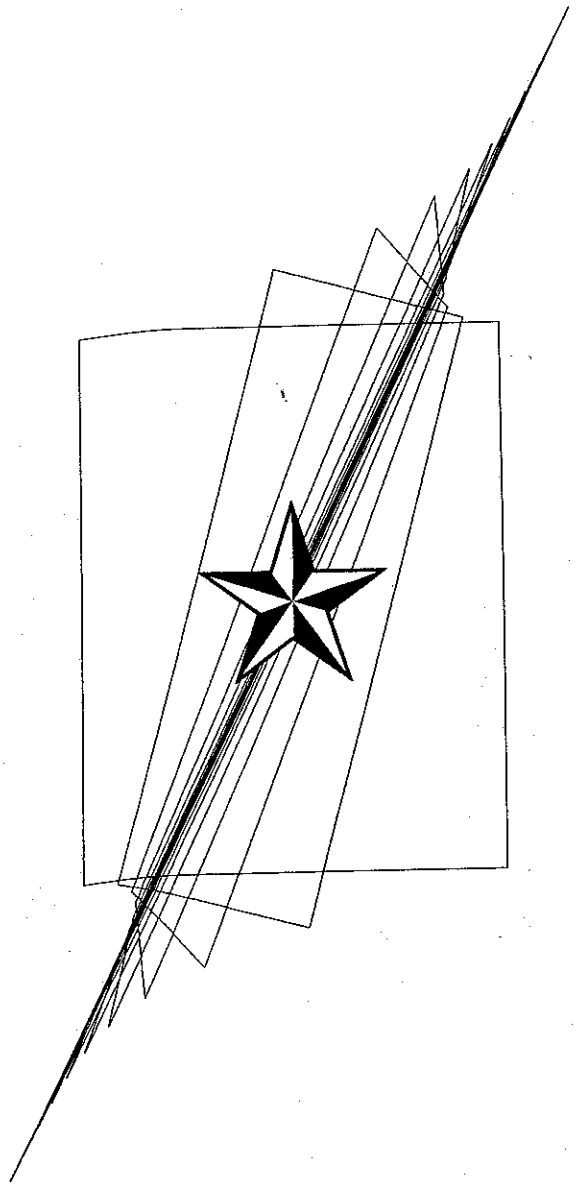

# THE ASIA-PACIFIC EDUCATION RESEARCHER

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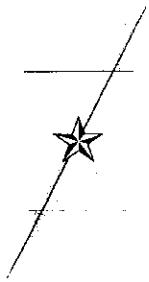

# THE ASIA-PACIFIC EDUCATION RESEARCHER

## Table of Contents

**RESEARCH ARTICLES**


Home Language Shift and Its Implications for Language Planning in Singapore: From the Perspective of Prestige Planning 111
*Shouhui Zhao and Yongbing Liu*

The Learning Organisation: A School's Journey Towards Critical and Creative Thinking 127
*Kala S. Retna*

Self-Efficacy, Personal Worries, and School Achievement of Primary School Students in Hong Kong 143
*Nancy Cheng and Peter Westwood*

The Centrality of Textbooks in Teachers' Work: Perceptions and Use of Textbooks in a Hong Kong Primary School 155
*Chien Chu Ying and Kathie Young*

Learning Chemistry in a Metacognitive Environment 165
*Richard Pulmones*

Conceptions of Assessment of Mainland China College Lecturers: A Technical Paper Analyzing the Chinese Version of COA-III 185
*Li Wai Shing and Hui Sammy King Fai*

Hong Kong Teacher Education Students' Epistemological Beliefs and their Relations with Conceptions of Learning and Learning Strategies 199
*Kwok-wai Chan*


**SHORT RESEARCH REPORTS**


The Use of Self-Assessment to Promote Active and Independent Learning in Teacher Education – An Exploratory Study 215
*Cheung Hun Ping Rebecca and Ng Mei Lee*

Reflections on the Dual System of Education in India 223
*Lillian I. Jasper*

# The Centrality of Textbooks in Teachers' Work: Perceptions and Use of Textbooks in a Hong Kong Primary School

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The research literature presents two different perspectives on the centrality of textbooks in teachers' work. On the one hand, the literature discusses notions of constraint and control over knowledge and is critical of a system of education that does not encourage teachers to develop their own curriculum. On the other hand, the use of textbooks in professional development has been associated with the potential for teachers to develop curriculum autonomy. While there has been a long tradition of using textbooks in Hong Kong government schools, there is very little, if any research available relating to teachers' perceptions and their use of textbooks. This paper sets out to use two alternative foci in the literature to discuss and analyse findings from interviews with teachers about their use of text books in their professional work.

