

## The policies of reintroducing Liberal Studies into Hong Kong secondary schools

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### Background

Hong Kong (HK), once called the 'Asian Tiger' economy, has a high-flying position in several international and educational league tables, such as PISA and TIMSS (Mullis et al. 2007; Schreiner et al. 2006). Providing high-quality and 'sustainable' (Jamsa 2006; Sterling 2004) education to help students achieve these successes was one of the merits of the HK education system in the last century. Nonetheless, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) have taken massive initiatives to restructure secondary and tertiary educations in response to the unprecedented worldwide changes in the twenty-first century such as globalisation and the advent of information technology (Plomp 2009). With the rapid development in Mainland China, such initiatives are necessary to keep HK students at the competitive edge for economic transformation and many other challenges ahead.

More specifically, in September 2009, the New Senior Secondary (NSS) academic structure was implemented, which has transformed the previous '5 + 2 + 3' structure (5 years secondary followed by 2 years pre-university and 3 years of university) into the current '3 + 3 + 4' system (a total of 6 years in junior and senior secondary followed by 4 years of university). As Mok (2007) expected, the scheme has inevitably triggered substantial and all-embracing reforms associated with curriculum, assessment and quality assurance. Whilst these reforms seemed to be relatively underplayed in the scheme, the policy of reintroducing Liberal Studies has become especially salient (Cheng 2009).

In contemplating the context of secondary education reform in the Asia-Pacific region, the initiative in HK to restructure the curriculum as a part of an ongoing effort to improve the quality of education is no longer a novel aspiration (Maclean 2002). In reality, HK shares many similarities with the Philippines and Singapore in developing Liberal Studies as a mandatory curriculum to serve multifaceted purposes. In particular, there has been a pressing need to strengthen citizenship education since the resumption of sovereignty by PRC in 1997, which established the identity of 'HK Chinese' citizenship (Fok 1997). Therefore, unsurprisingly, one of the agendas for reintroducing Liberal Studies is to develop a sense of citizenship by including the module called 'Model China'. Comparatively speaking, it resonates well with the ideology of the recent adopted Basic Education Curriculum in the Philippines, namely Makabayan, which strongly emphasised the principle of patriotic values in secondary schooling (Bernardo and Mendoza 2008).

### Research Questions

#### Conceptualisation

Ball's 'policy cycle' framework views policy as a process rather than an end in itself. Its underlying assumption matched our research ideology. Therefore, we conceptualised our research questions with this analytical framework.

#### Context of 'Policy Text Production'

1. 'How were the government policies of reintroducing Liberal Studies created?'

#### Sub-Question:

(1-1) 'What were the major issues contended by different interest groups?'

### Context of 'Influence'

(1-2) 'What factors affected different interest groups' standpoints towards the major issues?'

### Context of 'Practice'

2. 'What are the teachers' perceptions and students' expectations of the Liberal Studies curriculum?'

### Sub-Question:

(2-1) 'Whether teachers believe that the policies can solve the problems of over-specialisation in arts and science and can promote citizenship education?'

(2-2) 'Whether students expect that Liberal Studies can provide a broader area of learning other than arts and science and a better understanding of their citizenship?'

## Methods

Referring to the context of Liberal Studies in HK, the policies of the reintroduction had already been generated before 2006. Based on Ball (1992) underlying assumption, the policies were subject to a 're-creation' when implementation took place in 2009. Therefore, we separated the policy analysis into two phases: 'policy generation' and 'policy implementation' to investigate the process of policy-making. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of our research was constructed and divided into three guiding stages.

### Stage 1: Identification of policy issues related to the context of policy text production

According to Ball's explanation for policy-making, interest groups normally express their narrow interests through the context of 'policy text production'. This expression can take various forms such as legal texts, produced commentaries and speeches. In this stage, we aimed to identify the major issues of the reintroduction by reviewing the policy texts. This stage sought to explore the first research question (1-1)

### Stage 2: Interest groups' standpoints and context of influence

In this stage, we further investigated the policy-making of Liberal Studies by considering different interest groups' standpoints. Specifically, we interviewed the representatives of the three interest groups which actively participated in the policy-making, including teachers' unions, scholars and parents, to discuss their viewpoints towards the policy issues elicited from stage 1. This stage directly addresses the research question: (1-2)

### Stage 3: Prediction for policies' effectiveness in the context of practice

In this stage, we aimed to predict the policies' effectiveness between the period of policy generation and implementation. We investigated the teachers' perceptions and students' expectations of Liberal Studies by using a questionnaire-based survey. Their views towards the Liberal Studies curriculum were considered to get a better understanding of the implementation in 2009. This stage addresses the second research question

## Frame

Ball's study with Bowe and Gold (Bowe et al. 1992) developed a thesis in policy formulation and implementation, which provided a fundamental concept of 'policy cycle' framework. This concept, which comprised three contexts (pp. 19-23) including contexts of 'influence', 'policy text production' and 'practice', organised educational policy into different stages. It holds an underlying assumption that there is no exclusion of practitioners from either policy generation or policy implementation.

According to this assumption, the modern concept of educational policy becomes relatively 'dynamic' rather than the traditional 'static' thought.

### **Research findings**

This study focuses on the policy issues generated by the reintroduction of Liberal Studies and evaluates the predicted effectiveness of the proposed curriculum in Hong Kong (HK) secondary schools. Theorised by Ball (1992) 'policy cycle', approximately 200 newspaper articles and 30 government documents were collected to identify the issues in the process of policy-making. The documentary inquiry shows that 'Public Recognition', 'Learning Objectives' and 'Curriculum Structure' were the three major issues surrounding the reintroduction. Little evidence of any 'explicit' political influence related to the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is demonstrated. The interviews conducted later in this study illustrate that there were diversified opinions of the Liberal Studies curriculum. Whilst scholars and teachers disapproved of it, parents showed appreciation. It seems that the stakeholders working in the education field were uncertain, divided and displeased with the process of policy-making. A follow-up questionnaire-based survey clearly uncovered a sharp contrast between the beliefs of the teachers and the expectations of the students with regard to Liberal Studies. In other words, the gap formed between the two showed considerable differences in the level of satisfaction with the proposed curriculum.