

Building Quality Schools for Our Children

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Whether our schools are implementing an education suited only to an earlier era or they have failed the mission of education all along, their restructuring and redesign are urgently required. In addressing both utilitarian and epistemological concerns, the “variable” and “constant” aspects of education are examined, the centrality of learners as well as the process of learning and teaching are highlighted, and the need for going beyond basic literacies and introducing disciplinary thinking through in-depth studies of cultural exemplars of “zhen,” “shan,” and “mei” (truth, goodness, and beauty) are emphasized. Finally, the importance of building quality schools for our children on the basis of good practices and their evaluation is discussed.

Key words: school restructuring; quality school; Hong Kong

Currently, as Hong Kong education reform rhetoric and action intensify, many educators are struggling with the task of how best to restructure or redesign schools in pre-collegiate education to meet the needs of our society as well as to prepare our students for important challenges in the 21st century. This impetus for school restructuring or redesign may be seen as

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growing out from a widespread yet profound feeling that our schools are not adjusting adequately to the changing world, or worse still, they are not delivering the education that our children deserve. These accusations not only point to the scenario in Hong Kong but also to schools in many parts of the world.

The Utilitarian and the Epistemological Approach

From a broader perspective, the view of adjustment failure is largely based on the argument that our past and present schools owe their design to the industrial age of the early 20th century when the major challenge was to educate students in large numbers. Since these students only need a grasp of basic literacies to fulfill the economic and social requirements of the period, schools of the time served our society reasonably well (e.g., Dimmock, 2000a). As we enter the post-industrial age, increasingly, our schools fail to meet the new challenges and agendas of our information or knowledge era when students need to acquire knowledge-based and high technology competencies and skills. Consequently, schools need to change in response to the changing need for a different type of workforce.

The view of complete failure, on the other hand, is based on the argument that our schools, especially those in the public system, have all along fail in fulfilling their main mission to educate students. Our education system and our schools have wrongly overemphasized grades and achievement, overvalued drilling and memorizing, and over-depended on test scores and standardized testing. As a result, our schools are operating against what we know about motivation, teaching and learning, and assessment and evaluation. Further, our schools have managed to resist efforts for improvements and changes through centralized governance and top-down coercion as well as confusing harder with better (e.g., see Kohn, 1999).

Despite that these two views focus on different concerns, one more utilitarian and the other more epistemological, the same conclusion can be

drawn. Our schools need to be restructured or redesigned to meet the needs and aspirations of students, teachers, and parents if schools are to remain relevant and valued institutions of our society.

From a slightly different perspective, perhaps, we should also temper our judgment of school failure with at least two reflections. First, we might have very different views as to what education and our schools should do for our children. Those of us who focus on knowledge would want to ensure that schools pass on the best of it to children. Others who focus on the children themselves and on their presumed capacities and interests would like to ensure that schools accommodate the specific needs of different learners to allow them to actualize their potentials. Still others who keep politics and the economy uppermost in mind would want schools to produce the right kind of future workers and citizens. Consequently, many new images of schooling have emerged, and schools are variously characterized as learning communities (e.g., Sergiovanni, 1994, 1996), professional communities (e.g., Newman & Wehlage, 1995), self-renewing organizations (e.g., Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993), centers of inquiry (e.g., Calhoun, 1994; Sagor, 1995), democratic organizations (e.g., Beane & Apple, 1995), and learning organizations (e.g., Senge, 1990). Nonetheless, when schools do not deliver an education in line with our expectations, we will always be left with a disgruntled feeling that they are not doing as well as they ought to be.

The second consideration also has to do with what we expect from our schools and education today. Our expectation is more ambitious than it has ever been. We want our schools and education to do everything for all children. To name just a few, we want our schools to guarantee jobs for all, to promote self-esteem for all, to teach us all to be citizens, to ensure that all develop their full potential, to save the environment, and to increase productivity. No doubt, if we take such demands seriously, our schools and the education they deliver will always seem to be in a state of disastrous failure.

