Inequity without excellence?
The need for educational reform in Hong Kong

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The basic premise of inclusive school communities is that all children have unique contributions to make, and that they belong in typical schools and classrooms, and should receive appropriate supports to help ensure their success.”
(Ferguson and Ferguson, 1998)

Abstract

Hong Kong is now considering a number of major and wide ranging reforms to education. These include substantial reforms to the curriculum, removal of most examinations and the gradual removal of banding by ability. This paper focuses on ability banding, discusses the main issues and shares some data from an ongoing study on equity and excellence in Hong Kong schools.
Introduction

In every country, the earliest forms of education have been for those who were already able to send their children to schools and whose children were not needed on the land or to work to generate income for the family. With the implementation of compulsory education all children have been required to attend schools and to attend schools where the curriculum has been of a grammar school type, largely inappropriate for a mass education, and moreover, in a system which was resistant to change. It was seen as better for children who were not succeeding in schools, whether they had disabilities or were significantly failing in comparison to their age peers, to be given a separate form of education, usually called remedial or special education, which presented children with a different, usually easier option, and which was often characterised by lower expectations and lower status outcomes.

This special education system, created to cater to children who did not fit into the curriculum and organisation of schools was typically also an expanding system. It was initially a provision which included those children with disabilities, but increasingly, also those children who were without impairments but who were failing in classrooms. Special education resulted in a parallel system in many countries, one for children who had “special needs” and one for those who were said to be “normal”. Hong Kong, despite having a written policy of integrating children with special needs into the mainstream, now finds itself with an expanding system of special education and a highly banded secondary school system. This system has seen the creation of new special schools and a new group of
children termed “unmotivated”. Such children with “special needs” are clearly the products of a system which has failed to meet the needs of an increasingly challenging and diverse school population. Hong Kong has focused on excellence, and has failed to achieve equity. But has it even achieved excellence?

**Ability Banding**

One of the key challenges facing education is the balance between equity and excellence: an attempt to achieve high standards in education and to ensure that all children get an equal access to the best education that is available. At the heart of the controversy about ability grouping is conflict between arguments for excellence and for equity, and an assumption that both cannot be achieved simultaneously.

Ability grouping or tracking is a way of placing children into different tracks or bands across schools, within schools, or even within classrooms on the basis of their *assumed* ability levels. We highlight the term *assumed* since banding is normally based on a performance assessment, which may or may not be highly correlated to true ability. The outcome of allocating to bands is to provide different learning environments, and therefore different expectations and outcomes.

It is generally understood that the effect of banding by ability is to create a wider spread of performance about the mean. However research evidence does not always support this. In a longitudinal study (Braddock and Slavin, 1992) the negative effects of
ability grouping were shown to impact on all students not just low achievers. In another study, which compared high, average and low achievers in tracked schools and their counterparts in untracked schools, students in low tracks performed significantly less well than their counterparts in untracked schools (Braddock and Slavin 1993). By contrast, high performing or average students did not show benefits from tracking. Moreover low tracked students in the study were less likely to go to college than untracked low achievers. One of the best supported findings from studies on children in low “ability” bands, has been that children are exposed to less curriculum material and to lower quality instruction than students placed in higher bands (Oakes, Gamoran and Page, 1991; Barv and Dreeken, 1983; Gamoran, 1986, Page and Valli, 1990; Hiebert, 1983; Powell, Farrar and Cohen, 1985; Oakes, 1985; Oakes, 1991)

In the argument for ability grouping it is claimed that working with homogeneous groups enables a better match between instruction and the learner, and that individual needs can be more easily met. It is also claimed that including low achievers within heterogeneous classes would slow down the high achievers performance, who need the ‘spark’ of other high achievers. In opposition, those who argue against ability grouping are largely concerned with ensuring an equitable opportunity to have high quality instruction and to avoid the damaging effects of labeling.