There has been a long tradition of using textbooks (commercially produced course books, teacher guides, student activity books and related additional support materials) in Hong Kong government schools. The beliefs and work of Hong Kong teachers reflect the central role of the textbook in their work and this is reflected in their professional discussions.

The majority of Hong Kong government schools base their teaching and student learning on commercial textbooks (Lee, 2005) that have been designed to prepare students for high stakes examinations (Stimson, Morris, Fung and Carr, 2003) and teachers try to 'finish' the textbook with little regard for the learning needs of their students (Education Commission, 1994). The centrality of textbooks in relation to Hong Kong teachers' curriculum work has developed for a number of reasons including teacher training that does not encourage the development of interpretive skills needed for adapting and enhancing the suggested teaching and learning sequences, resources, assessments and so on in the textbook beyond its obvious meaning (Fok et al., 2004). Consequently, many teachers tend to perceive an authority invested in textbooks, which in turn functions to reduce their cognizance of the potential of the textbook to support and encourage their creativity.

As there are no officially published or prescribed textbooks in Hong Kong, the supply of textbooks is derived solely from private or commercial publishers. The Curriculum Development Institute (CDI), a division of the education department or the Employment and Manpower Bureau (EMB), provides guidelines on the different subject syllabi, and then evaluates

privately prepared textbooks for suitability against these syllabi. The published evaluation criteria include coverage, content, sequence, exercises, language, illustration and format of textbooks. To facilitate schools choosing quality textbooks, the CDI maintains a Recommended Textbook List for schools' reference. Schools are encouraged to choose textbooks from this list although there is no requirement to do so (EMB, 2007).

Currently, education is undergoing significant reform in Hong Kong as it grapples with how best to sustain ongoing economic and financial development (Adamson, Kwan & Chan, 2000). There is however, a fundamental tension between differences in school practices and the aspirations of the reform. On the one hand, the pre-reform curriculum prevails and is premised on what Adamson, Kwan and Chan describe as the three T's (teacher-centred, textbook oriented and test-centred) while on the other hand, the nature of the current reform requires a strong focus on teacher autonomy to address a diversity of school based needs (Adamson, et al., 2000). Hong Kong teachers are now required to be more facilitative, creative and autonomous with respect to their curriculum planning (Curriculum Development Council, 2004).

To assist the development and delivery of a school based curriculum responsive to local needs, principals have been given more flexibility and autonomy by the EMB to provide professional development programs to facilitate the development of appropriate teaching and learning resources and strategies to cater for the needs of their students and schools (CDC, 2004). A recommended approach to school based professional development programs is the creation and use of professional learning communities as teachers collectively contribute as part of their school based learning community (Advisor Committee on Teacher Education and Quality, 2002). Some primary principals have chosen to use their school's purchased subject textbooks as one professional development resource to support faculty teams learning interpretative skills to develop a more autonomous curriculum.

There is very little, if any scholarship available about how Hong Kong teachers view their use of the textbook as a teaching and learning resource. We believe that by using the literature to critically analyse teachers' views about their use of textbooks, increasing light will be shed on the role of textbooks in their curriculum planning and teaching.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The findings in the literature are presented in relation to both the centrality of textbooks in relation to teacher work as well as to fostering a learning community.

### *Textbooks and teacher constraint and control*

In relation to teachers as curriculum implementers, the literature contends that textbooks have the potential to both control and deskill teachers' professional knowledge (Apple, 1982, 1989, 1993; Elliot, 1990; Gitlan, 2001; Hall, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994; McNeil, 1988; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 1995) and as a result, teachers risk becoming mere technicians in the teaching and learning process (McNeil, 1988). In this sense, the literature denigrates the work of teachers where the textbook forms the core of their planning and instruction. Loewenberg Ball and Cohen (1996) found that:

> ...educators often disparage textbooks, and reform-oriented teachers repudiate them, announcing disdainfully that they do not use texts. This idealisation of professional autonomy leads to the view that good teachers do not follow textbooks, but instead make their own curriculum. Advocates of this view, which is consistent with American idealism, acclaim teachers who create original materials and lessons. Textbooks, and the commercial and political considerations that shape their production, are viewed as a conservative influence (Ben-Peretz,

1990). Curriculum materials are seen to constrain and control knowledge and teaching (Apple & Jungck, 1990), limiting student's performance to learn (Elliot, 1990).

