

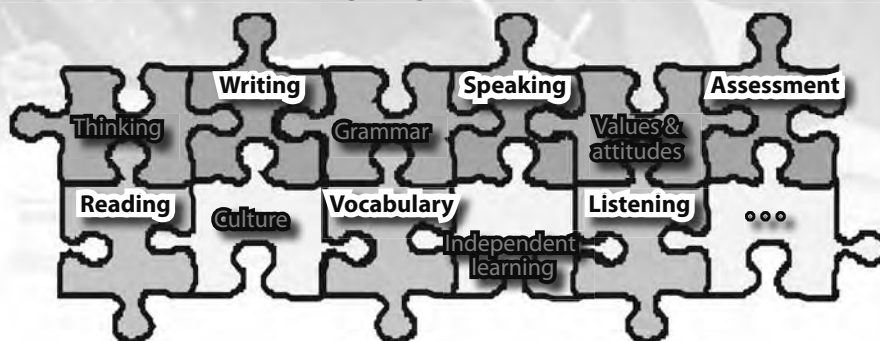
## Venturing into the uncharted waters of language education (2004 – 2009)



The Final Report of Language Education Review issued by SCOLAR recommended the setting up of a task force of teaching consultants to provide Chinese language (including Putonghua) and English language support services to all primary and secondary schools with a view to enhancing the capacity of Chinese and English panel heads and teachers to implement the curriculum reform. The Task Force on Language Support was formally set up in September 2004 to take forward this recommendation. As of today, we have provided support to over half of the primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong.

During these five years, we have witnessed immense changes in the educational and social contexts; the introduction of numerous language-related policies and initiatives; and most important of all, the professional growth of the language teaching community in coping with the challenges and opportunities brought by those changes, policies and initiatives. As close collaborators within this community, the development and achievement of the Task Force and the language teachers have been inextricably linked. Likewise, the challenges faced by the teachers have also been shouldered by the Task Force. We would like to revisit with our readers the joys and tears in this five-year journey, reflect on our learning and refocus our work in the years ahead.

## Premising on the basics in language education



To face changes and uncertainties, the Task Force has chosen to work with our teachers in strengthening the foundation areas of language education with particular emphasis on *Reading & Vocabulary building*, *Writing*, *Listening & Speaking* and *Assessment* at primary and secondary levels. Our hope was that the enhancement of teachers' capacity in tackling these fundamental areas would build up their confidence in exploring new ground.

### **Reading**

Reading, a key to developing a broad knowledge base, enhancing language proficiency, developing thinking skills and widening life experiences, has been a priority area of development for both the schools and the Task Force. For the English KLA, additional efforts have been put into helping students expand their vocabulary. Targeted support has been given to raising students' motivation to read; enhancing their reading abilities; and providing opportunities for them to read extensively and share their reading experiences with a wider audience. Among the strategies adopted, the explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills and reading strategies, cross-age reading pals programmes, Literature Circles, reading-across-the-curriculum activities and Reading Clubs were found particularly useful. We are delighted to find that teachers have become more aware of the importance of and more competent in teaching the different levels of reading skills which help students to comprehend, predict, make inferences and judgements, etc. By doing so, teachers have not just addressed weaknesses identified by the PIRLS and PISA studies, but developed students' capacity to cope with the requirements of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum of the Language subjects and Liberal Studies in particular.

### **Writing**

Writing has always been tackled simultaneously with reading. Teachers often complain that students' compositions are "rich" in mistakes and deficient in substance, let alone elaboration and organisation of ideas. To gain a deeper understanding of these problems, we have examined students' work together with the unit plans and task design and looked into the learning and teaching process in the classroom. We have then been able to identify gaps in curriculum planning and problems with learning and teaching.

These issues have been tackled on three fronts: (a) helping students build up the vocabulary and language required to perform the writing tasks, develop ideas and present them in a logical manner; (b) building teachers' capacity in developing a writing curriculum which integrates the teaching of reading and thinking; and (c) improving the scaffolding process through the use of process writing and cooperative learning strategies in writing lessons. The teaching of writing has become more systematic and students are more motivated to write and more able to produce longer texts with richer content, better organisation and greater accuracy.



## **Listening & Speaking**

Increasing importance has been attached to the development of listening and speaking skills partly because of the new emphasis given by the curriculum (for Chinese language in particular) and partly because of the new assessment requirements in the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA) and the NSS (including the School-based Assessment). There has been the misconception that with more practice, students' listening and speaking skills automatically improve. To enable students to cope with integrated tasks which involve listening, explicit teaching of listening skills such as making predictions, understanding the intention of the speaker, following the argument in a discussion/debate, etc. has been emphasised.

