

MAKING DIFFERENT SENSE OF REFORM: SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW SENIOR SECONDARY CURRICULUM IN HONG KONG

Abstract

This study outlines the perceptions of school leaders regarding the New Senior Secondary Curriculum in Hong Kong. It illustrates the diversity of perceptions and responses of school leaders in terms of the purposes of the reforms, challenges to be faced, and strategies for implementing the reform. The findings suggest that school leaders' perceptions and responses are varied because of the different agendas and cultures of individual schools. This paper argues that planners need to avoid over-prescription in designing a new curriculum so as to allow schools scope to take account of their own characteristics and readiness when implementing the reforms.

Since the retrocession to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the Hong Kong Government has instituted educational reforms that comprise structural and curriculum changes. These include greater devolution of curriculum-making and assessment to schools, and significant adjustments to the contents and length of the school curriculum. The purposes of these reforms appear—at least from the policy rhetoric—to be linked to broad, global moves to enhance student achievement, and school performance and accountability (Fullan, 2001, 2008; Hopkins, 2001; Chan & Mok, 2001; Cheng, 2009), as well as to local socio-economic and political changes (Kennedy, 2005). The reforms have been a mixture of hard policy by regulation and auditing, and soft policy through school-based curriculum development schemes, funding for teachers' initiatives, and support for teacher professional development programmes (Morris & Adamson, 2010).

Two major curriculum reforms have occurred. The first is encapsulated in the document, Learning to Learn (Curriculum Development Council (CDC), 2001), which sets out initiatives such as the integrated learning of eight key learning areas, the development of cross-curricular generic learning skills, and student-centred approaches that promote assessment for learning and attending to students' needs, interests and abilities. The second, the New Senior Secondary Curriculum (NSSC), envisions the creation of six years' secondary schooling to replace the 3+2+2 model that had existed in the British colonial era, and also makes a number of changes to the contents of the curriculum (CDC, 2009).

This paper investigates a key aspect of the curriculum reform: the perceptions of key stakeholders (in this case, school leaders) in the central locus (the schools), with specific attention to their perceptions of the pur-

poses of the reforms, the issues and dilemmas, and the strategies that they are adopting for implementing the reforms. Underpinning the study is a conceptualization of the process of educational change that views reforms as dynamic and amorphous, shifting shape as they move from planning to implementation (Ayers, Quinne, Stovall, & Scheiern, 2008). The paper argues that school leaders' perceptions and beliefs influence actions relating to implementation, and the diversity of perceptions demonstrated in this study means that curriculum design should incorporate a high degree of flexibility and a low degree of prescription so as to allow schools scope to take account of their own particular characteristics when implementing the reform (Stufflebeam, 2003).

In Hong Kong, the devolution of a greater degree of autonomy to schools since 1997, with initiatives such as School-based Management, and School-Based Curriculum Development, has not necessarily resulted in broader participation by teachers and other key stakeholders such as parents and students in curriculum decision-making. In the schools that were studied for this paper, planning for the NSSC was placed in the hands of small teams of teachers, and consultation was not a significant feature of the process.

The Nature of Curriculum Reform

This paper is premised on two notions: that reforms are influenced by particular value systems that ascribe particular societal roles to education, and that the process of change renders the nature of reforms dynamic rather than static. Both these notions suggest that reforms are contextualized and shaped by factors at three levels—the primary (classroom) level, the secondary (school) level and the tertiary (systemic) level (Figure 1)—as shown in a significant body of literature (for example, Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Riley, 1998; Tong, Adamson, & Che, 2000; Law, Galton, & Wan, 2007; Law & Galton, 2004; Yu & Lau, 2006).

