

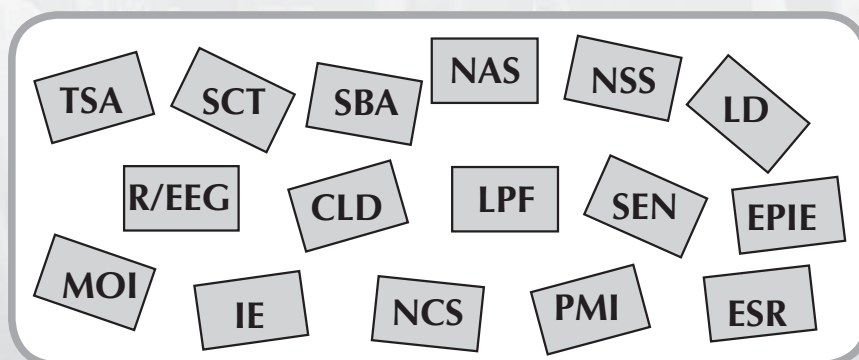
Unlocking the black box of our language classrooms

Larry Cuban, in his recent publication “Inside the black box of classroom practice: Change without reform in American education” (2013), puts forward a very thought-provoking question of why policy reforms in education have had little effect on classroom conduct and practice. Despite the fact that massive resources have been made available, structural and organisational changes have been introduced, and an accountability system has been put in place, most educational reforms do not really change things in the classroom, where learning is supposed to occur.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a wave of education reforms around the world, including Hong Kong. A common theme of these reforms is the need to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. What is the local scenario, especially in language education, after 10 years of education reform? Have the vision and the goals of those reforms been realised and positive impacts made on student learning? Over the last ten years, the Task Force on Language Support has been partnering with more than 700 primary and secondary schools to implement a wide range of policies and language-related reforms involving such areas as the medium of instruction, curriculum and assessment, class size, etc. In the course of planning and implementing those policies and initiatives, we have met with great challenges, especially those created by uncertainty in the internal and external environments. Yet, the commitment of the teachers and their untiring efforts to ever-improve their professional skills and build a collaborative culture among the teacher teams have not only enabled them to overcome those challenges, but have brought about real changes at school, department, and most encouragingly, classroom level. This article attempts to give a broader picture of the changes observed in teachers’ behaviour in the classroom as a result of the implementation of our collaborative projects. The impact on students in different areas of language learning will be looked into in different chapters of this compendium.

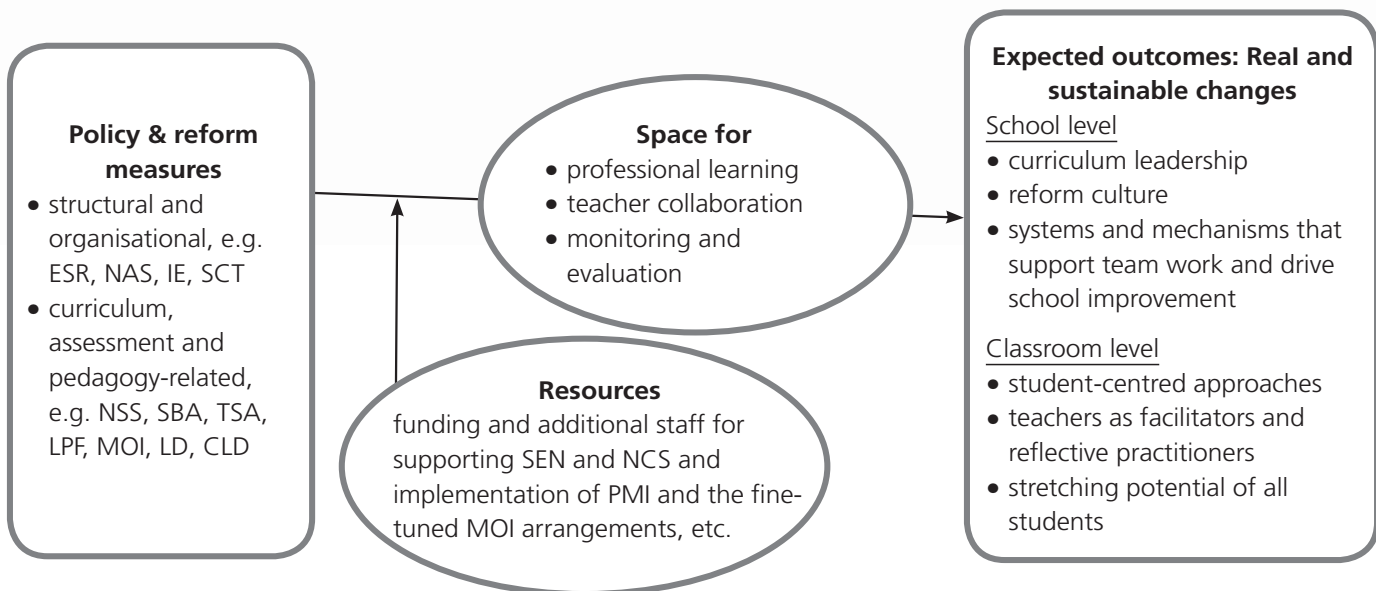
1. Revisiting key language-related policies and reforms

