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Free Development Is the New Educational Philosophy Exclusive Interview with Professor Yin Cheong Cheng, Acting President of the Hong Kong Institute of Education

On May 12, Professor Yin Cheong Cheng, Acting President of The Hong Kong Institute of Education was invited to Macau to be instructor for "Training Programme for Principal, Middle and Senior School Management Personnel" organized by Education and Youth Affairs Bureau (DSEJ). We hereby thank him for joining us in this exclusive interview with Teacher Magazine. In the past few years, Professor Cheng often came to Macau in different occasions to share his insights with principals, he says the city is very amicable and looks very different than before.

Professor Cheng reiterates that vision, standpoint and thinking are the three cores of being a principal. With more extensive and diverse thinking, his/her management will be more fruitful and readier for change. If the principal is not a flexible thinker, the resulting options and possibilities of leading the team to change will be poor. There course is relatively short for such trove of information, prepared by Professor Cheng, but he still encourages participants to actively think and discuss with one another during the 5-hour course, not an easy task for most of them.

Your course is a core section of the "Principal's Training Programme" and as the lecturer on reform and development of overseas schools, could you briefly describe the main trends?

Professor Cheng: How do Macau schools position themselves in current global trends and how do different schools position themselves? This is one of the important topics in the course. The discussions have widened my understanding of Macau education, which has its own strong and unique characteristics. Only with a wide horizon, a principal can think thoroughly and his/her decisions can satisfy the needs of educational and school developments.

The changing and extending educational phenomenon is the main trend of global development in education. Between 1970 and 2007, we saw an increase of 76% in tertiary students, a kind of "talent tsunami", where competition is more intense. In the next decade, there will be ever more people around the world receiving tertiary education. The educational policy makers and operators must be concerned about whether the local students can be competitive enough in this booming higher education sector and global "talent tsunami", which has been the catalyst for the worldwide educational reform.

Generally speaking, there are nine aspects to consider in this extensive reform. First, setting a new educational vision and goal for the country; 2) re-establishing the focus of education in respective educational level; 3) leading education into market-driven, privately-operated and diversified environment; 4) welcoming community and parents for joint management; 5) ensuring requirements of quality, standards and accountability; 6) delegating power to schools and actualizing school-based management; 7) improving teachers' professionalism, promoting continuous development; 8) achieving paradigm shift in studying, teaching and evaluation; and 9) applying information technology to teaching and studying.

In the face of ever more challenging situations, setting new educational goals and policies is the macro shift we must carry out. For example, Hong Kong

has already implemented the "334" academic structure. We need to probe into several aspects, like Macau's and its schools response to the challenge of a fast evolving world, whether the local higher education should be repositioned and which areas should be enhanced? Macau is doing an excellent and distinctive job in educational marketization, privatization and diversification, as local schools have been marketized and diversified for a long time. In the community level, parents and other parties were absent from school management, but nowadays parents and social partners are more participative in this regard.

In response to the challenges, schools should implement reform in three aspects, namely ensuring quality, standards and accountability requirements, delegating power to school and actualizing school-based management, and improving teacher's professionalism while promoting continuously professional development. Macau has enacted the "System Framework for Private School Teaching Staff of Non-tertiary Education". The qualification requirements and corresponding remuneration scheme for teachers proposed by this "System Framework" would foster professionalism in the entire education system, and thus guarantee operational and educational quality. Now the "Principal's Training Programme" is also a guarantee to education quality, uplifting the training for principals and directors.

In this worldwide educational reform, another direction is school-based management, already one of Macau's education system advantages. In Macau, most schools are private and we know that Macau schools can operate more freely than those in Hong Kong. Macau students can enter different university entrance exams of Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland or USA. This is an asset of Macau's education system. Hong Kong has been fully implementing relevant measures for seven or eight years to improve professionalism of teachers and to promote their continuously professional development. Now with the new "System Framework", Macau is also enhancing in this regard. "System Framework" stipulates that teaching staffs' qualification and professional development are pegged to their remuneration, which is a very pragmatic and important provision.

Next comes to specific operation, namely studying, teaching and evaluation. Today the general direction and purpose of education greatly differs from the past, when curricula were set in advance. And teachers only needed to "instruct". Nowadays, if students merely follow the teachers' "instruction" and do nothing else, they will develop very limited skills, hampering their progress. Thus the modern curricula require students to proactively learn, research and seek knowledge. We can see an education paradigm shift, with different goals, methods and contents. Hence curricula reform is a necessity and Macau is gradually changing its educational essence.

Last but not least, the trend of using information technology, such as electronic books, mobile learning and internet-based aids can widen students' learning opportunities and scope. The aforesaid nine aspects are global trends, in some of which Macau has its own specific advantages. For example, the tradition of Macau's private schools operating independently coincides with the third trend of leading education into market-driven and diversified condition and the sixth trend of delegating power to school and actualizing school autonomy. Now, Macau's mission is to develop a new paradigm in response to the globalization challenges.