This paper rejects the fidelity model that views the process as the unproblematic transfer of a policy from formulation to implementation in schools. Instead, the process of reform is seen as dynamic interaction or even “as a war zone, full of conflicts and battlefields between stakeholders with different values and interests” (van den Akker, 2003, p. 7). How school leaders perceive a reform through the lens of their own values and interests has a major impact on how they implement it (Lo, 2000; Tong, 2005). Positive or negative perceptions influence leaders' decisions to adopt or reject innovations. If they believe an innovation is difficult to understand or to use, they are unlikely to adopt it, particularly if the current alternative is easy to understand and use (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994). Furthermore, how the proposed changes are perceived affects the nature of the reform as implemented. For instance, different perceptions of a previous reform in Hong Kong—the Target Oriented Curriculum, which was intended to be a comprehensive overhaul of the primary and second-

ary school curriculum using an outcomes-based framework—among various stakeholders resulted in multifarious manifestations of the key components of the initiative when it was implemented (Tong et al., 2000).

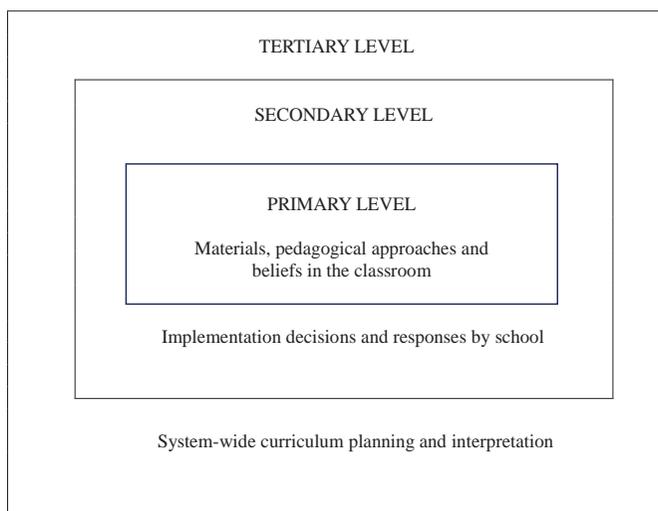


Figure 1. Primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of curriculum implementation (adapted from Tong, 2005).

Official Perceptions of the NSSC

This section analyses the purposes of the NSSC as portrayed in curriculum documents in order to determine the intentions of the designers. This analysis will provide a point of reference for the analysis of the perceptions of school leaders towards the reforms. According to the Education Bureau (EDB) (2005a), the NSSC is a response to changes in the macro environment, namely:

- The impact of globalization
- The need for sustainability
- The return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereign rule
- The continuation of reforms to basic education

Global competitiveness, according to the official documents, requires a vibrant and flexible education system that focuses on all-round development and generic skills. The documents argue that, in an era of rapid change, the education system should endow students with the capacity to sustain their economic competitiveness over time. Therefore, emphasis should be placed on the acquisition of the skills to learn rather than the accumulation

of detailed knowledge in specific curriculum areas. In addition, given that the NSSC is part of the series of reforms that started after the retrocession of Hong Kong in 1997, the curriculum should provide citizens with in-depth knowledge of China and her place in the world.

The NSSC is designed to create diversified pathways to post-secondary education, the workplace and further professional education opportunities such as associate degrees, higher diplomas and diplomas. It comprises three components: Core Subjects, Elective Subject and Other Learning Experiences (OLE), with varying allocations of time (Table 1). The number of core subjects is increased from three (in the old curriculum) to four: Chinese Language (covering standard written Chinese and spoken Cantonese), English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies, a new addition that aims to enhance students' general knowledge of social issues appertaining to Hong Kong and mainland China in particular. As the NSSC will be taken by all secondary school students, including those with aspirations for tertiary study at university and those who will seek to enter the workplace after Secondary Six, the core subjects assume major significance for university entry requirements and also for the school leaving certificate. Another innovation is greater choice for students: in addition to the four core subjects, they will choose two to three elective subjects from among 20 offerings from the categories of Personal, Social and Humanities Education, Science Education, Technology Education, Arts Education, Physical Education, Applied Learning (such as Creative Studies; Business, Management and Law; and Engineering), and additional languages (CDC, 2009).