The wave of policy initiatives introduced over the last decade has placed the quality of our education system firmly at the centre of public debate. Multiple innovations have been introduced into the system in order to ensure that our schools remain relevant and focused on delivering quality language education so parents’ expectations regarding their children’s language abilities and proficiency can be met. Teachers often reflect that this process of implementing multiple innovations has caused an increase in workload and a sense that, at times, they are being pulled in different directions.



An important part of our work is to help teachers and curriculum leaders understand the essence of the policies behind the many acronyms¹ by which they are known. We do this to make sure that the main drive for change comes from a desire to improve classroom practice and enhance student learning. One must clearly understand the rationale of each of these policies/initiatives and the kind of deep changes and support required if their implementation is to be successful. It is also of paramount importance that frontline colleagues have a good understanding of how the policies are interconnected in order to maximise the impact of their efforts.

The diagram below gives a simplified yet clear picture of how the Task Force has helped schools understand the essence and the deep changes required by relating those policies and reform measures to the expected outcomes. In order to sustain the kind of effort that leads to significant impact on student learning outcomes, schools are supported in making effective use of the resources available to create space for engaging the teacher team in planning, collaborating, learning, reflecting and conceptualising their experiences.



Mission of the Task Force: Helping teachers to establish a close connection between policy and practice at school

2. Zooming in on the process of connecting policy and practice

(i) Developing an understanding of what is going to be implemented

Whenever a policy or an initiative is rolled out, there are bound to be different perceptions and expectations. Pressure and additional workload could be real or a matter of perception. Sometimes, such pressure may originate from misconceptions, a lack of understanding or from trying to add new practices and requirements to an existing system without considering carefully what needs to be adapted, realigned or removed entirely to make space for them. So, guiding teachers to understand the

¹ Acronyms are often used in the local education context to refer to policies/reform measures/educational issues. Examples include: TSA – Territory-wide System Assessment, SBA – School-based Assessment, LPF – Learning Progression Framework, SCT – Small Class Teaching, CLD – Curriculum Leadership Development, IE – Inclusive Education, MOI – Medium of Instruction, PMI – Putonghua as a Medium of Instruction, R/EEG – Refined/English Enhancement Grant, NCS – (Support for) Non-Chinese Speaking students, NAS – New Academic Structure, NSS – New Senior Secondary (Curriculum), SEN – Special Educational Needs, LD – Learner Diversity, ESR – External School Review, EPIE – Evaluation-Planning-Implementation-Evaluation

policy intent correctly and how it is related to enhanced learning outcomes is a crucial part of the change process. Below are some examples of the assumptions, misconceptions and perceptions which we have come across and have tried to clarify in our day-to-day work with teachers.

I think...	Let's find out...
Some strategies like cooperative learning can only be used in small classes!	Effective teaching shows features that are applicable to different class sizes, e.g. setting appropriate teaching objectives. A strategy can work in different contexts provided the right kind of classroom culture has been fostered and the strategy is used at the right time and for the right purpose.
SBA incurs such a huge workload and there are issues of fairness!	What causes the workload? Has it to do with the logistical arrangements, the number of assessments to be administered, or the failure to understand that SBA should be closely aligned with and an integral part of the teaching and learning process? Is the focus of the process the actual grade, or using the assessment as an opportunity to identify students' strengths and weaknesses and help them make targeted improvement?
Getting extra funding means having greater workload and accountability as we have to submit funding proposals and evaluation reports. To get or not to get, that's the question!	The provision of additional resources does not necessarily bring about better results if there is a lack of planning, the planning is done without making reference to the school's real needs, the measures selected are not based on sound pedagogical knowledge, or there is no on-going review. Asking schools to develop a proposal on how particular funding (e.g. R/EEG) is used provides teachers with an opportunity to conduct a thorough review of their needs and set appropriate and realistic development priorities; work together to plan concrete measures; agree on how the resources should be utilised; and set evaluation criteria and expected outcomes. Teachers can then make use of the evidence collected to reflect on the effectiveness of their work. Hence, these tasks provide meaningful contexts for applying the EPIE process for school improvement.

