

## Secondary School Principals' Expectations of Beginning Teachers in Hong Kong

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*Against the background of structural and curriculum reforms in Hong Kong, this article highlights the qualities and performance that 40 principals and senior teachers in secondary schools expect of beginning teachers. The data, collected through semi-structured interviews, identified an incongruity with the expectations of novice teachers wherein, despite their inexperience, they are presumed to be able to function effectively as agents of change for major education reforms. The data point to the need for induction and continuing professional development opportunities for beginning teachers if they are to meet the high expectations that their employers have of them.*

### Introduction

In keeping with global educational development, Hong Kong has given high priority to raising the quality of education through fundamental reforms at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mok & Chan, 2002). To support the reform measures, the government has placed due emphasis on enhancing the quality and professionalism of frontline education workers, through the provision of training and support (e.g. knowledge and skills in curriculum development, teaching and learning, assessment and school based curriculum development) as well as through the formulation of appropriate professional standards for teachers. Among the tasks ahead, the Advisory Committee on Teacher Education and Qualifications and providers of teacher education programmes are concerned with "enhancing support for new teachers and actively exploring the feasibility of establishing a mentorship scheme [and] strengthening pre-service and in-service teacher education in support of the implementation of the education reforms" (Education Commission, 2002, p. 19).

However, precise ideas of how to support initial teacher education in general and beginning teachers in particular remain vague to teacher educators. What has been reportedly clear is that there is increase in teacher stress and burnout in coping with school demands and educational change (Chan, 1998; Ho et al., 2003; Wong & Cheuk, 1998). As suggested by Ho et al. (2003, pp. 41-42), "how teachers cognitively construe the working environment could substantially influence occupational stress above and beyond the actual working environment." The different dimensions of the profession which teachers must comprehend and navigate early in their work and therefore should be part of their professional learning, are many and varied: emotional, relational, structural, material, cognitive, ethical or temporal (Curwen et al., 2007). Therefore it is important that beginning teachers, who generally lack experience, acquire early a realistic understanding of these dimensions to their work and

what is expected of them by way of teacher qualities, competence and performance from a school perspective.

There have been research studies of differential early professional learning in relation to job satisfaction (Boreham, 2005), identity (Atkinson, 2004), pedagogical competence (McNally et al., 2005), perception of fate (Forrester & Draper, 2004), and organisational boundaries and partnership arrangements (Edwards & Mutton, 2007). However, there is a lack of contemporary literature on school employers' expectations of beginning teachers in the planning of initial teacher education. This is a serious neglect in view of the relevance of school-based practice (Edwards & Mutton, 2007) in decentralised education systems in Hong Kong and elsewhere. With this neglect in mind, this paper draws on evidence gathered from secondary school principals, who had responsibility for practicum as part of partnership arrangements with universities (Choi et al., 2004). The purpose of the enquiry was to obtain a useful description of secondary school principals' priorities, expectations or concerns in recruiting neophyte teachers, and to evaluate the traditional conceptions of professionalism – knowledge, skills and attitude – in times of change. The findings will enable providers of teacher education programmes to better understand school employers' needs and expectations, and to support beginning teachers through their Induction year and beyond.

### The Context

The place of the investigation is Hong Kong which has had a period of economic expansion. During this time the teaching profession was unattractive in financial terms. This situation was documented in the Education Commission's fifth report (1992), which raised concerns then about how the teaching profession could continue to attract and retain people of high quality, and how to strengthen the teaching force in terms of subject specialisation and



professional training. The nature of these concerns was then highlighted by an official survey of secondary schools (Education Department, 1996), which recorded that whereas 90% of some subjects – history, biology, chemistry and geography – were taught by subject specialists, this percentage fell to 68, 66 and 55 respectively for the core subjects of mathematics, English and Chinese. This shortage of core subject teachers was made worse by the further recognition of how few of these core subject teachers were teacher-trained, 87% for Chinese and 77% for mathematics compared to only 56% for English.

Later figures (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2002) reflected another stage in this economic cycle, the impact of an economic recession that made the teaching profession financially more attractive. Taking advantage of this recession, the government committed to enhancing teachers' language proficiency through mandatory benchmark examinations, and upgrading serving teachers' subject knowledge through the provision of professional training. Over the recent years, the number of secondary teachers who were subject specialists and were teacher-trained has increased steadily. The latest statistics from the Education and Manpower Bureau (2006) show a large majority of core subject teachers at secondary level being subject-trained (91.7% for Chinese, 90.9% for English, and 78.9% for mathematics), as well as teacher-trained (92.1% for Chinese, 90.2% for English, and 91.9% for mathematics).