Table 1

Time Allocation for the Senior Secondary Student Programme

Components of the senior secondary student programme		% of time allocation
Core subjects	Chinese language, English language, Mathematics & Liberal Studies as core subjects for all students	45–55%
Elective subjects	Two or three elective subjects chosen from 20 elective subjects, a range of Applied Learning courses and other languages	20–30%
Other learning experiences	Moral and civic education, community service, aesthetic development, physical development, career-related experiences	15–35%

Note. CDC, 2009, p. 8.

While the curricular changes can be seen as building on the themes of previous reforms, the most significant change incorporated in the NSSC is structural, involving the establishment of a six-year system that is similar to the one operating in mainland China. A 3-year senior secondary

and 4-year undergraduate academic system added to the current 3-year junior secondary school provision (“3+3+4”) would replace the “3+2+2+3” model, which was similar to the UK “5+2+3” model, with effect from 2009-10 (Figure 2). The year trimmed from secondary schooling would be added to undergraduate degree programmes.

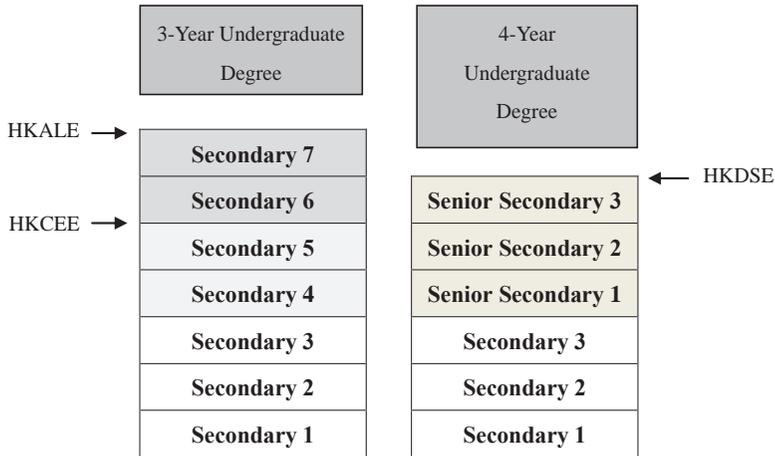


Figure 2. Comparison of the previous and new academic structures (EDB, 2005a, p. 5).

The NSSC removes the exit point at the end of junior secondary school, with the result that all students will receive six years’ secondary schooling. It also replaces the examination-related exit points at Secondary Five—the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)—and at Secondary Seven (the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE)) with a single examination-related exit point, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) at the end of Secondary Six. The introduction of the NSSC will produce a “double-cohort” year for tertiary institutions to manage, when Secondary 7 students from the old system and Secondary 6 students from the new system all take public examinations at the end of secondary schooling.

EDB anticipates that the NSSC will engender challenges in the reform process, including an increase in class sizes for the senior secondary levels, following the abolition of the HKCEE with its selective function; the necessity for flexible class structures, such as “floating classes,” to accommodate the greater choice of electives and the double cohort year; the requirement for staff development and school-based planning in preparation for the new curriculum; and the need for changes to assessment and public examinations at the senior secondary school level, which has implications for the interface with universities and other providers of higher and further education (EDB, 2005a).

EDB collated the views of various stakeholders (including school administrators, teachers, parents, students, the business sector, politicians, interest groups and the general public) on the reform proposals. These views suggested broad support, but concerns were raised over the speed with which it was to be implemented, the readiness of schools to cope with the necessary changes, and the impact of concurrent policies (such as adjustments to the medium of instruction policy) on the NSSC (Education Bureau, 2005b).