Speaking problems such as lack of confidence, inability to develop ideas and present them systematically, lack of interaction skills in group discussions, etc. are commonly found among students. A range of speaking activities has been integrated into classroom teaching to help students of different levels develop both confidence and competence in performing different speaking tasks. For instance, for the English KLA, schools have made use of Readers' Theatre to help primary students practise reading aloud; used drama to enable primary students to share their reading experience; and used Literature Circles to encourage the development of secondary students' discussion skills. For the Chinese KLA, individual presentation and group discussion skills particularly have been addressed by many secondary schools in preparation for the public exam. Samples of students' performance have been used extensively to help teachers identify the skills to be taught and understand the assessment criteria. This can help them plan their teaching of speaking more effectively.

## **Assessment**

Assessment can have a positive washback effect on learning and teaching. Over the years, we have aimed at developing teachers' assessment literacy and changing assessment practices in schools. We have worked together with teachers to make use of TSA data in combination with other school data to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, gaps in the school-based language curriculum and problems with teaching. We have also looked into how the learning process and outcomes could be improved through better alignment between assessment, learning objectives and teaching. To enable students to display learning which cannot be assessed through pen-and-paper tests, we have tried different modes of assessment such as peer assessment, self assessment, portfolio, presentations, project work, to assess students' language abilities and learning attitudes. To help students make targeted improvement, qualitative feedback, which clearly points out students' problems and the direction for improvement, has been used. Since data interpretation and different assessment practices have been applied to speaking, reading and writing, more noticeable improvement has been found in these areas.



## **Exploring the uncharted zones of language education**

The accumulation of experiences and achievements in tackling the basic areas of language learning and teaching has helped the Task Force build up confidence and capacity in dealing with unprecedented issues. During these five years, developments in the social and educational contexts have led many schools to ask for language support, in the following areas in particular:

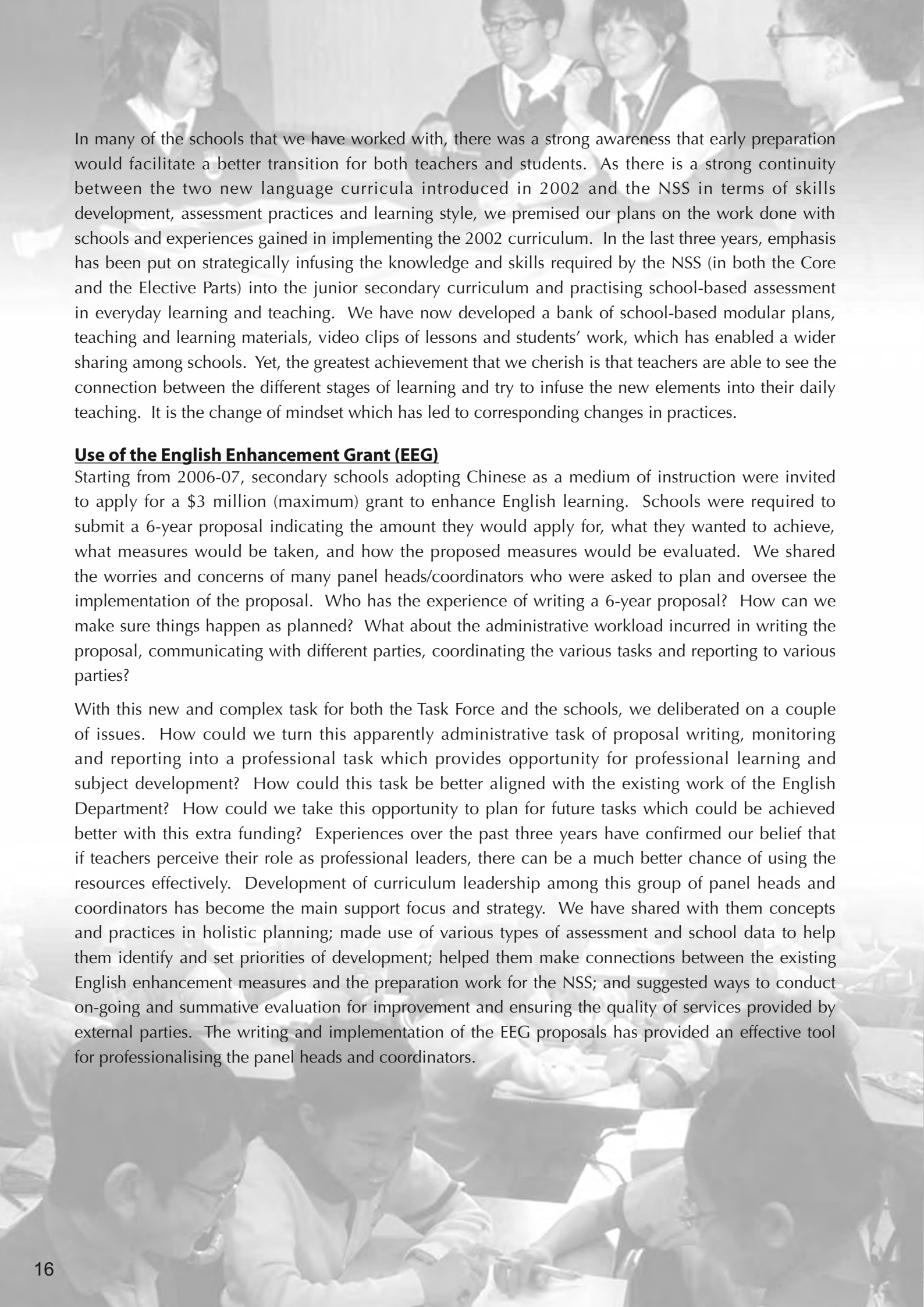
### **Teaching Chinese to Non-Chinese Speaking (NCS) Students**

