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Curriculum Reform

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As shown by other chapters in this book, Hong Kong and Macao are fascinating in their similarities and differences. These are evident in the domain of curriculum as much as in other spheres of education. This chapter explores the nature of the similarities and differences, identifying both causes and outcomes. It does so within the framework of broader literature on curriculum reform, and shows ways in which analysis of Hong Kong and Macao contributes to conceptual understanding. Its focus is on the primary and secondary levels of education.

To provide a framework, the chapter begins with an outline of the concept of curriculum reform. It then describes and analyses the contexts of curriculum changes in Hong Kong and Macao, before turning to the processes and products of change with particular attention to the school curriculum, assessment modes and textbooks.

The Concept of Curriculum Reform

The term ‘reform’ refers here to changes in education initiated from above, usually by the central government or in the political system (Fullan 1994; Bourke 1994). Curriculum reform is defined as a type of educational reform which focuses on changes to the content and organisation of what is taught. Reform may take place at the system level and/or at the school level (Ginsburg et al. 1990; Marsh & Morris 1991). The former commonly stresses a national curriculum which strengthens national identity and contributes to modernisation of the education system. The latter commonly results from the initiatives by schools and teachers to develop teaching materials for their student needs.

Hargreaves (1995) noted the interrelationship between curriculum reform and the context of change. He indicated that patterns of educational reform are greatly influenced by social forces. Similarly, Rulcker (1991) pointed out that curriculum reform movements commonly arise from demand for school curriculum to meet changes in social conditions. Reform has a pragmatic task of translating social standards into the teaching and learning content for the purpose of preparing young people for integration into society. This chapter mainly analyses the curriculum reforms in Hong Kong and Macao towards and after the turn of the 21st century, when the two territories were undergoing rapid social changes as a result of the transfer of sovereignty to the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Havelock (1973) distinguished between the stimulus-response model and the rational model of curriculum reform. In the stimulus-response model, changes occur from instinctive actions in response to challenges which have not been anticipated and perhaps even not fully understood. The model is reflexive, unplanned and trial-and-error in nature. The rational model emphasises an identification of objectives and related strategies in the face of challenges. Different steps are commonly taken, including a decision to do something, an attempt to define the problems, a search for solutions, and an application of possible solutions. The strategy is deliberate, and emphasises logical problem-solving.

Four areas of curriculum reform are especially pertinent for analysing the impact of political change on curriculum development in Hong Kong and Macao:

- *Personnel for curriculum development* are commonly in short supply in small states. In extreme cases, small states have only one or two specialists, or even none at all (Bray 1992c). In other states, curriculum development is well supported. These states may have curriculum units or centres, and specialists to define curriculum policy and manage curriculum development activities at different levels and in various subjects.
- *School-based curriculum development* has been promoted as an alternative to the centre-periphery approach that appeared to achieve limited results at the school level (Hughes 1991; Marsh 1997). In many education systems, priority was initially given to developing centralised curriculum which was believed to be able to strengthen national unity. In the 1980s, schools began to realise the need to supplement the centralised curriculum as well as to substitute some of its elements.
- *Assessment* is part of the school curriculum. It is the means to provide information about students' achievement and to improve their learning (Weeden et al. 2002). After colonial transition, many education authorities followed the assessment systems established by their previous regimes or took the examinations developed and run by these colonial powers so as to acquire internationally recognised credentials (Noah 1996; Bray 1997a). However, to prepare students for changing societies, assessment systems were later reformed to enhance the quality of education.
- *Textbooks* contain basic school knowledge, and convey cultural and national identity to young people. Teachers, especially those who are unqualified, rely heavily on textbooks in their teaching. In some small states, no textbooks are produced (Bray 1992c). Their textbooks are imported from overseas either from metropolitan cities or from neighbouring countries from which the small states copied their school systems. Heavy reliance on imported textbooks can result in irrelevant teaching content for local contexts (Altbach & Kelly 1988).

In this chapter, curriculum reforms in Hong Kong and Macao are described and analysed with reference to criteria including the ones listed above. The discussion focuses separately on the processes and the products. The processes of curriculum development include decision-making for the development of school curricula. The products include innovative curricula, assessment modes and textbooks. Before addressing these matters, however, the chapter presents more information on contexts in Hong Kong and Macao.