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## **Assessment Trends in Hong Kong**

### **Seeking to establish formative assessment in an examination culture**

Dr Rita BERRY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Hong Kong Institute of Education

e-mail: rsyberry@ied.edu.hk

#### **Abstract**

Hong Kong is traditionally an examination-oriented culture, a legacy of its Confucian heritage. Since the 1990s, Hong Kong Government has shown its determination to make a change to this deep-rooted examination-oriented culture with assessment for learning highlighted as an important aspect in the reform agenda. Although many initiatives have been put in place, the government has not seen many changes in the assessment practices in schools. This paper discusses the difficulties faced when seeking to establish formative assessment in an examination culture.

**Keywords:** assessment reform; assessment for learning; policy; culture; education system

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Rita BERRY

Hong Kong Institute of Education

#### **Introduction**

For over a decade the Hong Kong government has accepted the prevailing concepts of assessment which place greater emphasis on using assessment to support student learning. In addition to the widely recognised functions of assessment such as selection and accountability, the current thinking is that assessment should take on a very important function – assessment for learning (Black et al, 2003; Stiggins, 2008; James et al, 2007; Stobart, 2008). Through different assessment means, the information collected throughout the learning process will reveal what students have been successful at and where they need to be supported. These will subsequently be used for providing direction to the teacher and the student in the steps to be taken to enhance student learning. These ideas have influenced current trends in assessment in Hong Kong. To bring these assessment for learning (AfL) concepts to fruition, the government has launched a number of initiatives, including two major educational reforms with one implemented in the 1990s (the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC)) and the other launched in the early twenty-first century. Despite the efforts that have been put into the reforms, the initiatives do not appear to have made a big impact on schools' assessment practices. This paper will discuss the difficulties faced when seeking to establish formative assessment in an examination culture.

#### **Pre-colonial Hong Kong**

This section gives some background as to why it is so difficult to implement assessment for learning in Hong Kong. China is *culturally* an examination-oriented country. Since the Western Zhou Dynasty in China (1027–771 BC), a regular performance examination system for selecting government officials was used by different dynasties with only a few minor interruptions in between (Berry, 2008). In the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912), for example, the government provided very limited educational opportunities and linked them with the three-stage selection examination system, including in sequence of advancement, the local examination, the regional examination, and finally the highest level examination organized by the central government. Assessment in the Qing Dynasty, largely used for official selection

purposes, was high stakes in nature because it formed part of a highly selective summative examination system. The results of the examinations determined whether one would be allowed to step on the road to fame and fortune. Each year, only a few people could pass the top level examination. The common case was that many candidates spent their whole life studying without even managing to clear the first hurdle of the examination system. For thousands of years, Chinese people have been very used to examinations and have culturally accepted high-stakes examinations as a means to determine their future prospects.

### **Hong Kong as a British colony**

This section links social, economic, and political factors to the examination culture of Hong Kong. In the early days of colonization, the British government had very little political influence on the Hong Kong education system apart from a deliberate emphasis on English language in the curriculum, but all at the request of the Chinese community (Sweeting & Vickers, 2007). At that time, education was mainly provided informally by religious groups (mainly Christian missionaries) and some private local organizations (e.g. village communities). Encouraged by the British government, these early schools flourished. By 1896, there were officially on record 101 Anglo-Chinese schools (Hong Kong Educational Information Centre Editorial Group, 2004). These needed a structure. A straightforward way was to borrow the three-tier education and assessment system from Britain. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a more established primary, secondary, and tertiary education system. In 1914, Hong Kong had its first formal examination - the Matriculation and Junior Local Examinations of the University of Hong Kong. This examination was used as a hurdle to make sure that only the elite would proceed to university education. In line with this assessment policy, in 1937, the Hong Kong government set another hurdle at the end of the five-year secondary schooling. This hurdle managed to bar the majority of the students from advancing to the two-year study for the Matriculation examination. The examinations were high stakes in nature because they could make an impact on individuals' academic upward movement and subsequently their prospective career paths.

The establishment of the British external examination system was a response to the prevailing *socio-economical needs*. An external assessment system was seen to be a good alternative as it allowed talented people to be identified from different social and cultural backgrounds. The system provided an opportunity for *social mobility*. Since the end of the Second World War, Hong Kong began to acquire economic

strength, gradually transforming itself from a small British trading port into an important international financial and trading centre in the world (Lloyd George, 1992; Sweeting, 1998). This required a great deal of expertise serving in different business sectors. Assessment consequently served more purposes, including the award of qualifications; education and employment decisions; promotion considerations; allocation of resources, and so on. These were all linked with high stakes testing, selection, and competition. Though high stakes in nature, external examinations in the education system did provide people with equal opportunities to set and fulfil their personal goals which would never had been dreamed of in the past.