While the discussion of the Anti-racial Discrimination Bill was going on in society, the admission policy for primary and secondary schools was changed in 2004 to enable NCS students to have an equal opportunity to choose to study in local mainstream schools. The introduction of this policy has no doubt provided more choices for NCS students, yet with it came the implication that more support has to be given to those students and their teachers. Some NCS students might have great difficulty in studying Chinese and using Chinese to study and in integrating well in mainstream schools; and teachers had neither the knowledge nor the expertise to cope with the learning needs of these students.

Since there is little reference locally and from around the world that we can draw on, the Task Force has been working closely with primary and secondary schools with various intakes of NCS students to “experiment” with different modes of curriculum design and teaching strategies; and to design tailor-made learning materials as only a limited number of appropriate textbooks are available. We have also trained local senior primary and junior secondary students to coach NCS students in reading stories and information texts so that their Chinese vocabulary can expand to cope with the learning of other language skills and tasks. What we have now learned is that most NCS students who study in mainstream schools (with a high percentage of local students) can quickly catch up in learning Chinese since there are higher expectations and also greater support from teachers, a more Chinese-rich environment at school, and a specially designed pull-out programme to help them keep up with formal classroom learning. Students have performed and integrated into school life better in schools with a more explicit and coordinated policy and measures for NCS students and a team of teachers who possess a more positive attitude towards them.

### **Preparation for the New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum**

Since the introduction of the draft version of the two language curricula in 2005, schools have raised different concerns and worries. Some were concerned about what electives could be offered as there are a number of choices; some were not confident in teaching certain electives (e.g. Popular Culture, Sports Communication, Social Issues and Debating in the English curriculum, Performance in Putonghua and Multi-media Reading, Science Fiction in the Chinese curriculum); some were uncertain about the accessibility of sufficient quality teaching and learning resources; and many were worried about how School-based Assessment would be conducted and the extra workload that would be incurred. All these concerns implied that there was a great need for support in curriculum planning, teacher training and resource development.



In many of the schools that we have worked with, there was a strong awareness that early preparation would facilitate a better transition for both teachers and students. As there is a strong continuity between the two new language curricula introduced in 2002 and the NSS in terms of skills development, assessment practices and learning style, we premised our plans on the work done with schools and experiences gained in implementing the 2002 curriculum. In the last three years, emphasis has been put on strategically infusing the knowledge and skills required by the NSS (in both the Core and the Elective Parts) into the junior secondary curriculum and practising school-based assessment in everyday learning and teaching. We have now developed a bank of school-based modular plans, teaching and learning materials, video clips of lessons and students' work, which has enabled a wider sharing among schools. Yet, the greatest achievement that we cherish is that teachers are able to see the connection between the different stages of learning and try to infuse the new elements into their daily teaching. It is the change of mindset which has led to corresponding changes in practices.

### **Use of the English Enhancement Grant (EEG)**

Starting from 2006-07, secondary schools adopting Chinese as a medium of instruction were invited to apply for a \$3 million (maximum) grant to enhance English learning. Schools were required to submit a 6-year proposal indicating the amount they would apply for, what they wanted to achieve, what measures would be taken, and how the proposed measures would be evaluated. We shared the worries and concerns of many panel heads/coordinators who were asked to plan and oversee the implementation of the proposal. Who has the experience of writing a 6-year proposal? How can we make sure things happen as planned? What about the administrative workload incurred in writing the proposal, communicating with different parties, coordinating the various tasks and reporting to various parties?