Thus, even if we all agree that we definitely want good education for

our children, we do not necessarily agree on the nature of quality education, and on what we want education and our schools to do for our children. Asking too much from education and our schools also blinds us from differentiating our past improvement efforts and successes from our futile reform attempts and multiple failures. The state of disquiet and discontent highlight the importance of considering the timeless and time-bound aspects of education. Specifically, we need education and our schools to be firmly based on our knowledge about human conditions and characteristics, human motivation, learning, teaching and organization, or in other words, the timeless, universal, and “constant” aspect of education. At the same time, we want education and our schools to be responsive to what is known about the pressures, challenges, and opportunities of the contemporary world and the coming scene as well as the context of societal culture, or in other words, the time-bound, cultural, and “variable” aspect of education. Only with such double anchoring will we be able to ensure that we can build, restructure or redesign quality schools for our children.

The “Variable” Aspect of Education

In Hong Kong, our business people have become very much concerned with the quality of education. They are probably the first to alert educators to the fact that students leaving our schools are not adequately prepared and are not performing well. While poor performance of students could reflect declining academic standards of schools as suspected by some business people, higher levels of literacies might be demanded from new cohorts of students than from past students. Thus, in anticipation of the dramatic changes in work demand in the information age, and to remain competitive in a fast-changing world, business people seek individuals who are not only highly literate but also flexible and creative, who will be able to solve and anticipate problems, and who will work with others in a resourceful and cooperative manner. While business should have no right to dictate what

education should be like, it is appropriate for our schools to rise to the new challenges and address these needs of our business community and our society.

More specifically, our schools have to be responsive to world trends influenced by scientific, technological, political, economic, social, cultural, and personal changes. Among others, scientific breakthroughs in telecommunication technologies have made possible the fast and widespread transmission of knowledge and information (and unfortunately misinformation), which not only revolutionize the conduct of business, but also permit a special form of personalized coaching or tutoring not conceivable in previous time. Much of what can be accomplished in textbooks and occasional field trips can now be performed in virtual reality. However, similar advances in technologies have also invalidated our past assumption that education ensured that individuals could carry out a regular job throughout their productive years. Admittedly, automata can now handle almost anything that can be handled algorithmically, and few people will remain in the same occupations but will move voluntarily or by necessity from one occupation to another throughout their lives.

The changes in the landscape of workforce reflect our shift to the information society, the knowledge society, or the learning society where more and more people work in providing human services, especially in creating, transforming, and communicating knowledge. Our students will be employed on the basis of what they know, how well they can learn, and what they might contribute to the relevant knowledge basis. Lifelong learning will soon become a necessity for maintaining a job. Therefore, it is more important that our students learn to enjoy learning, develop wide-ranging interests, and want to nourish their minds for the remainder of their lives. In summary, technological advances challenge old roles and traditional values, and change the “what,” “how,” and “why” of learning and schooling in preparing our youngsters for the world of work.

The information age also alters our classic notion of literacy. To our

Chinese and English languages, we might have to add computing and programming languages. Our broadened notion of literacy will now perhaps include reading and writing Web pages, and functioning in hypermedia. Decades ago, we might just want all our students to acquire basic facts and literacies. Today, we increasingly require them to go beyond basic competencies. More importantly, our conception of the nature of knowledge has also changed. The postmodern perspective reminds us of the constructed nature of all knowledge, cautioning us against privileged specific points of view. In line with this perspective of multiple realities, multicultural considerations also remind us that different cultures might have different views of effective schooling, and might have their different accents on schools. For example, it is said that schools in Hong Kong and other Asian societies have started to value and emphasize more on creativity and individuality. Indeed, Dimmock (2000a) highlights the important role of societal cultures in the restructuring and redesign of schools in different cultural contexts. The importance of each culture's unique responses to changes can be gleaned from the joke recounted in Gardner (1999). The story goes that if one wants to benefit from the best practices in schools in different cultures, one should go to an infant school in France, a preschool in Italy, a primary school in Japan, a secondary school in Germany, and a college or university in the United States.