Discussion on the above and other language policies and initiatives can be found in different issues of Language Matters (newsletter of the Task Force) published in October 2004 – March 2010.

(ii) Developing necessary knowledge and skills

In order to be effective, teachers need to have and use different kinds of knowledge: knowledge for practice, knowledge in practice and knowledge of practice² (Basic Education Curriculum Guide, 2002). The following table summarises how the different modes of support adopted by the Task Force reflect our goal of helping teachers develop all three kinds of knowledge.

² Knowledge for practice: formal knowledge and theories from literature

Knowledge in practice: practical knowledge embedded in teachers' practice

Knowledge of practice: knowledge constructed when teachers inquire, experiment, reflect based on evidence, usually in partnership

Type of knowledge	Mode of support	Objective	Example
Knowledge for practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talks and seminars • Training and experience sharing sessions • Resources uploaded on the Web 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep teachers abreast of the knowledge and theories relating to different language policies and reform measures • Share experiences and resources generated in the field to enhance teachers' understanding of how particular initiatives or skills can be implemented 	Trends and practices in assessment, second language learning, catering for learner diversity, curriculum leadership development and using new technologies
Knowledge in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site-based meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help teachers to generate context-specific practical/craft knowledge 	Adoption of EPIE process in planning, implementing and evaluating the school-based language curricula
Knowledge of practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action research • Learning circles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the attitudes and skills required for a systematic, critical and evidence-based inquiry into specific learning and teaching issues • Establish shared knowledge, culture and practices that are valued by teachers within and across schools 	(Peer) lesson observation and looking at student work as instrumental tasks to promote individual and collective inquiry; and district-/ theme-based networks as platforms for generating new practitioner knowledge on issues of common interest/ concern

(These types of knowledge should be seen as a spectrum rather than as definitive points. As the support provided by the Task Force is context-dependent, emphasis will be placed on different kinds of knowledge at different times to suit different purposes.)

3. Unlocking classroom practices

Have teaching practices inside our language classrooms improved as a result of this support? Have changes in teaching practices led to improvement in student learning? A simple answer is “yes”, but in what way? Task Force members pay an average of 4,000 school visits, observe over 1,000 language lessons and conduct more than 100 professional development events every year, involving 300 – 350 primary and secondary schools. We have witnessed positive changes in both the culture and practices of our language teachers over the years. One significant change is that classrooms have become more accessible to the “public”, and teachers' practices are being gradually made clear to “outsiders”.

(i) Adopting a research perspective towards teaching

Doing educational research is often regarded as the business of universities. However, ten years of close collaboration with teachers have enabled us to sow the seeds of a more inquisitive and enquiring mindset among them. The adoption of a research-oriented perspective is crucial to improving the process and outcomes of learning and teaching. Behaviours demonstrating this change of perspective are exhibited in different areas of teachers' work.

(a) Conducting lesson observation

- In many schools, lesson observation has become an institutionalised practice and is used by teachers to find out how the planned strategies and activities are implemented in the classroom.
- Inviting peers from the same school or other schools in a learning network, or even parents, to observe teaching and learning activities has become common practice.
- Specific tools, as opposed to standard checklists, and appropriate success criteria are developed to help observers make focused observations. This enables teachers to inquire critically into particular issues of teaching and learning instead of giving general comments which cover every aspect of "perfect" teaching.
- Post-observation discussion protocols³ are adopted by most schools participating in the Curriculum Leadership Development Programme and in different learning circles. Interactions are found to be richer, more systematic and evidence-based. The focus is on what teachers can learn from observing processes rather than making judgements about the teachers' performance.
- There has been greater use of classroom research to help teachers plan, implement and reflect on their teaching. More evident changes are found among those Chinese language teachers who have had the experience of collaborating with the mainland experts through joining the Mainland-Hong Kong Exchange Programme and the support scheme on using Putonghua to teach Chinese.