Apple (1982) expanded on the way in which textbook use in schools both controls and deskills teachers by separating their mental labour or conceptualisation from manual labour or execution, thus effecting teacher capacities to devise curriculum materials suited to their contexts and needs. McNeil (1988) revealed that where teachers experience a lack of control over their work, they commonly put into place a defensive force; teaching as a coping mechanism that results in oversimplified lessons and following textbook recommendations.

Apple (1989) refined and extended his earlier theory, by suggesting that through the process of deskilling workers of their conceptual skills, they often underwent processes of being reskilled with other organisational skills such as student attendance and record keeping, but usually not associated with teaching processes. Smyth et al (2000) supported and extended this finding by suggesting that as part of the deskilling process, there remains the possibility of an unintended outcome of being reskilled with managerially determined skills and expertise that will require compliance from the workforce. In this respect, it can be argued that teachers risk losing a degree of personal engagement with determining the goals and purposes of their work, and a sense of their own agency and autonomy at work.

### *Textbooks – deskilling or skilling in Hong Kong?*

In contexts such as Hong Kong where teacher training does not provide teachers with interpretative skills to adapt and enhance the curriculum and teaching materials in textbooks, Stoffel's (2005) drawing on research in South Africa pointed out that the issue is not so much on the deskilling process since skills such as curriculum material selection and development cannot be expunged when they were never developed in the first place. Thus, the emphasis should not be placed on the skilling of teachers through the use of textbooks in professional development processes. New teachers who spend part of their training working in classrooms where textbooks form the core of instruction are not provided with the knowledge, skills and experience to develop their own curriculum (Loewenberg Ball & Feiman-Nemser, 1988). Without having ever developed the capacity to independently plan curriculum, these teachers run the risk of remaining textbook-bound (Ben-Peretz, 1990). As Loewenberg Ball & Cohen (1996) suggested, emphasis should be placed on teachers taking part in specific development programs so they can learn from curriculum materials as one resource to facilitate their capacity to design original curriculum, rather than assuming they have this already in place.

## METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative frame designed to facilitate an understanding of people's lives which in turn can be used to deepen our understanding of society's "empathic neutrality" (Patton, 1990). We chose to use interviews as our data collection method.

### *Sampling*

This study was one of several pilot studies related to a larger research project that focused on the culture and pedagogy of schooling across pre-, primary and secondary schooling in Hong Kong. We approached the principals of a number of typical government primary schools where we undertook in-service teacher field work observations and asked if these schools would allow researchers to conduct interviews with the teaching staff and the principal towards the end of the academic year. Only one principal responded and he along with two teachers from his school volunteered to provide us access to their classrooms and time to be interviewed.

One of the volunteering teachers (Ms. Emily, anonymous) had taught English and Social Studies for eight years and the other teacher (Ms. Sarah) had taught Putonghua and Mathematics for twelve years. The two teachers had completed the required teacher training to be appointed as subject teachers in government primary schools. The Principal was also an experienced teacher, having had twenty years of primary teaching experience prior to his recent promotion to a school leadership position.

### *Data collection*

We conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews. On both occasions, the two teachers and the principal were interviewed individually due to prior professional commitments.

The purpose of the first round of interviews was to gain insights into the participants' attitudes, beliefs about the roles of textbooks in their planning and teaching as well as how they used the textbook in the classroom. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to gain insights into how the textbooks were used as part of professional development sessions where as subject teams, teachers planned both units of work and individual lessons as part of a school based curriculum.

### *Data analysis*

Drawing on the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), we conceptualized phenomenon from the data text, then classified the concepts into categories. We used these sets of developed categories (e.g., themes, concepts) that were systematically interrelated through statements of relationship, to form the research framework of this paper.

## FINDINGS

### *Teacher use of textbooks*

The respondents of this study use the language of expediency, capacity building and communities of practices to think and speak about their use of textbooks.

***Expediency.*** As with most teachers employed in government primary schools in Hong Kong, the two teachers viewed textbooks as an important element in the development of their curriculum and teaching practice. They spoke about the value they placed on textbooks as they planned for teaching:

> They (textbooks) are useful... It takes a long time to prepare the teaching materials. If they can provide us with some of them, it helps us a lot (Ms Emily).

> ...it is easier and more convenient for us when textbooks come with Learning Support Materials. Teachers can have more time on lesson preparation and material delivery if the teaching tools are provided. Good textbooks and teaching tools can save a lot of our time because they include some items, such as worksheets and teaching aides, so that teachers can save their time (Ms Sarah).

The teachers felt that their use of textbooks positively enhanced the quality of their teaching and student learning if the textbook included additional resource materials that supported the development of the key learning objectives through student activities.

Further, they expressed a belief about the importance of student motivation and their active engagement in learning.

