17 Accountability and Improvement
Lessons from Studying Hong Kong Teachers’ Conceptions of Assessment

Sammy King-Fai Hui

INTRODUCTION

Assessment reform has become an important part of the reform agenda for the education system in Hong Kong, as it reaffirms the main aim of assessment: to support student learning, otherwise known as Assessment for Learning (AfL). In contrast to assessment of learning, which is summative and “intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about students’ progress in school, usually by signalling students’ relative position compared to other students” (Earl, 2003, p.22), AfL offers an alternative perspective to traditional assessment in schools. AfL is a process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and teachers, in order to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). The idea of AfL has its roots in the research conducted by Black and Wiliam (1998), which reviewed more than 250 assessment studies to present strong evidence of how formative assessment, or AfL, could improve student learning and development. The AfL movement reached its full potential with the identification of ten principles (Assessment Reform Group, 2002) for teachers to determine the crucial elements of effective classroom assessment practices and to understand why it is important to use AfL. This trend was echoed in Hong Kong and the government document Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2002) which stated:

All schools should review their current assessment practices and put more emphasis on assessment for learning. The latter is a process in which teachers seek to identify and diagnose student learning problems, and provide quality feedback for students on how to improve their work. Different modes of assessment are to be used whenever appropriate for a more comprehensive understanding of student learning in various aspects. (p.1)

It is recommended that schools evaluate their own assessment policies and practices. Teachers should find out what students have learned and why
they have difficulty in learning, give feedback to students on their strengths and weaknesses, and employ different assessment strategies to help students improve their performance. These strategies could range from teachers’ verbally questioning and observing student behaviour to students’ completing authentic and formative tasks (Black et al., 2003). The idea of reform follows closely with the global agenda of emphasizing the quality of school education (Kennedy and Lee, 2008; Ross and Jürgens-Genevois, 2006). This is because assessment not only measures the ability of the assessed but also influences student development; for example, as Stobart (2008) argued, assessment could help students manage their own learning and develop the necessary skills for future work and life situations.

Based on the shift in emphasis from assessment of learning to AfL—from judging to supporting student learning—Earl (2003) highlighted the role of students as critical connectors to the assessment-learning process, an assessment as learning approach. Students as active and engaged and critical assessors are the link between assessment and learning because they “can make sense of information, relate it to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved” (p.25). Assessment as learning then refers to the process when students “personally monitor what they are learning and use the feedback from this monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and even major changes in what they understand” (p.25). Table 17.1 gives a summary of the key features of these three assessment approaches.

Assessment reform, as one of the major reform initiatives of the post-1997 education reform in Hong Kong, challenged the age-old practice of assessment of learning and proposed a paradigm shift to AfL and assessment as learning at different levels of schools. As the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government’s Education Bureau’s (EDB’s) (2010a) official website explains:

The concept of assessment for learning is not new. It is underpinned by the confidence and belief that every student is unique and possess the ability to learn, and that we should develop their multiple intelligences and potentials. To promote better learning, assessment is conducted as an integral part of the curriculum, learning and teaching, and feedback cycle. [. . . ] Fundamental changes in school assessment practices to bring a better balance across assessment for learning and assessment of learning need to be planned, discussed, shared, negotiated and agreed by all teachers in each school.

Government bodies and different higher education institutes have offered various types of support to teachers to help them better implement assessment reform policy in Hong Kong, including (1) the Assessment for Learning Resource Bank and its extensive professional development seminars and training workshops of the EDB (2010b); (2) public lectures and development projects of the Assessment Research Centre of the Hong Kong Institute of
In addition, many local studies have reported on successful cases of AfL (see, for example, Au Yeung, 2009; Pang, 2008). However, despite the success of the reform agenda in promoting positive change, there needs to be more analysis of how AfL practices are affected by social and cultural factors. Teachers as ‘doers’ of the reform agenda are expected to have the knowledge, skills and resources to put this reform into action. However, many recent local studies have reported some concerns and difficulties voiced by teachers in trying to realize the AfL principles, including (1) the domination of summative, end-of-year examinations on schools’ assessment culture (Kennedy, 2007; Kennedy, Chan and Fok, 2011; Pong and Chow, 2002); (2) an emphasis on student performance in public examinations among teachers, parents and students (Chan, 2007; Yu et al., 2006); and (3) a lack of support and understanding of AfL practices by principals, teachers and parents (Carless, 2005). Therefore, the present chapter, which discusses the influence of social and cultural factors on assessment, is critical to understanding AfL.