The “Constant” Aspect of Education

Our discussion on the changes in the landscape of education and schools for the preparation of our students to meet the changing demand of the workforce of our time and future years might mislead us into believing that the major purposes of education are entirely utilitarian. Most educators, however, will readily reject this notion as patently false. Many will no doubt agree that beneath the utilitarian view are more invariant or “constant” aspects of education, which provide more noble reasons

why every society should devote monetary and human resources to the education of its children.

These “constant” aspects of education are features that characterize education, or more appropriately, good education. We might choose to focus on the outcomes of good education, such as the age-old Chinese notion of a balanced development in the five domains of *de*, *zhi*, *ti*, *qun*, and *mei* (ethics, intellect, physique, social skills, and esthetics). Alternatively, we might focus on these domains as content of education, and how these content areas should be presented, mastered, put to use, and passed along to others. Evidently, not all educators would agree on these domains, and many might have quite different views of what content or curriculum, or what learning and teaching should be about.

In this connection, Gardner (1999) proposes three “constants” or virtues that have historical origins in ancient Greece. They are the realm of truth, the realm of morality, and the realm of beauty. These virtues are reminiscent of the five domains of *de*, *zhi*, *ti*, *qun*, and *mei*, and are in some ways equivalent to the Chinese notions of *zhen* (truth), *shan* (goodness), and *mei* (beauty). Although, one might say that the Chinese do not regard the three virtues as distinct but as rather interrelated or fused, appreciation, understanding and acquiring these virtues are pathways for self-cultivation and intellectual growth, and for ultimately acquiring the Way or the *tao* of living. As such, the trio of virtues as content of education should appeal to Chinese scholars and educators.

Even if the trio of virtues is regarded as the “constant” aspects of education, it should be noted that they might manifest themselves differently in different cultural settings. In contemporary secular society of the Western world, the virtues of truth, goodness and beauty are seen as separate domains, as science, morality, and art. However, it is recognized that even in science, ultimate truth may be an impossible goal, and our conceptions of morality and beauty will continue to change, though somewhat slowly. Our schools should therefore deliver an education that seeks to elu-

cidate current cultural conceptions of the true, the good, and the beautiful, and to search for examples or representations for our children to admire, condemn, and to understand. The examples that Gardner (1999) chooses for North American children, and possibly for all human beings, are illustrative.

In the realm of truth, among the numerous scientific theories of importance, Gardner (1999) selects Darwin's theory of evolution as an example through which we could acquire a good understanding of the living world, and possibly related current topics of cloning, genetic counseling, gene therapy, and various form of eugenics. In the realm of morality, Gardner chooses the example of the Holocaust, the systematic killing of the Jews and certain other groups by the Nazis and others, before and especially during the Second World War. Through this example, we could be made more able to confront human mortality and the responsibility of human beings for acts of genocide and their aftermath. In the realm of beauty, among the many singular artistic achievements, Gardner selects the music of Mozart, or more specifically the *Marriage of Figaro*, as an example. Through this example, we could have a good understanding of the intricate artistic languages and the portrayals of characters with deeply felt human emotions. Presumably, schools in different cultures may cite different examples that generate equally powerful insight into the understanding of our human conditions. Here in Hong Kong, we might select some more local examples, such as Charles Kao's (Kao Kun's) scientific work on optic fibers as an example in the realm of truth; the controversial social unrest with small-scale terrorist attacks against the British government in 1967 as an example in the realm of morality; and Louis Cha's (Cha Liang-yung's) martial arts fictions as an example in the realm of beauty. More striking examples for the Chinese people could include, for example, Zhang Heng's study of astronomical phenomena and his construction of the first known seismograph, the Rape of Nanking, and Li Bai's (Li Bo's) poems as examples of truth, goodness and beauty.

Whatever examples we choose, representations of truth, goodness, and beauty will help inculcate in students an understanding of the major disciplinary ways of thinking about these issues. Specifically, in probing with sufficient depth a manageable set of examples, students come to learn to think and act in the manner of a scientist, a historian, and an artist. Such an immersion will enable students to draw on these modes of thinking (scientific thinking, historical analysis, and artistic interpretation) in coming to appreciate and understand the world (Gardner, 1999). More importantly, mastery of the important disciplinary forms will enhance our capacity to use these flexibly to solve new problems and to create new lines of thought.