> When they (students) play the games they become more interested. The textbooks have many games like card games, pictures and board games... (Ms Emily).

> Publishers provide different teaching methods, an arrangement of content and user-friendly teaching tools that can enhance teaching and learning quality (Ms Sarah).

The teachers felt that the textbooks provided interesting teaching suggestions, materials and student activities and if they used these in their

teaching, they would provide 'fun' and stimulating ways for their students to learn.

The two teachers indicated that the textbooks purchased by this school had been designed to support a diversity of student learning needs because it assisted them as teachers to track individual student learnings and provided suggestions to assist them to adjust their teaching accordingly:

> It (the textbook) includes assessment tools which can help teachers understand the pupil's background – what they have learned and what they are going to learn in the future. We can see the progression on not only in P1 but from P1 to P6 (Ms Emily).

This point relates to an important element in the design of the selected textbooks for the teachers. There are specific features that will assist teachers' knowledge and understanding of their students' progress so far and this has the capacity to enhance future tracking of students as well as the teachers' future planning and teaching.

***Capacity building.*** The above perceived benefits for classroom teaching and learning were also tempered with a realization that teacher training had not prepared or provided teachers with sufficient knowledge or skills in curriculum design. Mr. Wong was a former classroom teacher as such, he added from his own training that gave him limited exposure to processes associated with turning the broad EMB curriculum goals into curriculum at the classroom level. He said:

> Teachers are trained to teach, but they have received insufficient training in curriculum design and how take ideas and change them so they still match the curriculum objectives.

Consequently, Mr. Wong was aware of inadequacies in his training to develop and adjust the provided teaching plan and suggestions with a degree of independence. Instead as Ms Emily said:

> The textbook helps me organise what I have to tell my pupils, and what the students must learn in P1, P2 and so on.

Pre-service training did not provide these teachers with the knowledge and skills to adapt the suggestions and materials provided. This has placed the teachers in a double bind. Not only has there been a shortfall in their professional training to prepare them to adapt and adjust the processes and materials contained in the textbook in relation to their students' learning needs, but they were often aware of weaknesses and insufficiencies in the textbooks that were supposed to assist them and meet their needs but lacked the skills and confidence to always address this.

Further, the curriculum design in the textbook aims to create a particular learning experience for students, which can only partially anticipate their peculiar and individual curriculum and learning needs. For example, as Ms Emily indicated, some students have advanced skills while some students need more guidance and require alternate ways to apply their learning. She said:

> ...there are some very smart ones and I want them (textbooks) to provide us with something that is a little bit beyond the curriculum, to support me work with the needs of the different students.

Ms Sarah found that the textbook provided one learning model to fit all. She said:

> Many text books lack variety. While we strive for creativity, textbooks provide insufficient support for our teaching objectives.

Thus the teachers expressed concerns that the textbook did not provide strong curriculum guidance to support them to respond to appropriately to individual student learning needs and coupled with gaps in their pre-service training, they lacked the skills to be more responsive.

***A community of practice.*** Recent devolution of powers to school principals including the provision of professional development means that Mr. Wong has considerable administrative latitude to respond to his vision for this school community; a vision that includes a response to the fact that:

> The textbooks are not comprehensive or complete. Teachers have to learn to adapt the content to suit students' need, school's goal and EMB's requirements.

He is aware that it is important for the whole school to share beliefs about the importance of responding to shortfalls in textbooks and be able to respond:

> We have to build up our professional abilities gradually. Professional development takes time. Not all our teachers are professional enough and able to work independently and create their own curriculum. We also want action and teachers being responsible for their teaching. When the entire school understands and shares this educational value, teachers will be more likely to invest more in their teaching... My job is to empower my teachers to make their own decisions.

Mr. Wong as a school leader believes as Hord, (2004) found elsewhere that teacher learning outcomes will increase where there is a strong administrator prepared to foster a learning community premised on a supportive and shared leadership as well as shared values and vision, collective learning and the application of that learning in a shared personal practice.

As a core principle in developing the capacity of teachers to take increasing professional responsibility for what is taught and how it is taught, Mr. Wong said:

> Teachers are told to teach their students in another way according to two basic teaching requirements of less teacher talk and more student participation. In sum, we can't solely rely on the textbook and professional development is very important. Teachers have to change their thoughts and teaching approach towards the new educational direction.