The *political* turmoil in Mainland China fuelled the selection-oriented assessment system in Hong Kong. The civil war in China around 1949 forced many people leave their homes in China and move to Hong Kong. This sudden influx of population stressed the already limited educational resources in the Hong Kong society. The first Joint Primary 6 Examination (JP6E) was subsequently introduced and used as the screening mechanism, allowing only 20% of the primary students to further their education in the secondary school. The screening process did not stop at primary 6. Internally, secondary schools saw the departure of some students at each year group in each academic year. Externally, there were three additional screening processes - the Junior Secondary Examination Allocation (JSEA) at the end of Secondary 3, Hong Kong Certification Examination at Secondary 5, and the Matriculation Examination at Secondary 7. With a long history of qualification examinations, students at one point had to take up to eight public examinations before matriculating from university. Despite the abandonment of some of these examinations, Choi (1999) argued that examinations still remained at the ‘heart of the community’, both feeding and feeding off the ‘Chinese *culture* that academic credentials are superior to other qualifications and that examination results were the main determinants for admission to sixth form and higher education in Hong Kong’ (405).

In this elite system, only a few could make it to the end of the secondary schooling. Hong Kong people mockingly called this the “pyramid assessment system”. To help students survive this system, teaching was highly examination-oriented. This had resulted in students being tested relentlessly to familiarize themselves with the game, argues Biggs (1996). Students were thus reduced to rote learning factual content. The strategies frequently used included drilling students using past examination papers, making them do simulated exercises, and then getting them to memorise the model answers. This suppressed creativity and de-motivated learning. Worst still, some important learning aspects not overtly included in the syllabus were consequently left unattended.

The Hong Kong government was fully aware of the problems that could result from high stakes standardized testing and had determined to make a change to this deep-rooted examination culture. In the 1990s, the government-led Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) was a large scale attempt at linking assessment with learning. TOC was a form of outcome-based education in which students progressed towards specified learning targets through carrying out tasks (Morris, 2002). The assessment method of TOC was used to collect students' information during the learning process. This form of assessment required teachers to record students' learning outcomes in a highly detailed fashion, which teachers found very difficult to handle and too time-consuming to carry out. The formative assessment initiatives of TOC were unfortunately not well received despite their good intentions (Morris & Adamson, 2010). In his study, Carless (2005) found that the teachers encountered resistance from the parents, as well as lack of support from colleagues and school policies, due to the *cultural* context of the study. In looking at what could be taken from the failure of TOC in implementing assessment for learning (AfL), Carless expressed dismay at Hong Kong's inability to learn from past experiences and was hopeful that a new label might distract attention from the ineffectiveness or unpopularity of a prior policy.

### **Hong Kong today**

*Hong Kong educational system.* As shown in Table 1, the Hong Kong educational system comprises three main sectors, primary, secondary and tertiary. Attending kindergarten is optional although many parents prefer this option. All kindergarten classes are registered under the Education Ordinance. They are all privately run and can be categorised as non-profit-making kindergartens or private independent kindergartens. There are six main types of schools in Hong Kong, namely, government schools, subsidized schools, direct subsidy scheme (DSS) schools, private schools, private international schools and the schools run by the English Schools Foundations. Most Hong Kong schools are subsidised schools run by charitable and religious organisations with government funding (e.g. Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, Tung Wah Groups of Hospitals). Since 1991, HKSAR Government has encouraged non-government primary and secondary schools which have attained a sufficiently high educational standard to join the DSS scheme. DDS schools are private schools but receive subsidies from the government to help maintain their quality. These schools are free to decide on their method to deliver the curriculum, fees and entrance requirements. Private schools and private international schools are run by various private organizations and may have their own curriculum. They provide an alternative to the high-pressured mainstream education in exchange for much higher tuition fees.

Schools run by the English Schools Foundations also provide an alternative to the high-pressured mainstream education, however, the tuition fees are lower than many other international schools as they received subvention by the Hong Kong government. In addition to the above mentioned mainstream schools, Hong Kong provides children who need specific support with special education. Under the existing education policy, students with severe special educational needs or multiple disabilities are referred to special schools, with sixty-one of them are aided by the government, for intensive support services subject to the assessment and recommendation of specialists and parents' consent. Other students with special educational needs are placed in ordinary schools (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011f).