(b) Looking at student work

Examining student work, such as worksheets, projects, oral presentations, writing, has become a regular practice in co-planning meetings. Through studying the work of different groups and different types of work, teachers in schools under our support have gained a better understanding of the learning and teaching process, including the extent to which the learning objectives have been achieved, the strengths of and the problems faced by different groups of students. Such findings are often used to inform the planning and teaching of the next cycle/unit, in particular how lesson instructions, task design, the scaffolding process and the quality of feedback can be improved.

(c) Using assessment data

- Despite the importance attached to examination results and the continued use of examination practice ("drilling"), there is a heightened awareness of the value that assessment data can add to improving learning and teaching, and an increasing use of a wide range of formative and summative, internal and external assessment data in the curriculum review, planning and implementation process.

³ Protocols are adopted for conducting post-observation discussion. There are 4 steps to the protocol we normally use. (1) The teacher observed reflects on his teaching. (2) The observers share some positive impressions (with evidence) and ask questions to clarify doubts, if any. The teacher observed just listens. (3) The teacher observed responds to the questions. The observers just listen. (4) The group engages in a discussion on the issues/problems identified and works out the tackling strategies.

- The professional use of assessment data, in conjunction with other sets of data related to student learning, is exhibited at different stages of the process. For instance, TSA and HKDSE results are often used together with internal assessment results, feedback from inspection, teachers' observations, etc. to help language panel heads and teachers find out the extent and the nature of learner diversity, and identify teachers' professional development needs. This is useful to the subject leaders for setting development focuses/priorities. Assessment data from interim tests, exams and SBA and samples of student work are gathered regularly and analysed during co-planning meetings to enable teachers to gain a better understanding of students' problems, the possible problems with the design of the assessment and to work out improvement measures.

(ii) Widening teachers' repertoire in catering for learners' diverse needs

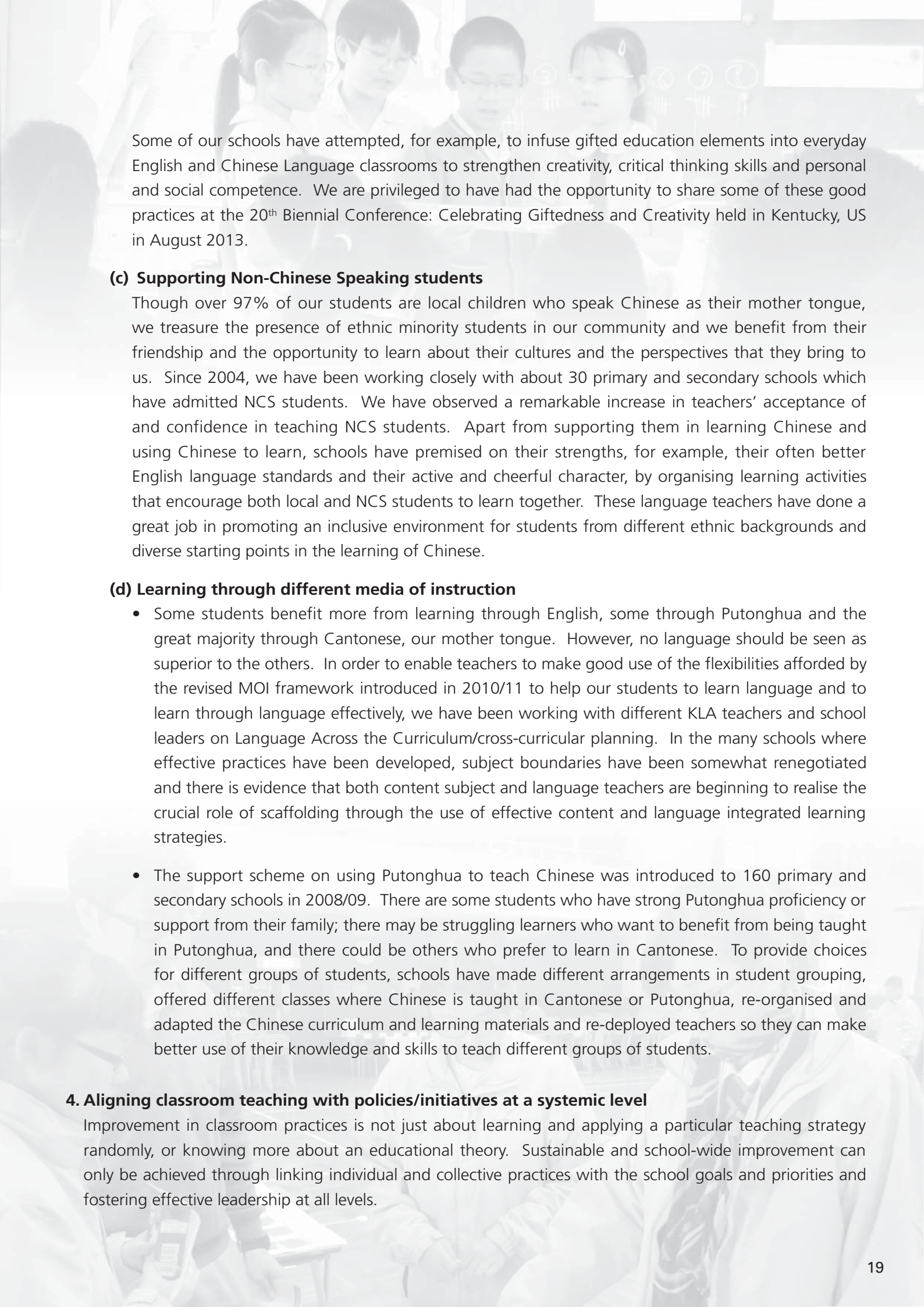
The diversity in our schools is a reflection of our diverse society. Over the past decade, the roll-out and implementation of a range of policies and reforms to help schools address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population have garnered unprecedented attention from the education sector. To some, diversity is a problem and needs to be dealt with. To others, diversity is a phenomenon which exists, whether you like it or not, and all one can do is live with it. To the teachers with whom we have been partnering, diversity offers immense opportunities to rethink how to address the needs of every individual student in the class, and explore how students' needs can be better addressed and their potential further stretched.