In practice, therefore, it can be seen that one argument is concerned with effectiveness and the other with equity. The arguments in favour of equity are indeed clear, but evidence to support the argument for effectiveness of teaching is less convincing. In a
review of many studies whilst there has been clear evidence that low achievers who are low banded have negative effects (Braddock and Slavin, 1992; Hoffer, 1991), most studies comparing tracked and untracked students show no significant differences in achievement (Slavin, 1987, 1990). Evidence on self esteem suggests strongly that low banded students have lower self esteem than low achievers in mixed ability classrooms and low banded students also had a more marked external locus of control, with evidence of helplessness (Braddock and Slavin, 1992)

**Educational Reform in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong there is a firmly entrenched practice to band students across schools on the basis of their ability, and to further track them within schools. Recently, the Hong Kong Government has expressed its serious concern at the extent to which large numbers of children are failing in the highly elitist school system and are looking at a number of sweeping reforms to curriculum and organisation of schools.

Criticism had been made for some time about the rote learning and passive characteristics of Hong Kong pupils in an examination driven schooling system. However, the crisis came to a head with the publication of the results of the school certificate examinations taken by school leavers in 1999 (Tai Kung Press, 31st December 1999). This showed that 23,000 students scored zero (16% of the total number of candidates). This was seen as a shocking waste of resources and disturbed the public and the profession. It is
partly because of this crisis that the Education Commission, the highest advisory body in education in Hong Kong, set out a “Blueprint” for educational reform, as part of a major review of the Education System. The key recommendations are based upon 5 principles, namely:

1. learning and teaching should be student focused
2. schooling should create “no losers”
3. focus on quality
4. life-wide learning
5. and society wide mobilisation

Within their reform proposals entitled “Excel and Grow” (Education Commission, 2000), is one particularly important recommendation central to this paper. It is

“to reform the secondary school places allocation mechanism and to eliminate by stages the Academic Aptitude Tests and the banding system so as to eliminate drilling and minimise the undesirable labeling effects”

(The emphasis is ours) (p.7).

That proposal to remove the banding system is already under fire from critics, who feel that ‘elite” schools will be lost. The Education Department of the Hong Kong Government, which governs the administration of the schools, has counter suggested three ability bands instead of the five ability bands now in operation.
The creation of separate bands or different curricula for groups of students, so that the existing grammar school curriculum and methods of delivery can remain unchanged, reflects a business and utilitarian approach to education. It assumes that the best students taking grammar school curricula are the path to excellence, at the cost of adopting policies and practices in which the rights of substantial minorities are denied. In the ordinary secondary schools, for example, 17.9% are qualified as teachers. However, in the Skills Opportunity Schools where children with learning difficulties are placed, 22.6% have no teacher qualification, and in Practical Schools set up to deal with children who are “unmotivated” (a unique invention by Hong Kong) as many as 40% are unqualified (Education Dept., 2000). It is therefore clear that the placement of students in such schools is more a matter of social control that the careful and planned placement of students with learning difficulties in environments which are highly conducive to their growth and development.

Teacher Education

The pattern of teacher education for special needs pupils has been to provide a specialist training for two years, (one year full time and one year part time), to provide an additional training to the initial teacher certificate courses. That special education programme has traditionally been categorical in nature, which has prevented teachers working in ways which would encourage the inclusion of children with disabilities into the mainstream. As part of a programme to integrate teacher education and therefore
ultimately integrate student education, the Department of Special Education at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (the largest provider of teacher education courses in Hong Kong) is being absorbed within a new departmental structure. This will mean that lecturers in the old Department of Special Education will be working alongside mainstream teachers, and teacher training will be partnered by a wider range of lecturers with mainstream skills and knowledge.

Teachers are at the heart of any educational reform, and the support and willingness of teachers to bring about change is important.