With this new and complex task for both the Task Force and the schools, we deliberated on a couple of issues. How could we turn this apparently administrative task of proposal writing, monitoring and reporting into a professional task which provides opportunity for professional learning and subject development? How could this task be better aligned with the existing work of the English Department? How could we take this opportunity to plan for future tasks which could be achieved better with this extra funding? Experiences over the past three years have confirmed our belief that if teachers perceive their role as professional leaders, there can be a much better chance of using the resources effectively. Development of curriculum leadership among this group of panel heads and coordinators has become the main support focus and strategy. We have shared with them concepts and practices in holistic planning; made use of various types of assessment and school data to help them identify and set priorities of development; helped them make connections between the existing English enhancement measures and the preparation work for the NSS; and suggested ways to conduct on-going and summative evaluation for improvement and ensuring the quality of services provided by external parties. The writing and implementation of the EEG proposals has provided an effective tool for professionalising the panel heads and coordinators.

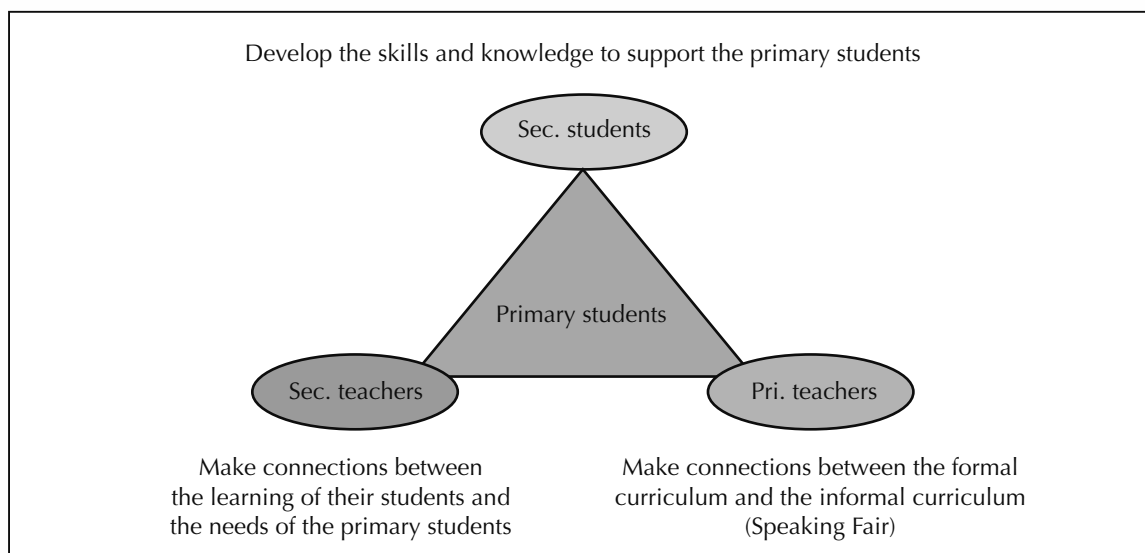


## Breaking new ground in supporting language education

We have not just accumulated ample and useful knowledge about different language focuses, irrespective of whether they are perennial or new, but have also developed new and effective “models” of school support through implementing different language support programmes.

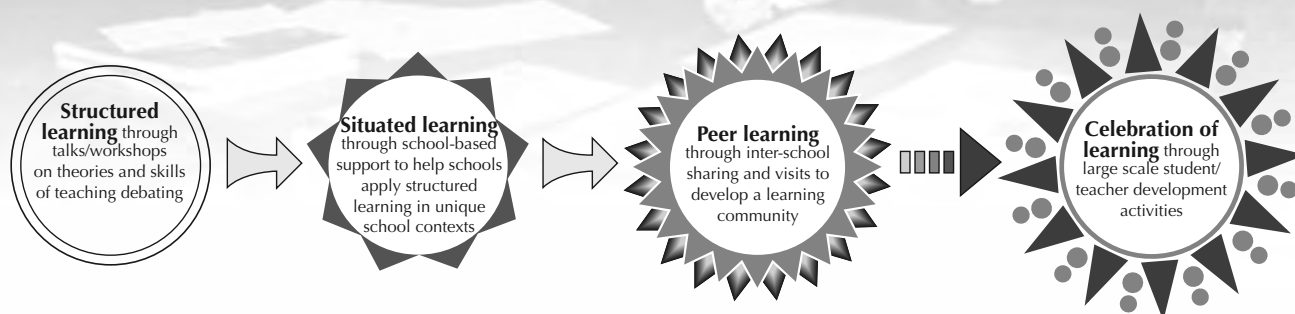
### **Fostering partnerships between primary and secondary schools to provide mutual support**