Concurrently, the government, through its Education and Manpower Bureau (2001), moved to introduce both structural and curriculum reforms. The structural reforms involved defining schools by their language of instruction, increasing mixed ability teaching by reducing the academic ability bands from five to three, introducing school-based management, and reducing secondary schooling by one year so as to make room for four-year university studies. Curriculum reforms included school wide adjustments to a new examination system (combining two public examinations into one, to be taken in the last year of secondary schooling), and the merging of non-core academic subjects (e.g. history, geography, science and technology) into liberal studies, emphasising interdisciplinary critical thinking in preparation for higher education.

From this brief and summary overview, it is possible to appreciate a growing educational incongruity in Hong Kong. In times of change, serving teachers might not necessarily benefit from their accumulated classroom experience; while beginning teachers, who

are equipped with the latest knowledge and skills, are likely to be perceived as "agents of change," charged with implementing reforms, despite having had only minimal classroom experience. This incongruity suggests that a discussion of school employers' expectations of beginning teachers may be timely.

### **The Investigation**

The present study falls into the paradigm of qualitative research, as it attempts to understand how school employers construct relevant expectations of teacher employees and perceive beginning teachers' paramount reality in a given social world in times of change. With an aim to explore what are expected of beginning teachers against the background of education reforms described above, data were collected from 37 secondary school principals and three senior teachers (in lieu of available principals of their schools), through semi-structured and standard interviews. The informants were chosen because they were responsible for employing teachers and therefore were considered best able to illuminate the research concern. The 40 secondary schools were sampled from the total population of 160 partnership schools with Hong Kong Baptist University, using stratified random sampling (Cohen & Manion, 2000). The resulting sample consisted of 28 Chinese-medium (less academically able/lower-band in general) schools and 12 English-medium (more academically able/higher-band in general) schools in keeping with the proportion of such schools in Hong Kong, and broadly representative of its secondary school system.

The reported interviews focused primarily on the principals' expectations of beginning teachers in terms of their qualities and performance, in relation to the vision and mission of their schools, as well as the current education reforms. Other issues on the prospects of university-school partnerships in relation to teacher education practicum were also addressed in the interviews and have been discussed elsewhere (Choi et al., 2004). Each interview was conducted by two of the four project team members in Cantonese within an hour. The audio-recorded interviews were translated from Cantonese to English and analysed in terms of identifying emerging topics: values and attitudes; generic skills and knowledge; agents of change. Quantitative occurrence of the emergent topics – noted both in terms of overall and then category distribution – guided the reported findings. What is needed is the point of the response relative to the object of study, that is, secondary school principals' expectations of beginning teachers in times of change. Although for this purpose, the finer details of translation may not be crucial, it is useful to



include translations of actual responses and instances of cultural variance, interspersed with quotations from relevant literature, so that the reader can see how and why the conclusions are reached. The quotations of particular interviewees were selected because their words capture the nature of teacher professionalism.

#### *Beginning Teachers and Professionalism*

According to Furlong et al. (2000, p. 6), "changes in the nature of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility can alter the nature of teacher professionalism itself." Despite the introduction of the structural and curriculum reforms in Hong Kong over the past years, the traditional conceptions of professionalism – knowledge, skills and attitude – still have wide currency within the sample of school informants (Chincotta, 1992; Furlong et al., 2000; Hoyle & John, 1995; Whitty, 1997). Traditional perceptions in all schools keep alive a belief that beginning teachers can and should be fully trained prior to employment, and so the essence of professionalism spread throughout the principals' expectations of initial teacher education; for example, they said that the providers of teacher education programmes should be concerned with the development of teacher professionalism, in terms of the acquisition of professional attitude, as well as professional knowledge and skills. The school informants attached great importance to the moral standards and attitudes (responsibility) of teachers and their mastery of knowledge and skills, which are recognisably the traits of professionalism.

#### *Values and Attitudes*

Ethical humanism – with its emphasis on a humanistic and rational outlook – has been a distinctive feature of Chinese culture dating back to Confucius' times. As Wong (2002, p. 132) puts it, "Confucius' pragmatic attitude towards life and his emphasis on learning has had tremendous influence on the minds of the Chinese who have subsequently become known for the emphasis and value placed on education." This traditional Chinese value of education, with its emphasis on the moral aspect of learning, is reflected in the public respect accorded to teachers who, in return, are expected to be exemplary models for their formative pupils. Such expectation is rooted in a belief that "the school in an Eastern society is the church, the last fortress of moral ethic," as a principal put it. Accordingly, in recruiting teachers,

We would look at the whole profile (personality) of each candidate; and the major criterion is the attitude of teachers, who must not view teaching

as merely a job, but should understand their commitment in guiding and re-shaping their pupils.