A few years ago, a team of researchers in a joint research project between HKIEd and South China Normal University, led by Professor Kerry Kennedy and Professor Gao Lingbiao, investigated the impact of social and cultural factors in the Chinese context on teachers’ conceptions of assessment (TCoA). This work has expanded from the development of a cultural-specific model of TCoA (Brown, Hui and Yu, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Gao and Kennedy, 2011) to a search for an additional meaning of assessment as supporting student learning (Hui, 2012) and for any hidden values that guide teachers’ assessment practices (Hui and Brown, 2010). These studies inform the socio-cultural factors underlying Hong Kong teachers’ conceptions and practice of assessment, which ultimately will have an effect on the success of the reform. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to examine the influence of accountability on learning improvement and to explore how the reform movement can be sustained.

### Table 17.1 Features of Assessment of, for and as Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Reference Points</th>
<th>Key Assessor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of learning</td>
<td>Judgments about placement, promotion, credentials, etc.</td>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment for learning</td>
<td>Information for teachers’ instructional decisions</td>
<td>External standards or expectations</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment as learning</td>
<td>Self-monitoring and self-correction or adjustment</td>
<td>Personal goals and external standards</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
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Source: Adapted from Earl (2003, p.26).
ASSESSMENT FOR . . .

Assessment is a key part of teaching and learning. A commonly adopted definition of assessment is the systematic collection, review and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development (Palomba and Banta, 1999). The collection, review and use of assessment information involves not only the selection of evidence that is relevant to the set assessment criteria but also the selection of assessment strategies and any act to interpret and judge if the pre-set criteria have been met. By this definition, assessment is for learning; however, the socio-cultural background where the assessment is occurring and the corresponding practices used by teachers—the strategies that teachers use and the interpretation and judgement that they make—could divert assessment away from the purpose of improving student learning and development. Black and Wiliam (1998) listed some of the common mistakes in assessment: (1) students use rote and superficial learning for tests and examinations; (2) when there is no feedback on student performance, students strive only to achieve higher marks and not to understand how to improve their ability to learn; and (3) students view assessment as competition, since they are compared to one another in terms of marks or grades. Black and Wiliam’s (1998) major recommendations to teachers were (1) to provide effective feedback to students; (2) to actively involve students in their own learning; (3) to adjust teaching methods to take into account assessment results; and (4) to allow self-monitoring and correction by students. Tests or examinations were not recommended at all.

For any assessment task that involves collecting and judging information or evidence of student learning, the concerns that arise are not only “What to assess?” “How to assess?” and “Who does the assessment?” but also “For what reason is the assessment done?” and “In what learning context does the assessment take place?” (Biggs, 1996). The first question—“For what reason is the assessment done?”—relates to the issue of accountability. As illustrated by Brown (2004), accountability is a major conception of assessment: “assessment can be used to account for a teacher’s, a school’s, or even a system’s use of society’s resources” and “students are held individually accountable for their learning through assessment” (p.304). Such a conception is twofold. Assessment results are used to demonstrate to the public, first, whether teachers and schools are succeeding in the prescribed job of educating students (school accountability), and, second, whether students are succeeding in their learning, as evidenced through proper certifications (student accountability). Accountability has a strong influence on teachers’ beliefs and practices. Brown (2004) suggested a nexus of teachers’ conceptions around the idea that “assessment for school accountability may lead to a raising of educational standards that will in turn lead to improved ability of students to receive qualifications and recognition of achievement” (p.313). Also, Brown and Harris (2009) reported that, in schools where
school leadership had introduced a new policy of using assessment data primarily to inform school improvement initiatives, teachers more strongly endorsed the conception of school accountability as the dominant use of assessment, rather than school improvement. Therefore, we must look at the issue of accountability and examine how it affects the implementation of (new) assessment policies, ideas and practices, as much as we look at the issue of how students learn in the Chinese context.