School Leaders' Perceptions of the NSSC

School leaders occupy pivotal positions in the reform process, as their task is to translate policy intentions into action, and—as noted above—their perceptions of the reform can influence its impact. In this paper, the perceptions of the NSSC held by school leaders were investigated through a qualitative study. Six schools were chosen on the grounds that they were preparing for the implementation of NSSC, and that they represented a geographical spread (urban, rural and island schools) as well as different academic levels of student intake. Between April 2007 and January 2008, the researchers conducted over 30 face-to-face individual interviews with the school administrators (Principals and Vice Principals) and teachers in key positions such as Panel Chairs (as the heads of subject departments are known in Hong Kong), and members of curriculum planning teams. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions focusing on the interviewees' perceptions of the orientations of the NSSC reforms, how they intended to implement them, the outcomes that they anticipated, and how successful outcomes could be sustained (Appendix 1). The interviews (which were carried out in the preferred language of the interviewees) were transcribed and translated into English where necessary, and the transcriptions were used to identify trends in how schools were responding to the reforms.

The results of the study showed that, as in the EDB report, there was general support for the ideas behind the NSSC and some concerns about implementation. However, the details of the perceptions and the implementation strategies adopted were colored by contextual factors—such as the leadership ethos, falling school rolls and staff profiles—that were specific to each school. To illustrate this diversity and to show the effect of contextual factors in implementation, case studies of three of the six schools in the project are presented.

Yuen Mei School

Yuen Mei School (all school names are pseudonyms) was established in 1997 in a new urban development some distance from the central district of Hong Kong. It is an aided (i.e., in receipt of government subsi-

dies but run by a sponsoring body) co-educational school that uses Chinese as the medium of instruction. The Principal said that the school had “an honest and open approach” in seeking to align its curriculum with the NSSC. She saw herself as a “bridge” between the EDB and the school, and her task was to help the staff handle the practical challenges of implementation. Her solution was to create the ethos of a learning organization.

The Principal perceived the introduction of the NSSC as primarily a political move to enhance the integration of Hong Kong’s education system with the one operating in mainland China:

Honestly, I think the new structure was made to match the Mainland education system better. It is a political concern, now that the Hong Kong SAR Government is considered a part of Mainland China. I think the NSSC is a political decision. (Principal, Yuen Mei School)

However, the school leaders acknowledged that this move provided a good opportunity for curriculum reform, and they showed approval of the ideological linkage between education and the economy that they saw as exerting the main influence on the contents of the NSSC. For instance, the OLE Panel Chair saw the NSSC as well aligned with the economic development of Hong Kong because the curriculum emphasized generic learning skills rather than in-depth understanding of subject matter.

The leaders in Yuen Mei School were positively disposed towards some details of NSSC. The Principal expressed her support for the goal of broadening students’ knowledge base, although she felt that student choice (another goal) was constrained by the designation of four core subjects, leaving only two to three options for the remaining subjects. The Vice Principal welcomed school-based assessment for recognizing students’ coursework, and providing opportunities for students to be motivated by on-going formative assessment rather than having to wait for the results of traditional, summative, public examinations. The OLE Panel Chair supported the new Liberal Studies subject in principle, on the grounds that it might enhance the students’ knowledge and understanding of current affairs and cultural matters; however, she expressed the reservation that implementation of Liberal Studies would prove to be a “torturous process”.

Indeed, the main concerns of Yuen Mei School were linked to implementation. The Principal said that the EDB had failed to provide sufficient preparation for some major challenges to prevailing practices, such as the expectation that Liberal Studies would be based around open discussions and the expression of student opinions as opposed to memorization of facts, and the increased reliance on school-based assessment of coursework instead of traditional examinations. The Principal was worried that Liberal Studies would become a receptacle for the “unwanted elements” (i.e., teachers) of other subjects. OLE teachers faced a logistical hurdle in the mandatory requirements that every student would carry out 45 hours’ community service over three years—previously, such service

was voluntary. With five classes in each year group, the teachers would have to provide opportunities for 600 students. Furthermore, the service would have to be assessed, making it a high stakes exercise as the results might affect students' chances for entry into universities.