A crucial component in the development of this learning community is for each community member to take up the shared beliefs and practices. As Ms Emily said relating to weekly group planning sessions in which the textbook appears prominently:

> We sometimes find in group planning sessions that the content is too easy or too difficult and we modify it and give the students more or less... That is our decision so we cater for individual differences. We have changed parts of the teaching and units because they (textbooks) do not fit in with our teaching decisions. I know my pupils and if I find some parts of the lesson or unit are not suitable, I just cut it. My pupils are the most important factor in what I teach and how I teach.

Ms Sarah added relating to group planning sessions:

> The content must match our teaching objectives and its learning activity. We won't cover the whole textbook. For example, the textbook has 20 chapters; we only cover half of it. If the textbook doesn't have the topics we need, we will find other teaching materials. If we find the textbook is not desirable, we will adapt it.

The textbook has become an important reference point in group planning processes and through the daily cycles of teaching as well as the group planning and evaluation sessions, teachers are expected to collaboratively develop the skills of being curriculum creators sharing beliefs and practices with the rest of the community.

The introduced professional development practices resonate with aspects of the new work

order (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) where teachers are socialized into the values and narratives of the community of practice as they work in teams to collaboratively and interactively design and redesign their work processes as they learn with and from each other (Lipnack & Stamps 1993; Wiggenhorn, 1990). To support the construction of a curriculum premised on the understandings shared by colleagues, Mr. Wong has provided time for groups of teachers to discuss and plan their lessons together. He said:

> One major part of our drive to improve professional development program is the weekly Group Lesson Preparation program. Teachers exchange their ideas on how to teach a particular lesson effectively. They share different ways, such as multimedia, drama and stories to teach a particular lesson. They also discuss which learning focus they should concentrate on, such as emotion-oriented and analysis oriented teaching.

In this context, the teachers were 'trained' by being scaffolded in 'joint practice' with beliefs perceived by the group as being desirable so that everyone in the community of practice gains knowledge through immersion in the collaborative practice (Gee, 2006).

An important outcome of the development of a learning community is the supportive nature of collegiate processes (Newman & Wehlage, 1995). During planning time, teachers share and discuss how they can devise a more responsive and creative curriculum to encompass the shared goals of this learning community. Each person has their own strengths and in this context as Mr. Wong pointed out, teachers learn from each other.

> In their groups, the teachers give feedback to each other. We won't just point out teachers' weaknesses. We also cherish teachers' strengths. We discuss the suggestions and in the next planning session, we evaluate the lesson (Mr. Wong).

## CONCLUSION

Many teachers in Hong Kong have knowledge and skills too limited to take the curriculum guidelines set by the EMB and develop their own school-based curriculum and associated units of work. One response in Hong Kong has been the reliance of teachers on commercial textbooks because teachers believe that by using a textbook, they can deliver quality teaching and learning. This belief is strengthened by the knowledge that local textbook developers and publishers have worked closely with the Curriculum Development Institute to ensure the broad curriculum guidelines and approaches are followed in textbooks.

In this context, because pre-service training had not equipped teachers to be curriculum creators making informed decisions and acting on their knowledge of their students, textbooks had come to take on a central role in relation to teachers' curriculum work. Over the years, the centrality of textbooks in teachers' work has functioned to curtail skill development rather than deskill teachers of their capacity to separate their mental from their manual labor. Many teachers were aware of the key pitfalls associated with the use of a prescribed textbook, namely difficulties in addressing the plethora of student learning needs in their classes as well as having the skills to do this with a degree of confidence. Yet they did not know how to create a local curriculum.

On the other hand, textbooks are now used in some schools as one resource to skill teachers as curriculum creators. As Ben-Peretz (1990) found, if teachers were involved in curriculum interpretation exercises and in instructional planning based on their personal interpretations, they may gain confidence to modify curriculum materials. In this sense, well-designed curriculum materials could offer opportunities to learn in and from their work.

Such school-based initiatives on the use of textbooks as a key resource can contribute to professional development if the materials are implemented into a program of professional development aimed at improving their capacity to develop curriculum (Ball and Cohen, 1996). Further,

such an initiative requires the building of a community of practice premised on the notion of shared leadership (Hord, 2004). By working as a community of learners, teachers can use textbooks as a reference point to develop skills and confidence as curriculum creators taking into consideration their tacit stocks of knowledge and thus address a teacher held concern that textbooks can never be a total substitute for local professional knowledge.

Yet there remains a word of caution. As Smyth et al (2000) found, the nature of the skills will be managerially determined. Further, in a learning community where there is a reliance on textbooks as a 'training' tool, there remains the potential for a recursivity of how things were known and practiced, unless there is a way to locate teacher subjectivity and complicity in capacity building professional development. It is only in this sense then that the use of textbooks in a capacity building arrangement has the potential to create teacher independence and autonomy.

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