The second question—“In what learning context does the assessment take place?”—relates to the nature of the assessment tasks and the generated situations in which students will use the knowledge they have obtained. Most educators, teachers and researchers agree that the best practice of classroom assessment is to make the assessment tasks authentic (Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000). As defined by Newmann, Brandt and Wiggins (1998), “Authentic’ refers to the situational or contextual realism of the proposed tasks” (p.20). Authentic assessment is realistic—real and true—in terms of its processes and products. It allows students to apply the knowledge they have gained in a bounded, but meaningful, real-world context and transfer that knowledge to a much wider context. Assessment tasks are authentic given that, for example, they (1) result in a knowledge product that has meaning or value beyond success in school (Wiggins, 2006); (2) emphasize a link between assessment, learning and real-world issues (Green, 1998); or (3) are being conducted in a context more like that encountered in real life (Diez and Moon, 1992). According to Frey, Schmitt and Allen (2012), the characteristic of “realistic activity or context” is the only characteristic that defines authenticity. However, after reviewing 47 scholarly publications, by 38 different primary authors, which provide a definition of authentic assessment for school-aged children, Frey, Schmitt and Allen (2012) found only 28 publications (59.6%) that indicated the presence of this characteristic. For the 19 publications that failed to address “realistic activity or context”, they mistakenly suggested that authentic assessment necessarily requires “multiple indicators of performance” (13 publications) and “known or student developed scoring criteria” (10 publications), and that it involves “cognitively-complex tasks” (7 publications). Although Frey, Schmitt and Allen (2012) admitted that the best way to judge whether a definition of authenticity is useful is to consider “what is needed for the assessment approach to have value” (p.13), the backlash of failing to adequately address the realistic nature of assessment should not be underestimated, at least in the Hong Kong context, where the concern is making AfL possible (at the classroom level).

Assessment by itself is an insufficient condition for learning and improvement (Shavelson, 2007). It is not the assessment itself but how teachers use it that leads to improvement in student learning. If the aforementioned questions—“For what reason is the assessment done?” and “In what learning context does the assessment take place?”—are not addressed, there cannot be any claim of success in assessment reform. This is because a “one
size fits all” approach to AfL focuses on desirability (all about “for learning”) rather than reality (the difficulties), and does not adequately address (1) whether the assessment tasks that teachers use in day-to-day classroom work are authentic enough to help students learn; (2) teacher concerns that assessment will be used to hold schools and students accountable; and (3) what teachers think assessment should achieve.

REVISITING THE TENSION

As articulated previously, it is widely recognized that a tension exists between two dominant forces for education assessment: teachers’ goodwill and efforts to improve student learning, and the focus on accountability by various key stakeholders (Ewell, 2009). Accountability is a concept in ethics and governance with multiple meanings. In the field of education, it means more than the functioning and mechanism of school organizations. Accountability in education is performance-based and there are, as Volante and Jaafar (2008) suggested, at least two types of accountability: the ethical-professional (process of school improvement) and economic-bureaucratic (outcomes of school operations). The ethical-professional type of accountability emphasizes the measurement of student performance as the basis for improving student learning and improving schools, and the setting of standards on how student performance is compared and judged. The economic-bureaucratic type of accountability focuses on the use of systems and policies of rewards and penalties to ensure that performance-driven school improvement—the ethical-professional accountability—works and to enforce its stability.

Accountability should not be viewed as negative; rather, it is evaluative in nature. As illustrated by Andy Hargreaves in his preface to the book Educational Accountability: Professional Voices from the Field (Gariepy, Spencer and Couture, 2009, p.xv):

The purpose of accountability, however, is not only to confront malpractice or even to prevent harm in the first place. It is also to improve performance by examining its impact, measuring quality and results and spurring people on to achieve even higher standards and greater improvement in the future.

In Hong Kong, school authorities (the EDB and various School Sponsoring Bodies [SSBs]) and parents are the major forces that push for high-performing schools. Since competition is keen and public resources are limited, these key stakeholders have a strong view that good schools make students smarter and that these schools should produce a high level of achievement in all kinds of assessment tasks (Biggs, 1996; Choi, 1999; Madaus, Russell and Higgins, 2009; Miller, 1998; Watkins and Biggs, 2001). A high level of
achievement does not just indicate high ability; an individual’s merit, worth and value are also ascribed through academic performance (China Civilisation Centre, 2007). Thus, assessment is believed to be a reliable tool to demonstrate to school authorities and the public that students learned and schools improved, and teachers tend to subscribe to the notion that assessment makes schools, teachers and students accountable.