The Vice Principal argued that the curriculum development had not involved much input from teachers, and this lack of ownership and limited professional training organized by the EDB and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority left teachers unprepared for school-based assessment and other innovations. The Principal said that teachers needed more time to handle the pressures brought about by the NSSC, and to make preparations to deal with the various implementation issues, but the school received little funding for support or workload relief measures. The reduction to six years' secondary schooling was perceived by many teachers as a threat, as they reasoned that the cut in the total number of classes would cause redundancies.

The Principal had set up a small team made up of herself, two vice-principals, and the OLE Panel Chair as the central reform management team. The team had conducted and disseminated a survey of students' preferences for electives, which had encouraged several teachers to undertake professional development or assume new areas of teaching so as to be well placed when the NSSC was implemented. The team had allocated school funds to recruit extra teachers to provide cover for teachers who wished to take professional development courses and to reduce the overall workload of staff so they could have more time to prepare for implementation. The Principal had also made use of opportunities for flexible resource deployment afforded by the "through-train" (i.e., Grade 1 through 13) nature of the school. Staff were transferred between the secondary and elementary sections of the school as necessary; campus space was being re-allocated to cater for the expansion of student numbers in the senior secondary section; and arrangements were being made for senior students to undertake OLE as tutors for elementary students. The Principal communicated regularly with parents and all staff to keep them informed of developments.

Overall, Yuen Mei School supported the implementation of the NSSC, as the school leaders' view was that their role was to translate policy into practice as effectively as possible. Although they felt under-prepared to cope with the important changes to the existing pedagogy and with some of the logistical challenges, the Principal's positioning of the school as a learning community, and support from the school's own resources, meant that potential tensions arising from differences between the NSSC and existing practices in the school were mitigated.

Island Christian School

Like Yuen Mei School, the Island Christian School is a subsidized "through train" school. However, it is located on a new and spacious cam-

pus on an outlying island. The school, which is sponsored by a religious organization, is committed to cater for less privileged students and for newly-arrived children from China mainland. According to the Principal, the academic standards of its student population tend not to be as high as those of schools in the urban areas, and the parents are generally less engaged in their children's learning as they are heavily involved with their work.

The Principal accepted the argument that Hong Kong needed to develop into a "knowledge society," and he discerned components of the NSSC as being supportive of this goal, such as the focus on authentic knowledge and competencies in place of declarative book knowledge that was emphasized in existing pedagogical practices. Both the Principal and Panel Chair of Chinese Language stated that they were especially favorable towards "learning by doing," which they viewed as being more motivating for less academic-minded and more kinesthetic learners. Likewise, both leaders saw formative assessment, portfolios and profiling as particularly suitable for their students.

However, enthusiasm for the NSSC was tempered by a concurrent trend of school closures because of falling student numbers. The Principal expressed his anxiety that the EDB was keen to close schools for economic reasons and the timing of the NSSC reform suggested that it might be linked to the policy of "killing" schools. He believed that, as a school on an outlying island dependent to some extent on immigration, Island Christian School was very vulnerable. He stated that his priority was keeping the school open, not the faithful implementation of the NSSC.

The Principal identified potential problems similar to those in Yuen Mei School—the need for more space to accommodate the higher student numbers that would attend the senior secondary section under the NSSC, and the flexible scheduling; for more staff development; and for reduced workload to allow teachers to grapple with the changes, particularly in the innovative and high stakes area of school-based assessment. Concerns specific to the school were related to the student profile—the Principal was worried that the HKDSE might be too demanding for the students, many of whom would previously have left school at the end of Secondary 5, and this might, in turn, further threaten the school's viability:

There will be no screening of more academic-oriented students to go into the senior secondary forms; almost all students will do their secondary studies up to Secondary Six. I am afraid that this will imply that the forthcoming HKDSE will be a very tough examination for future local sixth formers, who will not have any experience in sitting for high stakes public examinations. Our students who are not academically bright will suffer even more in this examination reform. (Principal, Island Christian School)

The inclusion of two languages as core subjects would place a particularly high demand on the students.