The school principals interviewed showed enormous concern about the centrality of attitudes in recruiting teachers who will implement the schools' commitment to guide and re-shape young learners. Teaching requires life-long learning and commitment; so those beginning teachers who see themselves more as wage-earners would certainly find life difficult in the field. Professional attitudes are also associated with self-discipline, clarity of purpose and self-improvement. As usefully elaborated by a senior teacher,

Self-discipline is the awareness of the rules and strict compliance to them. And one needs to be goal oriented to make things work; unfortunately, many new teachers these days behave as if they never know what they want to do, but just to get a job. The willingness to seek improvement is also important to avoid being phased out in times of change.

There is clearly a strong association held between self-improvement and educational change in terms of implementing current education reforms. However, can beginning teachers be adequately prepared for the level of accountability, time and effort expected of them, both in terms of their psychological awareness and their actual ability to cope with the work demands? For school principals, the answer is affirmative, through initial teacher education. Teacher educators should ensure that would-be teachers clearly understand their prospective role as teachers. Notably, there is no mention of developing teaching competence through induction or continuing professional development for beginning teachers.

#### *Generic Skills and Knowledge*

While the difficulties in keeping up with the reforms are deeply appreciated by school principals, they expect beginning teachers to be fully equipped with relevant knowledge and skills so as to fulfil the requirements of the society, the school and their subjects. Apart from enthusiasm and a good understanding of education policies and new teaching ideas, other expectations of beginning teachers are associated with their capacity to integrate generic skills (communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, information technology, numeracy, problem-solving, self-management and study skills) into different key learning areas (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). Within the new curriculum framework, the development of generic



skills is considered fundamental in acquiring, constructing and applying knowledge in new contexts. Principals expect that beginning teachers be able to demonstrate development of generic skills across key learning areas, as well as effectively transmit knowledge as they account for learner differences.

Naturally we try to adhere to individual skills in allocating work, but the current education reforms, for instance, clearly suggest that the barriers between subjects be broken, and that pupils' generic skills be fostered ... It appears that graduates often lack the insight on making more advanced knowledge applicable and perceivable at a more elementary stage; and this is something that we should work on for improvement.

Variations among school principals' expectations of teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogic skills are noted as reflecting contextual variables, such as each school's academic banding. Principals in higher-band schools reported being more concerned with subject competence and academic background in recruiting teachers, for example,

The first thing we look into a pile of applications is examination results [subject competence], in particular for teachers of A-level classes. The next thing is the applicants' alma maters – from which secondary schools and universities they come. Next comes relevant work experience; and for fresh graduates, we would look at their past achievements, as well as the characters and capabilities shown on their resumes. Performance in an interview is another channel from which we get to know more about their subject knowledge and characters.

The emphasis on teacher knowledge can be attributed to the fact that higher-band pupils belong to the top 33% (20% before the reduction of five academic ability bands to three) of the whole pupil population. By contrast, principals in lower-band schools reported more emphasis on the pedagogic competence of teachers compared to subject knowledge.

With the obvious polarisation among the pupil population in Hong Kong, we need teachers who possess the will to deal with the majority [of learners], who struggle at a lower level. Our mission is enabling pupils to learn happily and preventing them from being discouraged from learning.

Teachers in lower-band schools are expected to be able to motivate pupils to learn, to manage classroom discipline, and to accommodate learner differences under the new banding system since September 2000. These criteria are however, less emphasised by higher-band schools, which are more strongly oriented to academic achievement rather than disciplinary and learning issues. For beginning teachers – who cannot predict during their training which school band will employ them – to attain this spread of performance expectations may seem daunting if not impractical.

#### *Agents of Change*

Beginning teachers facing this daunting, if not impractical, set of school principals' expectations have one more reported expectation to meet, that of being responsive to change in accordance with the on-going education reforms and with new dimensions of teacher professionalism. For school principals, it is essential that teachers develop a sense of urgency as well as a high level of adaptability to changes, and be in line with the education reforms. As suggested by an interviewee,

We moved too slowly in the past – and now, we have to take extra strides to endure the increasing demands and rapid changes, which have made life harder. If beginning teachers in this age have a broader vision and greater compatibility, they would be better able to accommodate and appreciate others. Such qualities help to avoid internal clashes and make life easier in a tense working environment.