This conception of assessment, according to Brown et al.’s (2011) study of 1,014 Hong Kong and 898 South China teachers, is represented in the form of a meta-factor of “accountability”, which contains the sub-factors of “error” (teachers take into account measurement error when using assessments), “examinations” (examinations as assessment) and “teacher and school control” (assessment is used to control teachers and evaluate schools). “Accountability” in this study correlated strongly with another meta-factor of “improvement” ($r = 0.80$), which contains the sub-factors of “accuracy” (assessments are reliable), “help learning” (assessment helps students learn) and “student development” (assessment for student betterment or development). Together with the third meta-factor of “irrelevance” (assessment is fundamentally irrelevant to the life and work of teachers and students), which correlated weakly positive with “accountability” ($r = 0.28$) and weakly negative with “improvement” ($r = -0.22$), Brown et al. (2011) developed a tripartite model of how teachers conceived of assessment in the Chinese context. This model fit the responses of teachers from the two locations studied and is much more methodical when compared with previous attempts that used a translated version of Brown’s (2004) TCoA questionnaire (for example, Brown et al., 2009; Li and Hui, 2007) to explore the specific effect of a Chinese culture on TCoA. A new survey instrument was developed and tested. Items were extracted from two qualitative studies that tapped into Chinese teachers’ conceptions and practice of assessment (Hui, 2012; Wang, 2010); the authors assumed that “accountability” and “learning improvement” in the Chinese context were contextualized in a different way than was defined in the original TCoA questionnaire. Accountability, as referred to in Wang’s (2010) study of Mainland teachers, is more about controlling student behaviours both inside and outside the classroom and preparing them for high-stakes and/or externally administered tests or examinations. Mainland teachers often question students in class and mechanically drill them with examination papers. Assessment therefore helps students avoid failure and gain good scores in examinations. On the other hand, learning improvement, as referred to in Hui’s (2012) study of a group of experienced Hong Kong curriculum leaders (CLs), not only helps students improve their learning but also changes student attitudes towards learning, identifies their potential and prepares them for future challenges. These attributes are not only generic but also fundamental to learning and transferable from one learning situation to another. They better prepare students to fit in our knowledge-based society—which has a short knowledge cycle and demands a workforce that can continuously acquire
quick-changing knowledge and skills (UNESCO, 2010)—and they emphasize lifelong learning, that is, being “willing to participate in ongoing, not recurrent, education” (Online Education Database [OEdb], 2007). In this regard, assessment is used to provoke students’ interest in learning, stimulate their thinking, foster their character, prepare them for lifelong learning and eventually help them succeed.

Brown et al.’s (2011) model highlights the three inter-correlated core purposes of assessment in the Chinese context: accountability, improvement and irrelevance. This model is more reality-congruent to what Chinese teachers think of assessment because it addresses the socio-cultural factors in which teachers’ conceptions are based. This is evident in the strong positive association between accountability and improvement: under the influence of the long-standing “Chinese tradition of examination-merit decisions” (p.314), teachers tested students because they believed it was a powerful way to improve student learning and to help students achieve more in life. The strong force of accountability on learning improvement not only shapes TCoA but also affects how teachers put the assessment reform policy into practice in classroom contexts. Hui and Brown (2010) examined the judgement that experienced Hong Kong CLs gave to the use of a sample of self-selected classroom assessment tasks, which were supposed to be aligned with the policy of AfL. The study results indicated that although the selected assessment tasks were non-examination/test formats and exhibited many characteristics that support a formative, improvement-oriented purpose, these CLs strongly associated the tasks with improvement as well as accountability and examination purposes. In other words, when teachers think that the purpose of the assessment tasks is to improve learning, there is an intention embedded in teachers to hold students accountable and to better prepare them for high-stakes examinations, which in turn will help students be more successful in learning and make them better people. Again, accountability functions to improve learning. As Brown et al. (2011) suggested, “to the extent that assessment for learning policies advocate no testing or examinations, there will [be] difficulties in their adoption by teachers in Chinese contexts” (p.314; original emphasis). Table 17.2 lists the differences between the assessment purposes of accountability and improvement.