The Panel Chair of Chinese Language suggested that the percentage allocated to school-based assessment was too low an incentive for the students:

Personally, my colleagues and I in the Chinese Language department are favorable to school-based assessment. Actually we have been trying out portfolio assessment in Chinese Language and the results are promising, in both teaching and learning. We are trying to persuade colleagues in other subjects to do the same in their teaching. The Teaching and Learning Committee, of which I am the Co-ordinator, is doing just that. Nevertheless, the present school-based assessment ratio of 15% set by the Examination Authority for Chinese Language is too low; perhaps 30% would give the much needed impetus for both teachers and students to engage in more school-based assessment practice. (Panel Chair, Chinese Language, Island Christian School)

The Principal said the school would offer elective subjects on the basis of students' needs and interests. However, unlike Yuen Mei School, where a survey of students was conducted, in this school the teachers were surveyed and a short list of elective subjects to be offered was drawn up, featuring Religious Studies and Physical Education and some Applied Learning electives that teachers thought would be attractive to less academic-oriented students. The Principal cited these subjects as examples of how the NSSC had brought more diversity to the original curriculum, which he said he welcomed.

Given that the Principal's priority was the survival of the school, he had not committed a large amount of extra resources to support the implementation of the NSSC. Existing committees, such as the Teaching and Learning Committee, the Curriculum Development Committee and the Staff Development Committee, would be responsible for the preparatory work. The Principal had appointed some experienced teachers to leadership positions to mentor novice teachers. The school had also made use of the flexibility in staffing afforded by the "through train". The Principal had taken personal charge of Liberal Studies, a subject that he had taught for many years, and he had introduced it into the primary section of the school. Thus, the subject was much less problematic for Island Christian School than for many other schools.

On balance, the leaders in Island Christian School were positive about aspects of the NSSC that they believed would be relevant and beneficial to their students, which in turn might add to the attractiveness of the school to potential new students. However, in addition to the logistical concerns that were common to many schools, the leaders of Island Christian School were worried about threats of closure that they perceived to be attached to the reform, and this lessened their enthusiasm for the NSSC.

Hong Lok Secondary School

Unlike the two other schools in this study, Hong Lok Secondary School operates under the Direct Subsidy Scheme, which means that it recruits fee-paying students while still receiving financial support from the government. The school, located in a lower socio-economic urban district near downtown Hong Kong, has a significant proportion of non-Chinese students (mainly from the Indian, Pakistani and Korean ethnic communities). The staff is largely Chinese, but there are several overseas teachers in the English Language Panel and the medium of instruction is English.

The Principal, who holds a PhD in curriculum studies, analyzed the NSSC as arising from a confluence of various policy objectives of the government, in that it could address criticism of the lack of opportunity for students to develop creativity and critical thinking in the old system by introducing Liberal Studies, and at the same time allow alignment with the education system in the People's Republic of China. He characterized the NSSC as "a battlefield between western-style progressive education and the examination-based curriculum typical of the east," referring to the tendency in some local schools to prioritize product-oriented examination results instead of enhancing the processes of student learning. The Deputy Principal said that EDB officials were rushing the implementation, given, for instance, the prevailing conservative beliefs about assessment in Hong Kong. He felt that the inclusion of a greater amount of school-based assessment (SBA) was threatening to staff in a culture that strongly valued objectivity and standardization—SBA could engender situations where parents would require teachers to justify the grades they give. Other goals of the reform were also ambitious—for instance, he was concerned that critical thinking would be difficult to instill in a learning culture that relies on rote and in which there are class sizes of 40. However, the EDB seemed unable to get to grips with the problems. As the Principal commented, "Whenever someone raised an issue, the official response was 'We will deal with it later with training courses.'"

