

## Notes from Asia Pacific, early June 2013 – China, Singapore & Malaysia

### “Difficult, but not impossible”

It is the exam season in many countries here too. For some weeks, my junk email folder has been full of advertisements by Singapore booksellers for exam revision aids, some bearing the coveted Ministry logo. And most convenience stores are stocked up with bottles of “Essence of Chicken” – to aid exam performance.

External exams are wired into the DNA of many Asian countries. Imperial China can point to a historical use of written examinations for the Imperial Civil Service dating back to the second century BC and, although many aspects of the historical practices would seem as odd to modern Chinese as they do to us, the cultural legacy remains potent. In a meritocracy, external exams are major, respected, life events which can enable students from all social backgrounds to compete with the most privileged and advance if they work hard. In doing so, they honour their own family and their teachers. Exams may be tough and stressful, but they are respected as fair and hugely significant in the lives of students and their families. Critics often say that the trust placed in exams is more than any external assessment system can deserve, but nevertheless, the trust is there.

At the same time, Asian countries are very interested in educational thinking – some originating in the USA or Europe – about new ways of teaching and learning to inculcate so-called “21<sup>st</sup> century skills”. Typically, these highlight critical thinking, collaborative working and creativity - as opposed to the traditional Confucian strengths of memorising facts and doing sums.

During half-term week in Singapore, its National Institute of Education mounted an international conference which was attended by over 1,000 people, of whom I estimated that more than 700 were local teachers – not bad for an event during a holiday in a small country with just over 300 schools. The conference was entitled “Redesigning Pedagogy: Thinking – time for a rethink?” and the theme was how to educate students to learn how to think. We were welcomed by a Singaporean Minister, whose maxim was “Every student a thinking student”, calling for a rethink of classroom practices and learning environments for all ability levels and ages to stimulate reflection, creativity and collaborative working.

But how do these developments sit with the traditional deep-rooted allegiance to external exams? We mounted a seminar recently in Kuala Lumpur on the subject of “school-based assessment in Asian contexts”. There was a full house, with Government officials and assessment specialists from several Asian countries. The Government of Malaysia is committed to making greater use of school –based assessment, both to increase the appropriateness of the assessments to the characteristics they want students to develop, and also to reduce the stress of external examinations. A presentation to the seminar drew on the experience of Hong Kong, where the new national Diploma, taken by all students at the age of 17, includes elements assessed in schools. We also heard from Queensland,

Australia, where assessment at the end of secondary school has been school-based for over thirty years, although it is now moderated by a Common Skills Test.

One important distinction is between the (uncontroversial, but important) formative use of assessment in classrooms for day--to-day feedback and the use of school-based assessments to contribute towards high-stakes summative assessments such as those at the end of secondary school which determine selection for university or employment. In some Asian contexts the latter have proved particularly challenging for teachers, parents and the wider community. The problems are not just workload: can teachers *really* be trusted to make fair judgements that count towards the cherished ritual of the external exam? Asked whether it was possible for school-based assessment to be successfully incorporated into school leaving exams in Chinese cultures, the expert from Hong Kong concluded that it was “difficult, but not impossible”. We saw from the experience of Queensland the extent of guidance, training and support for teachers that is required, as well as the extensive arrangements for intra- and inter-school moderation and for communication with parents.

Most supporters of school-based assessment do not want to abolish external exams, but to widen the repertoire of types of assessment that inform crucial decisions about students' futures. External exams have a place too and we need to make sure that they are testing the right kinds of knowledge and skills for “thinking students”. Again, difficult, but not impossible?