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In 2012, the Macao government enacted the System Framework for Private School Teaching Staff of Non-tertiary Education (System Framework) to set higher standards for the educational backgrounds and pre-employment training programmes for private schools' mid to high level managerial staff. How should a principal lead his school to meet our society's current and future demands?

Professor Cheng: Over the past few years, the government has been engaged in curricula reform, and the newly-enacted System Framework is very important. The question is: how can we implement it at schools? Of course, the government can lead by enacting laws, setting goals, and providing resources, and then schools will follow suit. However, getting cooperation from teachers is quite important, and principals must persuade them to accept the new policies and goals. Nowadays the principal is facing a daunting challenge – for example, in the past, he didn't have to deal with globalization and educational reform, just following the routine of running the school in a conservative, cloistered and 'nearsighted' manner. Also, he didn't have to pay much attention to what was going on outside the school, just keeping the teachers and students well in hand, hence cloistered management, as I call it.

But with the international trends, this situation changed greatly. Nowadays the principal must be proactive, open-minded, and forward-looking. As the world is evolving, competition is also getting keener. If not enterprising, he will not set new goals. Now the principal has to work with parents and the community to get more resources, and encourage cooperation and openness to gain approval and the government's support. In the future, the way the principal leads and manage the school will be different. Therefore, he should transform the school in three aspects: developing the school, innovating teaching approaches, and enhancing management practices.

In the local non-tertiary education system, mainly encompassing private schools and having relatively more pedagogic autonomy, what defines a successful principal?

Professor Cheng: The principal or upper-level staff should play the following six roles:

Firstly, be a proponent of the new educational culture who transforms the old culture, has a wide vision, and plans for the future. Without a vision or goal, the school would muddle through blindly, wasting a lot of time and resources along the way.

Secondly, be a community network builder expanding interpersonal networks beyond the school to closely connect with society. Before, the principal connected with the students and teachers only, but now he must network with parents and the community. Without well-established connections, he can't mobilize school stakeholders and societal resources, as well as use contacts, to develop the school. Therefore, the principal should participate in social activities to connect with the community and its residents.

Thirdly, make political alliances. I'm not talking about party politics. What I mean is the principal should ally himself with society for the school's benefits. Since the school's development is always linked to the interests of outside groups, the principal should make alliances with interest groups, organizing them for shared benefits to prompt them to help the school develop. For example, there are many commercial and non-commercial computer ventures in Macao. While conducting technology education, which requires computers,

schools should cooperate with these companies to share their machines or take advantage of their specialty for mutual benefits. What's more, when a new competitor emerges, it's also very important to engage it in healthy competition. The principal should balance the interests of the groups involved to make the political alliances work better. Internally, he should also unite the teachers, students, and parents, even though they all primarily look after their own interests.

Fourthly, seek financial support and tap resources. Educational reform should forward diverse development, which requires lots of resources. Since government support is always limited, the principal, or the staff, should adopt a different approach. In the past, they just had to focus on teaching to attract more enrolments, but now the rules have changed. To help the school develop, the principal must tap new resources and be forward-looking, in addition to employing internal resources more effectively and focusing them on key issues.

Fifthly, technological advance is shaping the way teaching and learning is structured, as well as how schools are evaluated and managed. Since many learning opportunities can be offered through e-learning, schools should use information technologies to come up with diverse, interactive, and high-tech educational approaches like e-books and e-learning platforms. Therefore, the principal is facing the challenge of transforming the school through technological innovations.

Sixthly, the outside world is changing faster and faster, exerting an increasing influence over the school. Therefore, the principal should be a 'learning leader', a simple term covering several meanings: Firstly, a leader guiding students to learn by following new learning techniques; secondly, a leader encouraging teachers to use new approaches, helping them form learning groups to improve professionally – otherwise, they would become robots blindly following instructions; thirdly, a leader creating a learning organization encompassing all the people involved, such as the staff, faculty, supportive people, students, parents, parties closely related with the school, and the Board of Trustees. The principal should transform the school into a learning organization where, no matter what happened, people still can accumulate experience, study systematically, and even learn ahead of schedule. In short, the principal should guide students, helping them to pursue new educational goals and achieve higher intellectual growth; he should also help teachers to form learning groups to develop new teaching techniques; finally, he should turn the school into a learning organization, creating a favorable environment to prepare the school for a bigger challenge.

In terms of educational reform and from the viewpoint of school mid-to-high level managerial staff, what lessons can Macau draw from Hong Kong's experience?

Professor Cheng: Specifically speaking, as far as the nine trends in educational reform are concerned, Macau schools are pioneering the development. This is clear in such areas as school diversification and (management) autonomy, where Macau's schools have precious experience. As to how schools choose their orientation? My suggestion is: Refresh the mindset and help the school repositioning itself based on former practices. In fact, on top of playing the above-mentioned six roles, a principal should also pursue the following four objectives:

1. Lead the school to establish new goals, new vision and new philosophy, though, during the training courses many Macao school leaders invariably praise the government, saying it spares no effort to improve on education.
2. A leader may face limited resources, culture and practices. A principal should be able to surmount constraints, inside and outside the school; should have charisma and self-confidence as well as strong management skills and an educational philosophy; he/she should be the one able to change the educational philosophy of internal and external interested parties and even of the Board of Trustees or the school owner.