Due to limited educational resources in the mid-twentieth century, primary schools were half day so that two primary schools (morning and afternoon) could share the same premises. To compensate the time loss, primary students went to school six days a week from about seven in the morning to midday. Class size was big, usually over forty students as the norm. With the educational system got more established and resources became more accessible, the government would like to make a change to these. Currently, except a few schools, nearly all government and aided primary schools have been converted into whole-day operation or have agreed plans for whole-day conversion. To address the class size issue, the Chief Executive Officer announced in the 2007-08 Policy Address that the government will, where circumstances permit, implement small class teaching in public sector schools by phases, starting from primary one in the 2009/10 school year and extending progressively to cover primary one to six by 2014/15 (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011c).

The new initiatives for the secondary education sector include the New Senior Secondary (NSS) academic structure and curriculum and a fine-tuning of the medium of instruction arrangements for secondary schools. The NSS provides students with a diversified curriculum that aims at creating opportunities for students of different aptitudes, needs and abilities to reach their full potential. There will only be one public examination leading to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) at the end of the six year secondary schooling. The fine-tuned Medium of Instruction arrangements aim to give flexibility to schools to provide students with more opportunities to be exposed to, and to use, English at junior secondary levels to enhance students' ability to learn in English. This brings to an end the straight

streaming of schools either into using English or Chinese as the medium of instruction (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011e).

**[Insert Table 1 here.]**

There are 12 degree-awarding higher education institutions in Hong Kong with eight institutions funded by the public through the University Grants Committee and three self-financing institutions and one public-funded institution. The Government's policy objectives are to provide 14,500 first-year first-degree places to cater for about 18% of the 17 to 20 age group. The planning target is that by 2010/11, 60% of the senior secondary school leavers will have access to post-secondary education. Four institutions provide teacher training including the Hong Kong Institute of Education (the largest teacher training provider in Hong Kong), the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Baptist University. According to statistics provided by the University Grant Committee, there are 22,219, 29,694, and 6371 teachers serving at primary, secondary and tertiary respectively (University Grant Committee, 2010). The government aims to build a teaching profession of high commitment and quality by requiring all new teachers to be trained graduates. It is the government's long term policy to require all new teachers to be professionally trained and degree holders. The sub-degree pre-service teacher training places for primary and secondary school teachers are being progressively upgraded to degree level. To ensure the quality of language teachers, the government requires teachers of English and Putonghua (Chinese official language) to meet language proficiency requirement. Any teacher who begins teaching English or Putonghua should at least have taken the language proficiency assessment and met the minimum requirements of all papers (writing, speaking, reading and listening) except the paper on Classroom Language Assessment prior to teaching the language subject. They should meet the language proficiency requirements of classroom language assessment within the first year of his/her taking up the duty (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011g).

All children aged below 6 studying in kindergarten or child care centres in Hong Kong, irrespective of their nationalities and subject to their eligibility status, can apply for fee assistance under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (EDB, 2010 Kindergarten education in Hong Kong). The government used to

provide nine years of free primary and junior secondary education to all children attending public sector schools. Starting from the 2008/09 school year, senior secondary education is also provided free through public sector schools. In addition, with effect from the same school year, the Government provides full subvention for full-time courses run by the Vocational Training Council for Secondary 3 leavers to offer an alternative free avenue for senior secondary students outside mainstream education (EDB, 2010 Secondary school education). For the 2009-2010 fiscal year, Hong Kong's government expenditure on education was approximately HK\$58.8 billion (GBP 5.1 billion or US\$7.5 billion). This total was 20.2 percent of the total government expenditure and approximately 3.6% of GDP. The total was divided fairly evenly among primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011d).

*Assessment reform.* The unsuccessful experience of Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) did not shake the government's belief in the formative role of assessment. They subsequently planned new initiatives for a major assessment reform but under a new label – assessment for learning. However, these initiatives were delayed in being put forward because of the prevailing *political* situation – Hong Kong was to return to the Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Although Hong Kong was promised fifty years' administrative autonomy by the Chinese government, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) cautiously gave herself a few years to make sure the *political* climate was right for embarking upon a new round of educational reforms, including AfL. Following the release of the Review of Public Examination System in Hong Kong Report in Hong Kong (ROPES) in 1998, the Hong Kong government became even more determined to make a change in assessment practices. The report (Hong Kong Baptist University & Hong Kong Examinations Authority, 1998) stresses that:

*In today's severely competitive business environment, companies in Hong Kong are in need of multi-talented graduates who can display versatile skills in different areas. The public examinations should therefore incorporate those elements in the assessment of students, so as to better equip them to meet the requirements of employment. In addition, the method of assessment should also lay more emphasis on developing students' independent thinking and creativity, instead of requiring them to memorise mere facts. (41)*

Around such time, two very influential articles were published internationally. Black and Wiliam (1998) pronounced that there was firm evidence to show that AfL



was an essential component of classroom work and that its development could raise standards of achievement. The Assessment Reform Group (1999) concurred that assessment which was explicitly designed to promote learning was the single most powerful tool in both raising standards and empowering lifelong learners. However, they both warned that standards could be raised only if teachers could tackle the task effectively. In Hong Kong, for example, Biggs (1996) pointed out that for years, educators had based their assessment practices on assumptions inappropriately adopted from psychology and from the testing establishment. He then drew people's attention to the other function of assessment – to educate and pointed out that there is a need to change the assessment climate in Hong Kong.

As elsewhere, for example Scotland and New Zealand, the Hong Kong government has taken the concepts of AfL very seriously. From 2000 onwards, Hong Kong has pushed ahead with a curriculum reform effort in which assessment is highlighted as the key for learning. In its government document - Learning for Life, Learning through Life (Education Commission, 2000), the government stresses that:

*We must address the inadequacies within the existing education system to enable the majority of Hong Kong people to achieve lifelong learning and all-round education. All-in-all, despite the huge resources put into education and the heavy workload endured by teachers, learning effectiveness of students remains not very promising, learning is still examinations-driven and scant attention is paid to 'learning-to-learn'. (4)*

In the assessment reform agenda, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC, 2002) highlights in its document that:

*All schools should review their current assessment practices and put more emphasis on assessment for learning. The latter is a process in which teachers seek to identify and diagnose student learning problems, and provide quality feedback for students on how to improve their work. Different modes of assessment are to be used whenever appropriate for a more comprehensive understanding of student learning in various aspects. (Chapter 5, p.1)*

In its most recent published assessment guidelines (Curriculum Development Council 2009), Hong Kong government highlights that:

*Assessment is an integral part of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment cycle. It involves collecting evidence about student learning, interpreting information and making judgements about students' performance with a view to providing feedback to students, teachers, schools, parents, other stakeholders and to the education system. (Booklet 4, p.1)*

Taking the lead in a series of actions in the assessment reform was the abolition of Academic Aptitude Test in the Secondary School Places Allocation in the 2000-2001 academic year. The Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) was introduced as a replacement of Academic Aptitude Test; however, it took on a very different function. BCA is a low-stake assessment tool that aims at enhancing teaching and learning in the areas of English language, Chinese language, and Mathematics. There are two main components of BCA, namely, Student Assessment and Territory-wide System Assessment. Student Assessment is a resource bank provided through the internet for the purpose of assisting teachers in developing and selecting the appropriate task for their students. Territory-wide System Assessment is conducted by the government across Hong Kong. This assessment mainly uses the paper-and-pen mode (both English and Chinese languages have face-to-face oral assessment in addition) and is administered at primary 3, primary 6, and secondary 3 levels (the end of the three key learning stages). The government stresses that the territory-wide system assessment is low stakes and the information collected will not be used for making high stakes decisions although school personnel may view this differently.

In this same year, 2001, the government reiterated the significance of AfL by introducing School-based Assessment (SBA). In its 2002 publication on curriculum and assessment for P1-S3, *School Policy on Assessment – Changing Assessment Practices*, the government reiterated its aim to implement AfL into the local school curriculum, pushing for a 'balanced' approach towards the use of formative and summative assessment in schools. Similar sentiments were expressed in the government's most recent Senior Secondary Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council (CDC) (2009). While acknowledging the use of summative assessment in the past, the document calls for an increased adoption of formative assessment in local schools, once again stressing the need to place the emphasis of assessment policies not on reporting the achievement of the pupils, but on supporting their learning process. SBA is notably promoted in this document, as part of Standards Reference Reporting. Students will be scored on a level of 1-5 for each subject they are enrolled in, and SBA, along with external examinations, will count towards the

formation of this score. As such, the document calls for schools to plan for and begin adopting measures to implement SBA and other types of formative assessment. With all these good intentions, the problem remains is that “How formative is this new assessment initiative?” To many schools, this might just mean more frequent summative assessment.