Local research

In the Review of the 9 Year Compulsory Education System, published by the Board of Education (1997) it included a confirmation that the Secondary School Placement Allocation System and the banding system “is functioning smoothly and there is no ground for a replacement”. The Education Department commissioned an evaluative study, led by the first author, of the Government’s Pilot Project on Integration amongst nine schools, which had each agreed to accept students with disabilities. The research project lasted two years. The research concluded with a report making a number of recommendations regarding teacher training and the organisation of provision to facilitate the integration of disabled students. The report was presented to the Hong Kong Government in June 1999. One of the recommendations made stated:
Banding should be reviewed by the Department of Education as it is not consistent with equal access to a common curriculum and experience in schools.

In the same year of the Education Commission set up team to carry out an international comparative study of integration. The task was to make recommendations on the way forward for the integration of children with disabilities in Hong Kong. Amongst the recommendations to the Education Commission was to change the secondary allocation system, which assigned students to schools based on their academic attainment. The recommendation spelled out clearly:

“Schools need to be debanded and detracked. All pupils should attend their own neighbourhood schools.”

(Crawford, Dowson, Ho, Yip and Yuen, 1999).

In a recent survey, as part of a larger study (Crawford, Leng-Hui, Heung, in progress), interviews were carried out in primary schools and ordinary secondary schools, and principals, teachers, parents and students were asked, amongst other things, about banding. Their comments were wide ranging and represented different beliefs about the nature and purpose of banding. A selection of responses is included here.

I prefer to remove banding. Although there are elite among students, the majority should be cared for. I believe that if we pay attention to multi-intelligences, our society will become more healthy. Secondary principal

If the Government moves to three bands instead of five, if the aim doesn’t change, the result is the same. Five or three are the same. Finally, there are three kinds of school. Principal
Banding has more disadvantages than advantages. Teacher SOS

I’m a teacher, so from my point view, we can handle the students more easily with banding. For example, we can know what should we teach them, what method should we use to teach… Such as our school, the students are slow learners, so we will know what kind of method we should use. Teacher SOS

Clever students may like their classmates to be clever too. They don’t like it if there are some slow learners in the class. The slow-learning students will not like mixed ability classes. Teacher SOS

I support banding. Students also need to face the reality. After growing up, they also need to face the same issue in society. Teacher SOS

I think debanding is very difficult and I don’t see how it can operate in the real school world. Teacher SOS

If the banding or streaming is done well, it is good for teaching. If all the students in the class are band one, we can use another teaching method. As for the labeling effect, I think there should be a consensus in our society that we don’t label student band 5 schools as bad. We should understand such arrangement or banding is for providing suitable education. Teacher SOS

Some teachers may think the elite system is not good but the workload of teachers will be much greater if there is no banding system. Teacher SOS

No banding is better. Year 1 Student SOS

I don’t like banding. Year 1 Student SOS

It is no problem to place all students in mixed ability classes. Year 1 Student SOS

Why we need to place students in different bands? We are all human. Everyone may have his strength. Some people may be bright in something but may be weak in other things. Year 1 Student SOS

I like mixed classes. The most important for me is that teachers must be good. Year 1 Student SOS

There should be banding. If we are studying with clever students, we will be discriminated by them. Year 1 Student SOS
Students who are poor in academic performance will find difficulty in studying in a Band one school. Banding is necessary. Parent of child in SOS

I prefer there is no banding because some children may have potential in something, but it may not develop at an early stage. Once we band them, they will not have a chance to develop their potential in higher forms. Or the school may not have suitable resources to help him. Parent of child in SOS

Views from an ordinary secondary school

The Government’s suggestion to change from 5 bands to 3 bands is the same. Band 5 becomes band 3. In theory, there will be more students labeled as “bad” students. 1/5 of students are labeled as the last band now. But there will be 1/3 students labeled as bottom band. Grammar School Principal

If there is no banding system, the situation will be uncontrollable. Banding can facilitate the teaching and classroom management. Grammar School Teacher

Interviews with primary school staff showed a variety of views too.