Beginning teachers' major personal qualities in response to changing needs include an awareness of crisis, adaptability, and broadened vision. For neophytes, beginning teaching is more than a test of their level of confidence in areas of professional practice (e.g. curriculum knowledge, assessment techniques, differentiated teaching, etc); it is also a challenge to their emotional maturity (range and intensity of feelings), relational skills and adeptness in social interactions (Curwen et al., 2007). In addition to assuming such managerial personae, they are expected to be endowed with a spirit of self-sacrifice with a view to coping with the incessant work demands and relentless examination pressure: "We would like to have teachers who are active and willing to accept challenges and sacrifice private time ... to come back to the school at weekends to conduct drills and exercises."

Such all-round expectations of beginning teachers clearly overlook the temporal dimension of early



professional learning (Curwen et al., 2007), that is, the impact of time as it relates to novice teachers' competence to meet the pupils' needs for teaching and learning amid other administrative duties. Considering all such work demands, it is little wonder that teaching might not be perceived as a welcoming profession for beginning teachers, who are insufficiently advised to safeguard their life outside work.

### Summary and Implications

There was a general social and political will to expand and improve the quality of teacher education in Hong Kong, as in other national educational contexts in the 1990s (Lucas, 1997; Sultana, 2002; Morris and Williamson, 2000). With this as a background, this paper addressed the lack of a school perspective in planning initial teacher education programmes. As aptly emphasised by an informant,

I think it is not just mine, but everybody's expectation that you [providers of teacher education programmes] can provide a service that meets the needs of the schools and society. The problem is – what do schools need? That is what you should ascertain.

Such a broadening of the investigation into school employers' expectations of beginning teachers marks the orientation of the exploration. Drawing together the reported views indicates at least some of the qualities that are expected of beginning teachers at the secondary level. These qualities reflect something of the traditional conceptions of professionalism, as well as the school informants' perceptions of the on-going education reforms. In brief, according to the 40 school principals and senior teachers, beginning teachers should be fully immersed in the principles of reforms, and well-equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully navigate the road to change. On the note of traditional conceptions of professional work, however, none of these school employers ascribed a degree of autonomy (freedom in making professional decisions) to beginning teachers. Nowhere in the interviews did this surface among their expectations. Little wonder then, that novice teachers tend to feel constrained by their peripheral participation in implementing reform measures.

One of the "centre-periphery" problems of education reforms and policy implementation is frontline teachers' resistance to innovation or lack of readiness for change. As for beginning teachers, it is not difficult to appreciate their murky reality facing the overwhelming if not unreasonable set of

expectations. As suggested by Curwen et al. (2007), the major influences on new teachers' perception of their welcome to the profession are: the structure of the Induction system, relationships within the school setting, and formal and informal support systems for neophytes. Notably, the interviewed school employers seemed to be more concerned with newly recruited teachers' competence in coping with individual work contexts than in providing early professional learning opportunities through induction and continuing professional development. While schools may count on beginning teachers' contribution to innovation for the difficult enterprise of implementing educational change, it is necessary for classroom practitioners to keep some personal time for other life-enhancing activities while growing through their professional practice. Overwork will make teachers more vulnerable to poor health, and lead to terrible depression and anxiety. A teacher, whether experienced or novice, must dread such conditions. Beginning teaching can be an enjoyable challenge; but the need for induction (Lazovsky & Reichenberg, 2006) is certainly one of the many issues awaiting exploration, for not everything that the teacher needs to know can be learned at the stage of initial teacher preparation.

What might slightly complicate newly recruited teachers' perception of their welcome to the profession is their level of fit to individual school contexts. It will be remembered that student teachers cannot predict during their training which school band will employ them; but there are variations among school employers' expectations of beginning teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogic skills in relation to the academic abilities of their pupils. In the light of this uncertainty, it would seem important for providers of teacher education programmes to broaden the school experience (practicum) of trainee teachers prior to their assuming longer-term employment; and to nurture professionally qualified teachers through flexible educational experiences that will help them keep up with "rapid change and increased expectations of differentiating to meet individual learner needs" (Draper, 2007, p. 1).

The general consensus that teachers are the most important factor in raising educational achievement reminds us that teacher education should be given top priority in education policy agendas. In moving forward, what remains clear is first, that within the context of Hong Kong, there is an educational incongruity in school employers' expectations of beginning teachers and, secondly, that this incongruity must be addressed if the current education reforms are to achieve their declared aims



of providing a quality education, and if Hong Kong is to continue to merit the reputation of being one of the

world's best school systems (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

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