(a) Meeting the challenges of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum

Since the introduction of the new academic structure in 2009/2010, catering for learner diversity has been top on the learning and teaching agenda in secondary schools. How can the language curricula be adapted to offer sufficient challenge while catering for the needs of students with different abilities? What electives should be offered to satisfy the diverse interests of the students? How can learning activities be arranged and conducted to encourage participation of students with different learning styles? In many of our collaborating schools, strong emphasis is placed on building a firm foundation at the junior secondary level, so the school-based curriculum is carefully planned by infusing knowledge and skills of the senior secondary elective modules into units and modules of work so as to broaden students' exposure to different text types and themes. Schools have also started infusing the essence and practices of school-based assessment in daily learning to help students develop reflective learning habits. The task-based learning approach is also used to help students learn and use knowledge and skills in authentic situations and in an integrated manner.

(b) Promoting the effective use of small class teaching

The small class teaching arrangement has obviously been a great support for schools in handling student diversity. Schools have been offering a wide range of in-class and after-school learning support for the falling-behind group or late starters. Yet, much of the efforts and resources have been skewed towards the weaker group. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011 confirmed that the percentage of Hong Kong students attaining the "advanced" benchmark was still low in comparison with other countries. Hence we need to set appropriate expectations in order to stretch the potential of all students and create the conditions for students to excel. It is pleasing to find that schools are placing increased emphasis on stretching their students' potential.



Some of our schools have attempted, for example, to infuse gifted education elements into everyday English and Chinese Language classrooms to strengthen creativity, critical thinking skills and personal and social competence. We are privileged to have had the opportunity to share some of these good practices at the 20th Biennial Conference: Celebrating Giftedness and Creativity held in Kentucky, US in August 2013.

(c) Supporting Non-Chinese Speaking students

Though over 97% of our students are local children who speak Chinese as their mother tongue, we treasure the presence of ethnic minority students in our community and we benefit from their friendship and the opportunity to learn about their cultures and the perspectives that they bring to us. Since 2004, we have been working closely with about 30 primary and secondary schools which have admitted NCS students. We have observed a remarkable increase in teachers' acceptance of and confidence in teaching NCS students. Apart from supporting them in learning Chinese and using Chinese to learn, schools have premised on their strengths, for example, their often better English language standards and their active and cheerful character, by organising learning activities that encourage both local and NCS students to learn together. These language teachers have done a great job in promoting an inclusive environment for students from different ethnic backgrounds and diverse starting points in the learning of Chinese.