The academic results of Resource Class students are not good, that means, they are at the bottom in the whole system. It is inevitable that they are the least advantaged in this system. Removal of their Banding seems to be the best solution to help these students because then these students would receive mainstream education with other “ordinary” students. I agree with mixed-ability grouping. Primary School Principal

To place these students at schools of different bands according to their academic performance is a good practice. Ability grouping is better than mixed-ability grouping because it is easier for teachers to teach and manage the students when their ability is about the same. To place students with poorer academic results at Band 5 schools does not mean bad. Actually, Band 5 schools should tailor/design a curriculum particularly suitable for these students. Primary school teacher

To me, this is not a question of equality. Schools of different bandings are designed for students of different bandings. It is meaningless to place
students of Band 5 at Band 3 or above schools. The students will feel it very difficult to catch up with other students and the curriculum in these schools. Primary school teacher

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Usually, Resource Class students go to Band 4 or Band 5 schools. It seems to be a natural law. Removal of Banding will be good for them and mixed-ability grouping is preferable for these students. Primary school teacher

I know some parents insist on choosing Band 1-3 schools even though their children are Band 5. We told them it’s good to choose schools that matched the banding of their children. Some parents would say they wanted to gamble for a higher banding school. If they really look for Band 4 schools, we’d suggest them to choose those schools out of this area. Chances are greater. Primary school teacher

We can see how the views vary, but teachers, where they support banding think of the continuation of their teaching mode in the same way and identify difficulties with meeting students needs in mixed ability classes, presumably through continuing teacher centred approaches, no extra resources and with the same class size.

Conclusion

The removal of banding is necessary, and there will be resistance to this process, because it challenges the status quo and the vested interests of some of the players. If de-banding is to succeed it must be seen as making the highest track, in quality terms,
Available to all students - not a matter of taking the high band away from top students. Schools which remove banding must keep the high expectations for all students (Wheelock, 1992) and use more interactive and co-operative approaches, known to be effective for all students (Brophy and Good, 1986; Slavin 1991).

Ability grouping and tracking are barriers to the creation of high expectation for all students. Ability grouping maintains low expectations and limited learning opportunities for lower banded students. Schools in Hong Kong need to challenge all students to meet high standards; they need to recognize the diversity of talents and move the frame of assessment away from a solitary gaze on academic attainment to other skills and abilities, such as leadership, problem solving, creativity etc. Ability grouping in Hong Kong means sorting lower ability students out of opportunities to succeed, thereby reducing the obvious need to reform education by removing pupils who “challenge” the existing grammar school curriculum. A simple viewing of the present banding system in Hong Kong may seem to confirm the logic of current grouping practices, because of the large differences between high and low achievers. But on a closer inspection it is clear that resource inequities, teacher skills, curriculum depth, and inadequate opportunities for lower band students confound the natural differences which exist.

One of the less obvious consequences of banding is that it tends to prevent a dimate of continuous learning and inquiry amongst teachers. Teachers tend to take as given the levels of ‘ability’ as immutable characteristics and fail to challenge existing norms and ideas of intelligence, student ability and the established curriculum.
The goal for policy makers in Hong Kong is clear. However the path to achieve that goal of inclusive schools is neither clear nor simple, but it will involve a change from the present teacher focused approach prevalent in Hong Kong Schools, which is a lecture model of teaching aimed at the ‘average’ student, to a flexible, interactive student focused approach to teaching and learning. Merely moving low achievers from low bands, however necessary that may be is, by itself, insufficient. What is needed is to raise the performance of low achieving students, not just by means of well designed curricula and co-operative learning approaches, but by valuing a wider set of skills and abilities than that traditionally valued in the formal academic grammar school curriculum. The Education Commission’s belief that the multiple intelligences put forward by Gardner is an important part of the present reform process for Hong Kong, offers exciting new challenges for teachers and for schools. This educational reform facing Hong Kong is long overdue, and is an opportunity and challenge that cannot be missed. Hong Kong schools must embrace diversity and collaboration in order to achieve both equity and excellence.

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References