It is worth noting that it has never been the government’s plan to replace the high stakes public examination by SBA. In Hong Kong, SBA is regarded as a general term for the assessment conducted in schools which contributes to the certification system in Hong Kong and also aims at becoming an integral part of teaching and learning. The government would expect that there should be a de-emphasizing of the summative tests, in favour of the practice of formative assessment which emphasizes the provision of quality feedback from teachers as well as the active involvement of students in the assessment process (CDC, 2002). By 2007, Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination subjects (equivalent to O Level) and 14 Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination subjects (equivalent to A Level) will have SBA components. In time, SBA will become a major component in all 24 subjects within the new Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (which the first cohort will take in 2012), the combined examination students will take at the end of the six year schooling for the new 3+3+4 education structure (6 years secondary and 4 years tertiary education). The contribution to the summative measurement is currently expected to vary from subject to subject, from 15 to 30 %, with certain subjects such as Visual Arts having an even higher percentage assigned to the SBA component (Berry, 2008, p.34-36, Table 2.4 SBA implementation in the 24 subjects in the 3+3+4 education system).

The Hong Kong government sees many benefits in SBA. Basically, the government believes that SBA could bring about educational benefits to teachers as well as students, by not only helping improve the validity and reliability of assessment, but also creating a positive backwash effect on teaching. In addition, it has potential to reduce examination pressure, leading to positive motivation effects on students. To share the vision of AfL, the government has prepared and disseminated government documents, and organised official educational seminars, workshops and courses for relevant parties. In addition, the government has recruited some internationally renowned scholars and regularly borrows expertise from overseas to help establish and consolidate the AfL trend in Hong Kong.

### **The reality**

Despite the huge resources invested in the assessment reform, learning is still examination-driven. Hong Kong is still struggling with bringing AfL to fruition. On 24 May 2003, the eye-catching headline ‘Rote-learning and high-stakes testing throughout school are out of place in modern Hong Kong’ hit the front page of the education section of South China Morning Post. The news article reported the unreserved criticisms by IBM Business Consulting Services and Vision in Business Consulting. One of the main criticisms was that Hong Kong still regarded assessment as an event that occurred at the end of the education process, instead of something that deeply influenced learning and teaching. ‘At all levels of schooling,’ the criticism read, ‘Hong Kong has been struggling to combat the entrenched paradigm of rote-learning of factual content that is driven by high-stakes tests and examinations.’ Though the impact of formative assessment on the development of student learning has been accepted for some time, Hong Kong still has yet to effectively implement the plans and policies as set. Many schools in Hong Kong are rather traditional in their assessment practices. They still adopt a competitive and selective approach for assessing their students internally, rather than through formative and supportive means. The assessments used are largely paper-and-pencil tests (Berry, 2010). Kennedy et al. (2008) points out that in Hong Kong, even though there has been considerable support for making assessment a vehicle for learning, the high stakes *social* function of assessment gives it a role and function that can trivialise these plans, and that the potential for assessment reform in this *cultural* context may well be limited.

There were critical voices from various sectors of society with most of them pointing their fingers at BCA and SBA. While the government thinks that BCA would realise the spirit of AfL, provide information for students to improve learning, and let teachers reflect and improve teaching, society does not seem to share this vision. School personnel in particular believe that the Territory-wide System Assessment is used for evaluating school performance and also used as a weapon to close down some of the schools. To ensure good performance by their students, schools drill their students frantically for the tests. The item bank provided by the Student Assessment has become quite a handy tool to serve this purpose. The examination-oriented *culture* lives on. The voices from the school personnel can help inform the situation, as reported by a local newspaper Ming Pao:

*Schools think drilling brings the best outcomes of their students. They wouldn't give up drilling their students for the tests that easily.*

(12 Sept 2003)

*After the abolition of ATT, allocation of secondary school places is mainly based on the internal academic performance of the students plus using the results of English, Chinese, and Maths as the moderation mechanism. Drilling our students for the tests of the three subjects becomes meaningful.*

(12 Sept 2003)

In Hong Kong, SBA has become a very controversial topic and has almost created an upheaval in the education sector. School personnel see more problems than benefits in SBA. Berry (2008) points out that there is a general concern about the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of SBA results and that teachers see SBA as increasing their workload as it may involve additional collecting and recording of information through giving students a large number of assessment activities. Cheung (2001) says that SBA has brought about a tense learning atmosphere in lessons and difficulties in motivating students to complete tasks that were not part of the SBA component. Yung (2006) argues that SBA can be used to bring about AfL only if the teacher adopts the appropriate mentality and attitude, implementing formative assessment, supporting and delivering feedback to their students in the proper manner. What is required is an increased understanding of, for example, the role of the teacher in the classroom and assessment in education. Furthermore, the findings of a survey conducted by the Education Convergence & Hong Kong Primary Education Research Association (2006) revealed that schools were very sceptical about the whole idea of SBA. They felt that given the resources they currently had, teachers were not ready for this new assessment initiative. They urged the government to delay the implementation of SBA and to narrow the scope of the SBA policy.