How to increase students’ exposure to English beyond classroom learning has always been the concern of many schools, especially for those students who do not have strong family support and have only limited access to English learning opportunities. Three years ago, we established a network which involved a group of primary schools in Tuen Mun. Apart from providing school-based support to enhance teacher development and curriculum development, we organise English Speaking Fairs yearly to conduct a wide range of English learning activities for the senior primary students in these schools. The objective is to provide them with more opportunities to use the English they learn during class through fun and meaningful activities, thus raising their motivation and confidence in using English.



To conduct the Speaking Fairs, we have invited students from several secondary schools to serve as coordinators, organisers and helpers. This arrangement on one hand helps reduce the workload of the primary teachers, but more importantly provides a valuable opportunity for the secondary students to engage in Other Learning Experiences, a requirement of the NSS. The Task Force has successfully helped build partnerships between the primary and the secondary schools, developed the capacity of the teachers to connect the formal curriculum and informal curriculum, and trained the secondary students to conduct the activities. By doing so, we hope that the learning opportunities for both the primary and secondary students can be sustained. Experiences over the past three years have shown that collaboration between the two parties facilitates the learning for both groups of students and teachers.

## Establish links between structured learning, situated learning, peer learning and “celebrated learning”



Different modes of teacher development have different purposes. The Task Force has tried to adopt a combination of teacher development modes in delivering a Chinese debating education programme for junior secondary students. The programme aims to develop students' integrative language and thinking skills which in turn prepares them for the NSS Chinese Language curriculum and Liberal Studies. We have designed a series of structured seminars to help teachers understand what debating is, how debating skills can be infused into the Chinese curriculum and how they can be taught in class. It was then followed by school-based support which aimed to help teachers design their school-based curriculum, implement the curriculum in the classroom and review the learning of students based on the evidence collected. This has helped teachers apply their structured learning in a practical school context. In doing so, they had to consider students' needs, refine their plan and reflect on their teaching practices which led to deep learning. We then arranged inter-school lesson observations to enable schools to learn from each other. Through such arrangements teachers had greater exposure and gained peer feedback and mutual support, which reinforced their learning from the previous two modes. The peak of the learning cycle appeared in a celebration event in which students from the collaborating schools were invited to take part in a Debating Camp. Apart from providing opportunities for students to display their learning, what was of even greater value was that teachers could reflect and share their experiences using students' performance as evidence and were able to work out a “progression map” for their own students.



## **Adoption of an exchange and collaborative approach to support**

In the past, we might have, to a certain extent, adopted a “pathological” approach to support, i.e. support was given to “problematic” schools or to improve the weak spots of schools. Yet, how can the needs of schools who want to try innovative ideas or work for sustainable development be satisfied? The Task Force has offered the Mainland-Hong Kong Exchange and Collaborative Programme since 2004-05. To begin with, about 40 schools participated and the number has now grown to more than 200. Mainland experts, including outstanding teachers, researchers and school leaders, are stationed in our schools for two days a week to work in collaboration with the Chinese language teachers to conduct small scale research into different language issues, e.g. the teaching of classical Chinese literature, the use of Putonghua to teach Chinese language, appreciation of Chinese culture, integration of reading and writing. Schools have successfully tapped the strengths of the Mainland experts to help them conduct structured classroom research, focussed and detailed lesson planning, and reflect on the process and outcomes of teaching and learning through lesson observation and post-observation discussion. Through close collaboration and exchange of ideas from the different perspective offered by the Mainland experts, our teachers have been really inspired and yet the improvements are owned by both parties. To broaden teachers’ perspectives, exchange tours to China have been organised to enable our teachers to experience how Chinese language could be taught in different school and cultural contexts. The value added by this approach in teachers’ professional growth is coupled with an increasing understanding of our country which can bring them a step closer to developing a national identity.

## **Keep sailing**

Despite the fact that we have had many small successes and accumulated useful knowledge and experiences over the years, the journey to improving language education is never smooth as there are always waves ahead. Yet, safe and happy sailing comes from an urge for excellence and sustainable development. In the years to come, the Task Force will step up its support in the area of curriculum leadership development with a view to helping primary schools to make effective use of different resources available (e.g. provision of small class teaching and specialised teaching) to build a firm language foundation and supporting secondary schools to implement the New Senior Secondary curriculum successfully.

We salute our collaborating schools for placing their trust in the Task Force on this five year journey! Together we have grown in confidence and competence, providing the best language education for our students.