In the Principal's eyes, the reform constitutes a daunting task for the school. At the curriculum level, the school faces particular problems because of the ethnic minority population, such as Chinese Language being a core subject when there was a dearth of suitable teaching materials for non-native speakers. The introduction of Liberal Studies was laudable, according to the Deputy Principal, and compatible with the school's goal of student development, but in reality, the sample NSSC materials were mainly China-based, and it was difficult to find English resources. One result, he said, was more and more parents sending their children overseas because of concerns that they would become "guinea pigs" of reform in Hong Kong—the Principal estimated that the school roll had dropped by 10% because of this phenomenon.

The Principal found the initial NSSC documents to be unconvincing, with little evidence of deep thought about how subjects such as Liberal Studies could be implemented. The plans, he said, were very ambitious and far-ranging, but seemed to adopt a “hill-fire approach”—a broad sweep rather than addressing individual targets strategically:

The curriculum is filled with coarse and large brush strokes. When examined in detail, it shows a lack of careful thought. (Principal, Hong Lok Secondary School)

To address the challenges, the school leaders encouraged staff to take higher degrees as part of Continuing Professional Development, while developing staff capacity in Liberal Studies was seen as a priority. A small working group was set up to plan the implementation of the NSSC under the leadership of the Principal, who responded to pressure from teachers for top-down guidance:

I understand that these [teachers] wanted me not only to show administrative but some curriculum leadership—i.e., not only assigning tasks to the best people, but how I’d set up new subjects, define their contents and purposes, give guidance to teaching approaches, set up a new framework for assessment, and monitor progress, etc. I have to respond to these expectations. (Principal, Hong Lok Secondary School)

Staffing was less of an issue in Hong Lok Secondary School than in the other two schools. As a DSS school, all teachers were on contract terms and the school already had a high annual staff turnover rate, which meant that there was more flexibility for the school leadership in handling fluctuations in staffing levels arising from the reform.

Overall, the leaders in Hong Lok Secondary School displayed strong reservations about the NSSC. Their views reflect a concern that the reform contains three major tensions. The first was a tension between the emphasis at the systemic (tertiary) level on the strengthening of Chinese identity and the school’s main *raison d’être*, which is to cater to a significant non-Chinese population. The second tension arose from their perception of the reform as essentially being based on foreign models that have yet to be adapted for the local education system. The third tension was created by the perceived lack of detailed content to support the attractive rhetoric of the reform. As a result, the school leaders displayed unease about complying with a reform that was out of sympathy with the particular context of the school. As the Principal concluded:

I would have to find ways to truly and seriously implement the ideals of the reform, beyond the guidance that the poorly written and unhelpful [official curriculum] documents provided. I have to say I do not have a lot of confidence in the reform. (Principal, Hong Lok Secondary School)

Discussion and Conclusions

Emerging from the study were common themes that were consistent with the concerns raised in the EDB consultation exercise. There was empathy among the school leaders towards the direction of the reforms and innovations such as the introduction of school-based assessment and Liberal Studies were generally welcomed. But negative perceptions remained, such as criticisms of the government's curriculum development processes, and anxieties about how the reforms could be implemented. However, the ways in which the school leaders perceived and responded to the NSSC (see Table 2) appeared to be strongly influenced by the context of the individual school. In Yuen Mei School, the leaders were supportive of the reform and perceived no disadvantages to the school, and thus were instituting strategies to facilitate implementation. In Island Christian School, the positive dispositions of the leaders were tempered by fears that the reforms might prove deleterious to the future of the school. At Hong Lok Secondary School, the leaders were skeptical about the new curriculum and its chances of being successfully implemented in the school, as it did not take account of the particular characteristics of the existing education system in Hong Kong in general and of the school's student population in particular.