Based on the above analysis, accountability in the Chinese context is more like an external catalyst for learning improvement. Teachers are shaped with the need to hold students and themselves accountable, mainly to school authorities. This is evident in a strong positive association between the two conceptions of assessment and the way teachers use classroom assessment. Teachers’ willingness to assess for learning and accountability, as well as to ensure these purposes happen as expected, is both ‘ethical-professional’ and ‘economic-bureaucratic’. Therefore, policymakers and educators should not aim for a resolution to the accountability–improvement tension; rather they should pay more attention to helping teachers recognize that while each side has limits, both are worthwhile pursuits.
AUTHENTICITY IS THE KEY

Assessment, as a process of documenting and judging evidence of student learning, demands that teachers take a cautious stand on the learning context and the kind of information that it collects. This measurement process rests on the assumption that assessment reveals some sorts of ‘truths’ that exist as characteristics—a constructed notion of understanding of knowledge or ability or skills—of an individual that can be accurately identified (Gottfredson, 2009). It is an epistemological issue of what counts as knowledge, how knowledge is acquired and how assessment extracts what students have learned from a personal cognitive domain to a public performative domain. As informed by Howard Gardner (1993), the essence of understanding is that it is performative; therefore, in order to demonstrate to others that one has learned, an individual has to perform that learning in terms of participation and response to set assessment tasks. Ultimately, student ‘performances’, no matter if they are scores in tests/examinations, or verbal answers to in-class questions, or written opinions to essay-type questions, or self-selected evidence and justifications to projects/portfolios, have to be judged by teachers as to whether they count as learning and how well that learning has been achieved. However, different from scores in tests/examinations, a particular ‘performance’ could be considered significant and meaningful if that performance was revealed from an assessment task that connected to the real world. An example could be reading this chapter on ‘authenticity’: if there is an assessment of what the reader has learned, the assessment task of writing a proposal to school management to recommend authentic assessment would better demonstrate that the reader understands than to just repeat the point in a paper or other decontextualized means. This is because, in the context of understanding and reforming assessment practice in schools, proposal writing is authentic (both real

Table 17.2 Differences between the Assessment Purposes of Accountability and Improvement

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Purpose</th>
<th>Socio-Cultural Factors</th>
<th>Teachers’ Conceptions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Limited resources and keen competition in society</td>
<td>Always measurement error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Testing is a powerful way to improve learning</td>
<td>Examinations as assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Students’ future needs and the demands of a knowledge-based economy</td>
<td>Assessments are reliable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment helps students do better</td>
<td>Assessment helps students learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment for student development</td>
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and true) to every teacher and has value in the real world. Using the same logic, mathematics assessment tasks are authentic if “they involve finding patterns, checking generalizations, making models, arguing, simplifying, and extending—processes that resemble the activities of mathematicians or the application of mathematics to everyday life” (Stenmark, 1991, p.3). The argument here is that authenticity, as characterized by “situational or contextual realism” or “realistic activity or context”, is a necessary condition for any assessment that claims to be epistemologically valid. If an assessment task does not involve realistic activity/context and does not reflect what students do and treasure in their real life, then it cannot provide valid information for teachers to judge a student on his/her learning; that is, it is epistemologically invalid.

In Hong Kong, the use of authentic assessment is acknowledged mostly on classroom levels, for example, engaging students in projects/portfolios and different classroom assessment tasks that elicit their learning performance. However, mostly because of the ‘negative’ influence of accountability on student learning, authentic assessment has not been considered as a change measure at school levels, at the least not evident in existing literature. Scholars who favour authentic assessment and tried it at schools and their classrooms are all in agreement that there is an innate relationship between authentic assessment and student learning. For example, Wong, Yung and Cheung (2008) experimented with a set of performance indicators (PIs) and different strategies, methods and tools for implementing authentic assessment with 15 preschools (13 kindergartens and two child care centres). They did two semi-structured focus group interviews with a total of 30 participants—two participants from each preschool—and documented their views on finding authentic assessment valuable to provide more thorough information of student development to further improve teaching and enhance teacher-parent communication. Another local study (Wu and Lee, 2009) reported the implementation of AfL in Mathematics in a local primary school. The authors noted the use of authentic assessment in students’ activities; for example, asking primary 1 students to collect photos in their daily life that involve “lines” and “curves“, and arranging primary 6 students to shop in the supermarket and then do the “four arithmetic operation“. The authors found that these authentic assessment tasks were useful in helping students actively acquire Mathematics knowledge through direct, personal experience. In the same way, Lee (1998) made an interesting attempt to explore the positive effect of authentic assessment—portfolio assessment—on students’ higher-order thinking skills and their conceptualization of learning. Interview findings indicated that the participating senior secondary school students eventually improved their learning strategies.