Based on such arguments, Gardner (1999) favors an education for understanding and a curriculum that examines a limited number of topics in depth. Accordingly, it is not essential for students to survey the entire range of sciences, mathematics, art forms, and historical events, but it is important that they understand concepts, skills, theories, or domains of knowledge to the extent that they can apply them in new situations. The added advantage of this approach is that with rich, probing, and multifaceted investigation of significant topics, early misconceptions of the “unschooled mind” may be dispelled, and more sophisticated understanding of the “disciplined mind” may emerge from further exploration of these topics under the guidance of individuals capable of disciplinary thinking (Gardner, 1991, 1999).

Gardner’s belief that our schools should educate our students to master the fundamental ways of knowing appears to be very much at variance with the traditional or conservative view that education is basically about acquiring information. This traditional view is exemplified by a curriculum that is sequenced to cover a large number of specified topics and concepts for each year of schooling, and by the emphasis on memorizing such materials and information, which are taught uniformly to all students and assessed in essentially the same way (e.g., see Glickman, 2001; Hirsch, 1996). While few

schools in Hong Kong would subscribe entirely to the traditional view, their emphases on a common curriculum, on achievements based on examination results and test scores, and on teaching for performance have put them more in line with the conservative approach. Cautions therefore should be exercised that the recent calls for “learning to learn” as well as “lifelong learning” are not turned into reasons for the necessity of amassing and memorizing mountains of information for better jobs and survival in the competitive business world and globalized economy (Chan, 2001).

Building Quality Schools on Evidence-Based and Good Practices

Hong Kong schools should be moving away from implementing an education that, at best, is suited to an earlier era, where the amassing and memorizing of information was seen as the mark of an educated person. Rather, our schools should be learner-centered, and emphasize the process of learning and teaching (Fried, 2001; Hill, 1993). In addition, our school should emphasize students’ mastery of the most important disciplinary forms of inquiry, and nurture students’ capacity to use these flexibly for problem finding and problem solving as well as for creative thinking. Even though basic literacies might dominate the first years of school, a curriculum focused on understanding in the disciplines should gradually be introduced. On the other hand, while basic literacies are always desirable, there is no need that they have to be acquired by drilling. At the same time, early misconceptions and stereotypes need to be seriously challenged to lay the groundwork for more sophisticated ways of thinking. To achieve the goal of lifelong learning, our students need to be motivated intrinsically rather than extrinsically by achievements and test scores. As motivated and autonomous learners, students love to read, become curious about the world, ask questions, and experiment to find answers, and will continue to seek knowledge and expertise even in the absence of outside pressures and rewards.

Good, effective, and quality schools may take many different forms. But it is important that we have a clear idea of what we want our graduates to be like. Once we determine the kind of persons we would like to see emerge at the end of their schooling, we may start to plan backward or apply the process of “backward mapping” (Dimmock, 2000a). Since the most important stage of the education process is the delivery of quality teaching and learning, it makes sense to start at that point. Dimmock (2000a), for example, views student outcomes, and learning and teaching as the core technology of the school, which are intimately connected with curriculum and assessment. Further, he suggests that school organization and structure, leadership, professional development, and resource allocation need to be planned to be in full alignment with and to be enabling as well as supportive of the core technology.

Finally, it is reassuring and encouraging to know that our quality schools can be built to overcome past flawed approaches. There is a voluminous literature on learning and teaching, on school effectiveness and school improvement, and on school restructuring and redesign (see Beck & Murphy, 1996; Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson, 1999; Chall, 2000; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Kohn, 1999; McDonald, 1996; Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001; Renzulli, 1994; Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, & Snyder, 2000). While we should exercise cautions against importing Western practices uncritically into our schools in our specific cultural context (see Dimmock, 2000a, 2000b; Dimmock & Walker, 2000; Walker & Dimmock, 2000), we certainly will benefit immensely from studies of promising prototypes, compelling approaches, and informed or good practices in different parts of the world (see Gardner, 1999). It remains a great task for our researchers to evaluate these good practices and conceptualize new ones for our specific setting, and our practitioners to put research into practice in building good, effective, and quality schools for our children.

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