Table 2

NSSC Reform: The Perceptions of School Leaders

	Yuen Mei School	Island Christian School	Hong Lok Secondary School
Purposes of NSSC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ political decision to integrate Hong Kong and mainland education systems ▪ alignment with Hong Kong's economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ develop a knowledge society ▪ focus on authentic knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ political decision to integrate Hong Kong and mainland education systems
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ broaden students' knowledge base ▪ use of new assessment modes, e.g., summative assessment, school-based assessment, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ new modes of assessment, e.g., portfolios ▪ favors less academic and more kinesthetic learners with move to learning-by-doing ▪ introduction of new electives, e.g., Religious Studies, PE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ matches existing pedagogical practices in the school

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

	Yuen Mei School	Island Christian School	Hong Lok Secondary School
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ limited choice of subjects for students ▪ insufficient teacher training e.g., for Liberal Studies and new assessment modes ▪ unstable quality of teachers for Liberal Studies ▪ provision of sufficient OLE opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ disadvantage in students' learning as they are from lower socio-economic backgrounds ▪ expected standards too high for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to cater for needs of non-Chinese population, e.g., difficult to find English materials for Liberal Studies ▪ large class size (40) ▪ lack of detailed content to support the large scale reform
Coping strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ increase communication with teachers on the development of NSCC ▪ formation of a reform group to manage reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Liberal Studies taken up by an experienced teacher, i.e., the principal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ practice continuous assessment in school ▪ encourage teachers to take up higher degree courses ▪ a team led by the principal to plan for NSCC

The perceptions of the leaders in Island Christian School and Hong Lok Secondary School indicate a sense of tension between the government agenda and schools' best interests—the tertiary and secondary levels in Figure 1—that will impact upon the reform's implementation in the classroom, the primary level. All three schools mention dissatisfaction with, and lack of confidence in, the competence of the central agencies to support the reforms. The schools are deploying internal resources to different degrees (depending on their individual circumstances) to cope with the changes, but there is a general consensus that the EDB has not taken fully into account the capacity of the education system at both the secondary and the primary level in Hong Kong to cope with the changes planned at the tertiary level. These concerns of school leaders, as well as their values systems, affect their view of reform and, in turn, the implementation strategies that they adopt. Their perceptions of tensions between the tertiary and secondary levels, together with the schools having to respond pragmatically at the primary level, help to account for the shape-shifting of reforms.

The study suggests that there are at least three necessary elements for school leaders to feel positively disposed towards the implementation of a new reform: sympathy with the ideological directions of the reform; identification of components of the reform that they perceive as being of benefit to the school; and confidence in the central agencies responsible for designing and supporting the reform in ways that are appropriate to the context of education at both the tertiary and secondary level. Perceived

threats can dissipate the good will of schools towards reform, and conflicts and battlefields can result unless policy-makers at the tertiary level ensure that the components of a reform are inclusive rather than divisive, and that the concerns of schools receive attention in the design process. This would require greater consultation and consensus-building than appears to have been the case with the NSSC, which runs the risk of being implemented in a piecemeal and patchwork fashion.

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Appendix

School Leaders and the NSSC: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Orientation of the Reform

- What do you see as the purposes of the reform?
- How do other teachers in your school view this reform?
- To what extent do you think the reform will help improve student learning?

Implementation

- Can you give an example to illustrate how the school is responding / will respond to the reform?
- Who has been involved in taking the major responsibility in the implementation of the reform in the school? What is his or her role?
- What is/do you think will be the response of parents to the possible changes in the school?

Possible Outcomes

- What do you anticipate to be the outcomes of the reform in terms of teaching, learning and assessment?
- What changes do you expect in the school as an organization when the reform is fully implemented?

Sustainability

- What are the constraints and obstacles so far to implementing the reforms?
- What strategies should the school adopt to sustain positive changes brought about by the reforms?
- What should the Government do for the school to make the reforms more sustainable?