

WHAT WE SAY

Wishy-washy report misses stress reality

Steve Cray
Assistant Education Editor

If ever there was a case of a wasted opportunity, the much-awaited final report from The Committee on Teachers' Work is it.

There was much anticipation that after 10 months of research and consultation, the document would make practical recommendations on cutting teachers' stress.

We said in this column back in February last year that if the committee was to come up with ideas to resolve the heavy workload on teachers, it would have to think imaginatively, drawing on experiences near and far. It has failed to do so.

Instead of making practical recommendations, the report – released during the Christmas break – talks in the most general and wishy-washy way about “strengthening mutual trust, minimising uncertainties, redirecting time to the core business of teaching, enhancing the capacity of school leaders and teachers, and leveraging community support and respect for the profession”.

Chairman of Hong Kong Policy Concern Organisation Mervyn Cheung Man-ping calls it “a whitewash” and chairman of the Aided Primary Schools Heads' Council Alex Cheung Chi-hung describes the report as superficial. Even the most cursory of comparisons with a similar undertaking in Britain four years ago shows why.

Rather than offer up philosophical niceties, the UK review, “Raising Standards and

Tackling Workload: a National Agreement”, made far-reaching practical and sometimes controversial recommendations that in effect redefined the role of teachers in England and Wales.

The government set an average working week target of 45 hours in place of the *de facto* 52, blamed for driving teachers out of the profession, and proposed new contracts that guaranteed 10 per cent of teaching time for planning, preparation and assessment.

In addition, many non-teaching duties were transferred to support staff.

It's all very well to say that Hong Kong teachers should be able to “redirect time to the core business of teaching”, but how?

The HK report suggests that schools should operate a “school-based mechanism to regularly examine non-teaching tasks ... redirecting tasks that could be better handled by administrative and/or support staff”. This does not go far enough when there is a culture of teachers often being directed to carry out administrative jobs by principals.

On the question of stress itself, the report says teachers should “improve ... their ability to manage change and take care of their overall wellness”. That's tantamount to saying teachers are responsible for their own stress, the implication being that they have been unable to manage it in the past.

It's unacceptable to “spin positively” and paper over the cracks. This report should have identified the nature of the cracks and proposed hardline, practical solutions.

“This report should have identified the cracks and proposed solutions”

WHAT YOU SAY

Dream is fine but delivery is clouded

Robin Cheung

Recent progress reviews of education reform still promise a positive outcome. Hard questions, however, remain over its delivery. To date, reform has introduced new structures and mechanisms, such as curriculum change, external school review and the blueprint for the new 3+3+4 academic structure. However, management of the vision, catalysts for change and beneficiaries still need attention.

The original vision was to transform our younger generations into able and lifelong learners, critical and creative thinkers, proficient communicators, competent team players, capable IT users and good global citizens – and Hong Kong into a world-class metropolis of economic dynamism and social harmony.

When we get down to details of the reforms, the student-orientation in the dream often becomes blurred, if not lost. For the reform to achieve its long-term goals, teachers who are the prime agents of reform, must be relieved of unwarranted pressure. If schools must fight for survival or see good exam results as the only guarantee of parental acceptance, they will remain pressure cookers, for teachers and principals would focus on career prospects rather than all-round student development.

To achieve the cognitive, effective and moral qualities we envision, students need a more stable and relaxed school environment. School management should therefore make schools healthier work

environments for teachers to pursue educational goals. The government should also provide system support to help schools maintain sustainability and build capacity for deep and positive change. Fewer school closures, smaller classes, more administrative support, more support for professional development and the like can help maintain a healthy ecology of education.

As regards beneficiaries – predominantly the students – more needs to be done for the middle and bottom third. We need not worry too much about the top third as they have substantial achievement records and family support to catapult them into continuing success.

It is the average pupils and late-bloomers who need more help to recognise and exploit their potential so that they can also succeed over time. Associate degrees, for instance, need to be made a more

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credible qualification. The work on the qualifications framework needs to be accelerated and more widely publicised too to foster hope for non-academic students. Aspiring to be an

knowledge economy, Hong Kong needs the great majority, if not all, of our students to succeed, academically and professionally, though individuals may attain achievement at different paces. Failure of the reforms to achieve this across-the-board improvement would mean more youth problems, cross-generational poverty and welfare costs as well as a waste of human talent.

Robin Cheung Man-biu is principal of Tsung Tsin College, Tuen Mun.

Montessori's century-old methods still popular today

A new school following the child-based teaching approach will open its doors in Hong Kong next week on the anniversary of its Italian founder, writes Liz Gooch

ON THIS DAY IN 1907, an Italian woman named Maria Montessori opened a school in the slums of Rome.