(d) Learning through different media of instruction

- Some students benefit more from learning through English, some through Putonghua and the great majority through Cantonese, our mother tongue. However, no language should be seen as superior to the others. In order to enable teachers to make good use of the flexibilities afforded by the revised MOI framework introduced in 2010/11 to help our students to learn language and to learn through language effectively, we have been working with different KLA teachers and school leaders on Language Across the Curriculum/cross-curricular planning. In the many schools where effective practices have been developed, subject boundaries have been somewhat renegotiated and there is evidence that both content subject and language teachers are beginning to realise the crucial role of scaffolding through the use of effective content and language integrated learning strategies.
- The support scheme on using Putonghua to teach Chinese was introduced to 160 primary and secondary schools in 2008/09. There are some students who have strong Putonghua proficiency or support from their family; there may be struggling learners who want to benefit from being taught in Putonghua, and there could be others who prefer to learn in Cantonese. To provide choices for different groups of students, schools have made different arrangements in student grouping, offered different classes where Chinese is taught in Cantonese or Putonghua, re-organised and adapted the Chinese curriculum and learning materials and re-deployed teachers so they can make better use of their knowledge and skills to teach different groups of students.

4. Aligning classroom teaching with policies/initiatives at a systemic level

Improvement in classroom practices is not just about learning and applying a particular teaching strategy randomly, or knowing more about an educational theory. Sustainable and school-wide improvement can only be achieved through linking individual and collective practices with the school goals and priorities and fostering effective leadership at all levels.

(i) Adoption of EPIE at micro and macro levels

With the introduction of the School Development and Accountability framework in 2003/04, we witnessed the gradual acceptance of evaluation as a strategic driver of school improvement. In recent years, an increasing number of schools have asked for support when they have to undergo external school reviews/focused inspections. One positive wash-back effect is the fact that they seize this opportunity to conduct a thorough review of their departmental work, including the appropriateness of the school-based curriculum, the quality of learning and teaching and the use of the resources, by making better use of data and evidence from different sources.

The findings from the review are often reflected in the subject development plan where we see greater alignment between the major school concerns and improvement measures introduced, as well as the implementation details and the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms built into the process. This EPIE cycle is also applied to more micro level and day-to-day tasks like teaching a lesson and organising a learning activity. This greater alignment creates a platform for teachers to identify learning needs and plan and evaluate their work according to their school's major concerns.

(ii) Curriculum leadership development


For the impact of the reform to be sustained, it is crucial to achieve deep changes in mindset and professional culture, and develop communities of practice that are responsive to change. We need to target the right people and help them develop the leadership capabilities⁴ required for introducing and managing those changes.

Since 2011/12, the Task Force has made CLD a new support focus. Through the introduction of a CLD Programme, teacher networks and regular on-site support, we have developed a good number of curriculum leaders who show more evident improvement in their ability to use data effectively to set priorities and development focuses and promote evidence-based teaching practices; to propose concrete and workable actions; to use resources effectively; to demonstrate subject and pedagogical knowledge and to communicate effectively with different parties. The introduction of various schemes (e.g. the R/EES, the support scheme on using Putonghua to teach Chinese), which require schools to develop application proposals and submit evaluation reports, has provided curriculum leaders with an opportunity to apply those leadership capabilities.

5. Language classrooms opened

How are the language classrooms of today different from those of ten years ago? Much more OPEN! The classroom doors are open (to welcome visitors), the lessons are open (with an atmosphere that encourages student participation), the teachers are open (to critical and constructive feedback) and the learning time is open (so that students can always have access to support from their teachers). With these improved practices, has student performance improved? Results in local and international assessments may give a little boost to our hardworking language teachers. Their relentless efforts in implementing different changes over the ten years should deserve a big THANK YOU from the students and the public. Though the pace and the impact of our reform differ from classroom to classroom, the improvements made through these

⁴ The target curriculum leadership capabilities we aim to help teachers develop include the ability to (1) use data effectively, (2) propose concrete and workable actions, (3) establish monitoring and/or evaluation mechanisms, (4) use resources effectively, (5) demonstrate subject and pedagogical knowledge, (6) communicate effectively with different parties and (7) use personal strengths and uphold positive values and attitudes.



policy/initiative anchors are a big step to improving the quality of our language education. The bigger challenge ahead is to prepare our students for a way of life in which language is used as the main thinking and working tool amidst the emergence of new technologies and global networks. So, continuing to help our students learn more effectively is the mission of all our language teachers. We would like to appeal to like-minded partners to embrace this mission and continue collaborating with us!

Reference

Cuban, L. (2013). Inside the black box of classroom practice: Change without reform in American education. Harvard Education Press.