Authentic assessment functions within the domain of AfL (and assessment as learning), the learning improvement conception. Authentic assessment often involves interactions between teachers and students over
the demands of the assessment tasks. As illustrated by Wiggins (1989), “Authentic tests are contextualized, complex intellectual challenges, not fragmented and static bits or tasks” (p.711). Authentic assessment is often used interchangeably with another assessment practice in the education literature—performance assessment. This is attributable in part to the lack of a clear definition of the two concepts, as “they are sometimes only vaguely defined and sometimes used without being defined at all” (Palm, 2008, p.1). Both concepts call for assessment tasks to elicit observable performance; however, authentic assessment emphasizes the fact that performance has to be generated from tasks that emulate real-life situations. In this regard, Oosterhof (2009) made it clear that authentic assessment is performance assessment, but the inverse is not true. Some practices of performance assessment do not belong to authentic assessment. Thus, it is unfair to judge authentic assessment with criteria specifically associated with performance assessment, such as the need for a specific format, indicators of acceptable performance, and cognitively complex tasks (Frey and Schmitt, 2007; Frey, Schmitt and Allen, 2012).

To answer the question “authentic to what?”, Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner (2004, 2006) suggested a five-dimensional framework (5DF), which listed the important criteria of authenticity: (1) task (what to do?); (2) physical context (where to do it?); (3) social context (with whom to do it?); (4) result (what is the result?); and (5) criteria (how is the result being judged?). Scott (2000) highlighted the necessary process of connecting, reflecting and feedback. ‘Connecting’ means requiring students to connect facts, concepts and principles together in unique ways to solve problems; ‘reflecting’ means helping students develop their self-awareness and reflective skills; and ‘feedback’ simply refers to providing feedback to learners related to significant objectives. In the process of reflecting, the idea of ‘transfer’ is worth noting. According to Fogarty, Perkins and Barell (1992), ‘transfer’ is defined as “learning something in one context and applying it in another” (p.ix; cited in Scott, 2000, pp.34–35). ‘Transfer’ is an important supplement to authenticity because transfer of knowledge and skills is a lifelong lesson for every student (UNESCO, 2010), and authentic assessment should be thought of as part of the learning process rather than simply a measuring device. Students learn through authentic assessment and therefore the designed tasks should embed learning by emulating real-life contexts.

In summary, authenticity is a necessary condition for assessment in order to collect epistemologically valid information of student learning for judgment. This is because authentic assessment tasks allow students to perform and transfer their constructed notion of understanding of knowledge and skills to a situation that emulates the real world. Authenticity is the key to the success of assessment reform in more strongly supporting student learning, and students do learn through actively engaging in well-designed authentic assessment tasks.
CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the premise that assessment reform in Hong Kong is an important reform area because it highlights the main aim of assessment is to support student learning. In order to judge the meaning of an assessment practice—that is, whether it is of or for (and as) learning—it is necessary to closely examine the questions “For what reason is the assessment done?” and “In what learning context does the assessment take place?” Research into Hong Kong TCoA highlighted the influence of socio-cultural factors on how teachers define the purposes of assessment and the way teachers implement assessment in school and the classrooms. The purposes of assessment for accountability and AfL improvement are strongly linked. Accountability drives schools to make a positive change and functions as an external catalyst for learning improvement; conversely, learning improvement demands collection and judgement of accurate and precise information of student learning. Also, it is necessary to assess students in a real-world context in order to collect epistemologically valid information to support student learning.

This chapter did not intend to judge whether assessment reform is successful in Hong Kong, a Chinese society that is strongly associated with a high regard of accountability as well as learning improvement; rather, it examined the meaning of the phrase ‘assessment for learning’ and presented the key arguments to those who want to achieve more success in assessment reform. The key arguments were:

- Assessment means to judge collected information of student learning against set criteria.
- Assessment by itself is an insufficient condition for learning and improvement.
- The strategies that teachers employ to collect information on student learning shape the assessment purposes.
- The primary areas of focus of assessment are supporting student learning and making schools, teachers and students accountable.
- Accountability policies initiate and drive change in schools.
- Assessment as a measurement process infers only an epistemological understanding of student learning.
- Authenticity is defined by the characteristic of ‘realistic activity or context’.
- Authentic assessment that emulates real-life situations could retrieve more valid information of and support student learning.
- Authentic assessment allows students to learn through doing.

Finally, policymakers and educators should go beyond the ‘for learning’ premise and foster an environment for teachers where they can critically examine the underlying purposes of existing assessment practices and at the same time put authentic assessment into test and practice.
NOTE

The author is responsible for the choice and presentation of the arguments contained in this chapter, and the opinions expressed therein are not the opinions of The Hong Kong Institute of Education.

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