The Casa dei Bambini, or “children's house”, was Dr Montessori's brainchild, employing a revolutionary teaching method that would eventually spread across the globe.

Her philosophy turned the traditional approach to education on its head and has attracted its fair share of criticism, but a century later, 22,000 schools are keeping her legacy alive. Dr Montessori's methods are now followed in more than 100 countries. In Hong Kong, a new school will next week open its doors to children, from newborns to 12-year-olds.

In 1978, Lorraine Hughes, founder of the Woodlands Group, opened Hong Kong's first Montessori pre-school in Repulse Bay, followed by schools in Mid-Levels and Tai Tam. After opening with just 36 children in Repulse Bay, the Woodlands Group now has about 500 students attending its three bilingual Montessori pre-schools.

Ms Hughes said the Montessori method was more “child-based” than mainstream education. “As opposed to going into a class where the teacher says today we're going to do X, Y and Z ... the child has the freedom to choose,” she said, adding that the teacher acts as more of a guide.

The International Montessori School, which caters for children from three to 12, opened in 2002 with 58 students. The bilingual school in Wan Chai now has 170 children from 25 countries.

School supervisor Anne Sawyer said the school appealed to parents looking for creative, individualised learning for their children in a bilingual environment.

Joanna Godbolt, principal of the Casa dei Bambini school that officially opens today, said the philosophy was based on the premise that “children learn by doing, not by hearing”. She said the children worked in three-hour blocks, where they could choose various tasks but must complete a curriculum by the end of the three pre-school years.

Ms Godbolt, who has also worked in two Montessori schools in Beijing, said children were encouraged to become independent and confident problem-solvers.

“The kids in a Montessori school have freedom within boundaries. They become self-disciplined and self-motivated,” she said. “The children do not have to sit still in rows. They can talk, they can experiment. Montessori has specialised materials so that children learn by doing, not by hearing.”

Dr Montessori also bucked the trend of educating children in age groups. At Montessori schools, children of different ages are taught together. While some parents are concerned that younger toddlers will hold their older children back, Ms Hughes said grouping different ages together had a positive effect on all parties and allowed children to learn from each other.

It was the combination of these unconventional teaching methods that secured Dr Montessori a place in education history books.



Serious child's play

Toddlers learn with the educational toys at Hong Kong's newest Montessori school, Casa Dei Bambini, in Queen's Road West.

The school, which will cater for children from birth to the age of 12, officially opens today and children will begin attending classes next week.

Casa dei Bambini will initially only offer classes in English but

plans to start bilingual classes in the future. Principal Joanna Godbolt said Montessori schools, which give children freedom to learn at their own pace, were becoming more popular. “I think parents are becoming more and more interested in Montessori and they're finding out that it works,” she said.

Report: Liz Gooch Photo: Steve Cray

Born in 1870, Dr Montessori was the first Italian woman to receive a medical degree but it was her pioneering research with children that really put her work on the international stage.

After achieving success in her work with children with special needs, she was asked to establish day care centres for children in one of Rome's worst neighbourhoods.

When she held the first training course in the Montessori approach in 1909, she expected to attract only Italian teachers but people came from around the world. She spent time teaching in London and India, and her book, *The Montessori Method*, has been translated into 20 languages.

While Montessori schools in some countries cater for children from birth to the age of 18, Ms Godbolt said the most popular schools in Asia were those for children aged three to six. During these years, children's primary motor co-ordination, independence and language are developed through doing everyday tasks such as folding, washing or sweeping, painting, singing and other artistic activities.

Ms Hughes said the Montessori method was becoming increasingly popular.

“More and more parents are seeing for themselves how the Montessori philosophy works, how the children relate to it, the great love of learning that they achieve, which is all part of the Montessori philosophy.”

Dr Margaret Wong Ngai-chun, associate professor at the Hong Kong Institute of Education's Department of Early Childhood Education, described Montessori as an alternative form of early childhood education.

“They have very specific learning materials, very specific procedures,” she said. While mainstream schools may use some Montessori methods, Dr Wong said mainstream schools encouraged children to interact more with their peers and teachers.

“Nowadays we advocate children learning in groups to interact but in Montessori they stress on children working with materials on an individual basis,” she said.

However, Dr Wong said if the learning outcomes achieved at Montessori schools matched parents' expectations, she did not see any problems with the method.

“Maybe for some children their parents feel that they want their children to learn through the quiet, concentrated way but for most parents they feel that their children learn in a mainstream school,” she said.

While schools bearing the Montessori name have sprung up around the world, from Angola and Columbia, to Slovakia and Sweden, its practitioners readily admit that not all of the schools are “100 per cent” Montessori. They acknowledge the name is open to abuse because the Montessori method is not trademarked.