Although the government is very determined to make a comprehensive change to the assessment scene, the general misuse of BCA in schools and the resentful sentiments towards SBA have diluted the impact of translating the prevailing AfL conceptions into classroom practices.

### **Conclusion and implications**

The Hong Kong education reform, which calls for a realignment of assessment practices, draws upon current assessment theories and tries to move Hong Kong from an examination-oriented culture to a culture of using assessment to support learning. This is a substantial challenge in a culture in which parents, pupils and teachers are

oriented towards tests and improving results. Admittedly, Hong Kong is still struggling with bringing the AfL conceptions to fruition. Despite the strong indications from the government, the current situation is that many Hong Kong schools still place a high emphasis on gearing students up to meeting the requirements of external examinations. To push for good results, a common practice amongst Hong Kong schools is to ‘teach to the tests’. Whether due to cultural contexts and social pressures, insufficient clarity of guidelines, or simply a matter of habit, Hong Kong has struggled with implementing AfL in classrooms.

To implement the prevailing assessment conceptions is not an easy task. It is often like a tug-of-war with one end being pulled by a combined force of the deeply entrenched examination culture, economic demands, social values, and political influence, and the other end the education conceptions encompassed in the new AfL initiatives. What is evident is that the Hong Kong government needs to make an effort to explore more practical options to bring about tangible change by addressing the core issues behind past failures to implement AfL. One way to address this issue would be to revamp the model of teacher professional development. Hong Kong teachers have already experienced other assessment initiatives (for example, the TOC) which were not sustained. A new professional development focus could be on treating change in classroom practice as a collaborative and negotiated activity, rather than the more familiar ‘top-down’ initiative. The development would encourage the teachers to become more self-regulating and self-supporting. Through professional development, sustained support, and a collegiate environment, teachers would be better able to develop plans to incorporate AfL in their classrooms.

In addition, summative and formative assessment need not be mutually exclusive. Even within the cultural context of Hong Kong, a happy medium can be found, such as in the case of the Basic Competency Assessment, where summative assessment is carried out at designated intervals, not for ranking, but rather, for helping teachers identify which students need more attention and hence improve learning. As such, students can be assessed formatively through summative assessment exercises. What this demonstrates is that though summative assessment in Hong Kong will not be ameliorated in the near future, it can be restructured and realigned to ensure student learning, rather than to encourage surface learning, especially in terms of external summative assessment, so that the city’s students can truly benefit from the education system.

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**Table 1: Hong Kong Educational System**

Education type	Length	Additional names	Age Group	Type	Focus	School year	School number 2009/10	Classroom size 2009/10	Number of students 2009/10
Kindergarten education	3 years		3-5	Non-compulsory	General	Sept - June	950	-	140502
Primary education	6 years	Primary 1, Primary 2, Primary 3, Primary 4, Primary 5, Primary 6	6-11	Compulsory	General	Sept - July	582	29.8	344748
Junior Secondary education	3 years	Form 1, Form 2, Form 3	12-18	Compulsory	General	Sept - July	523	36.1	238026
Senior Secondary (leads to HKCEE)	2 years	Form 4, Form 5		Non-compulsory	Specialised	Sept - July (Form 4), Sept - April (Form 5)		36.1	166421
Matriculation Course (leads to HKALE)	2 years	Form 6 (Lower Six) Form 7 (Upper Six)		Non-compulsory	Specialised	Sept - July (Form 6), Sept - February/March (Form 7)		30.3	65019
Special education	Primary 6 years Secondary 6 years	Primary 1-6, Form1-5	6-18	Compulsory	Specialised	Sept - July	61	8-20	8026
Post-secondary education	Depends on subject	Usually year 1-4	Usually 19 -22	Non-compulsory	Specialised	Varies	34	Varies	64869 (2008/9)

Source of information: Hong Kong Education Bureau (2011a, b, c, d, e,f)