“Schools can open up anywhere, use the name, have a few pieces of their equipment and call themselves Montessori, which is why we've taken the step of accrediting to London Montessori,” Ms Hughes said.

Ms Godbolt said not all schools using the Montessori name employed properly trained teachers. She hopes Casa dei Bambini will eventually offer accredited teacher training courses.

For more information visit <http://montessoricentenary.org/>

mailbag

Fairness built in to English examination

The Hong Kong Examinations Authority would like to clarify issues raised in the letter by “Tutorial School Oral Examiner” (*Education Post*, December 9), as the writer is misinformed in two major respects.

The writer suggests that in the individual response part of the exam, the fact that candidates are asked different questions which may be of different levels of difficulty is unfair and represents a return to differentiating between candidates according to whether they are of Syllabus A or B standard. This is not so.

The individual response part of the exam is designed to enable candidates to do full justice to their ability to speak English. Those who are interested may refer to page 11 of the “Guidelines for Candidates” published by the HKEAA which states:

“The questions candidates will be asked will depend on what they have said in the discussion, for example some questions may be inappropriate because they had already covered that point or made their opinion clear. Also, the questions will be at different levels of difficulty.

“The examiners will try to choose questions that match candidates' level of ability to help them to do as well as possible. That is why questions are set at varying levels of difficulty; to give both weaker and stronger candidates an opportunity of showing what they are capable of.”

It is quite clear from the above that the individual response is designed to help candidates perform at their best. Examiners

will give a preliminary assessment on the basis of the discussion. This assessment may be changed either upwards or downwards as a result of the individual response, but not drastically, as the individual response is only one minute, while the discussion lasts for six minutes.

It would therefore be impossible for a strong candidate to be given a low mark simply on the basis of a poor individual response or for a weak candidate to do better than a strong one simply because s/he had been given an easier question to answer, both of which scenarios the writer claimed were possible.

If, as the writer claims, some schools are instructing their students to perform poorly in the discussion so that they get an easier question to answer in Part B, they are doing them a grave disservice.

The writer suggests that the fairest option would be to ask all the candidates in a group the same question. As all the members of the group will be present when the questions are asked, this option truly would be unfair as candidates C and D might benefit from having listened to the answers given by candidates A and B or, alternatively, they might not be able to think of an answer that had not already been given, which might lead them into performing less well than they could have.

If teachers have queries about the oral examination, they are welcome to raise them with the HKEAA, which, happily, is a more reliable source of information than tutorial school examiners. Enquiries can be e-mailed to ce@hkeaa.edu.hk
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LET US KNOW YOUR VIEWS

Do you have a view about Hong Kong education issues or have something you'd like to share with *Education Post* readers? Write to or e-mail Mailbag, submit a short article for our “What you say” column or contact our reporters with a story. Letters should be as short as possible and may be edited.
Phone 2565 2222 and ask for the education desk. Fax 2811 1048.
E-mail education@scmp.com

Prefect appointment should be consistent

It is a shame to see boys and girls of 16 experiencing inequity. The recent allocation of prefects at Island School has left some wondering what justice really means.

In one house, prefects were chosen by votes cast by house students. In another, students who wished to be prefects wrote a letter of application, and yet in another all students of the eligible age and behaviour were chosen – this left more than 20 prefects from the latter, and 10 in each of the former. For some students, this is a meaningful milestone in a school career.

Island School should be consistent in order to create a system of procedural and distributive justice.

At German Swiss the entire school votes for its prefects. ESF schools should be consistent and create a sense of equity so that these young people are not bewildered and disappointed.
NAME AND ADDRESS SUPPLIED

Race discrimination guaranteed in diploma

Our government plans gross racial discrimination that makes its pledge to teach values laughable. The proposed Hong Kong diploma ignores racial minorities and immigrants by denying them the freedom to study a language other than Chinese.

The official stance is that students who cannot afford to study at international schools, or wish not to, may take a language other than Chinese. This would, however, automatically disqualify them from gaining the diploma upon graduation. It is ridiculous that as an “international” city Hong Kong wishes to adopt educational reforms that marginalise minorities and guarantees their academic disqualification.

There is a sizeable proportion of citizens in Hong Kong who do not have a qualification in Chinese but who are productive and tax paying citizens. It is unacceptable that the new Hong Kong diploma actually is a step backwards making it inferior to the soon-to-be-replaced HKCEE.

Thus far we have been presented with one *fait accompli* after another and I fear this gross mistake is already in the works. Thus far we will have the following thrust down our young people's throats: an extra year of compulsory mathematics for all, an un-liberal liberal studies curriculum and lip service to a can-do assessment.

High-sounding but empty theories create only a rosy picture and deceptive and wasteful advertising.
G. DUDLEY,
Mid-levels