3. A principal should be the leader able to create value. For example, his/her raising students' university entry rate to 80% this year from last year's 70% is considered a value-added achievement. On the other hand, if the school itself can create value is even more precious: it does not simply focus on students' entry into universities, but also emphasizes fostering students with a powerful world vision, or an artistic solid foundation. In this sense enhancing students' future development potential is value-added education. Therefore, teachers are required to build up their professionalism in order to create new educational outcomes, apart from teaching the relevant curricula.
4. Just by himself, a principal cannot accomplish all the mentioned key educational work, since it's unrealistic to expect him/her to be an omnipotent saint. The most important is to build up a leading group at the school. The grooming of leaders in different aspects is crucial, in order to deal with many innovative endeavors and resource development. For instance, if the school's administrative janitors and staff are trained to assume leading roles, they can properly fulfill their tasks without waiting for the principal's instruction. Another example: newcomers are usually young and good at IT, and can help innovation in applied technology. The crux of the matter is: how to discover these potential talents? If the principal has the knack, his/her workload will be considerably reduced. Another issue is that, more often than not, the principal is challenged by disgruntled parents who challenge the school and he/she has to cope with them. Conversely, if a principal has excellent relations with parents, then the Parents Association or Teachers-Parents Association will become school's partners, instead of the opposition. Likewise, if the principal enjoys good public relations outside the school, with a large circle of friends, some organizations will cooperate gladly to help him reach the goals. Take an underprivileged school: it needs plenty of resources, or if students are less endowed, it requires from the teachers a super dedication to their jobs. But if these schools' principals have good interpersonal relations and keep a solid social network, many people are there willing to help. And if the principal can further facilitate and allow them to fully play each one's roles, then he/she can be considered quite successful. It's worth noting that nowadays it takes great courage to be a principal, as it has become a highly challenging job. Nevertheless, pursuing these four objectives, the principal will become more proactive, which will in turn further the school's reform.

Lastly, I'd like to share a little about education reform in Hong Kong. To carry out the reform you must have reform leaders. Nobody is a born leader, leadership is a product of talent fosterage. The current course organized by MSAR government to nurture Macau's talent pool marks the important first step on a very crucial path. But even more important is to offer further opportunities for the trainees to keep exchanging and seeking sustained improvement, since just a course will not turn anybody into an excellent leader. Fostering leadership is a long process, done step by step. Therefore the government must always ponder on how to shape Macau's principals into a learning group? There are several ways, for example, to increase exchange opportunities among school principals; and, in case of school managerial and operational problems, as well as educational and teaching challenges, to create a lively micro-community ambience for Macau principals, thus fostering a spontaneous and forward-looking group of learning leaders.

Furthermore, according to Hong Kong and other countries' experiences in terms of education reform strategies, Macau should not carry out reform at different levels simultaneously. The government should also take into account various factors, including the reform pace, and the diverse ability of principals and teachers to cope with changes. Failing to do so may put undue pressure on teachers, thus undermining the reform good results. My suggestions in terms of overall direction in this regard are:

Firstly, focus on the operational level: start with classes operation and input more time, care and resources into training, for this is directly related with education and with students' learning. To make teachers and students aware that they are required, in the name of education, to join forces to learn spontaneously and to improve open thinking and creative capacity, will make reforms of other aspects easier to coordinate.

Secondly, start with classes, something every school can accomplish. Take class as the core task, then proceed to subject reform. Yet don't pursue reform on all subjects at the same time; you can reform subject by subject, one after another in order to gain some pilot experiences. Subject reform can include redesign of the (teaching) content, method and goal. Afterwards you can proceed with class/grade reform, starting from lower to higher grades. And next is the reform of the whole school, a time-honoured long course. Finally, when all schools have undertaken reform steps, naturally the whole education system will be experiencing change.

Thirdly, it's about technical change: no doubt it's quite important as to how to test and implement it; yet what's more important is the change of culture, that is, to help

people to change their ways of thinking, which means to convince them of the idea and make them accept it voluntarily. Rushed, forceful implementation is not advised. All the government-school, school-teachers and teachers-parents spheres must be interactive, all aware of why it is being implemented and what is the philosophy behind – it doesn't matter even if it takes longer for the involved parties to realize these. Provided that pilot research is well done, people will be more willing to share experience, as it's always easier for teachers to exert influence among peers, than for a principal to influence the teachers. And the result is the reform that has started with just a bunch of people keeps expanding little by little, step by step, to a bigger universe. With this achieved, sense of belonging will grow stronger (in the reform participants), which in turn reinforces the reform.

Closing remarks

Professor Yin Cheong Cheng says, the value of education in the first wave (of school reform) stresses the aim to foster citizens with knowledge, skills and cultural belief for their development in an industrial society, where teaching means a process of transmission of knowledge and culture and learning an assimilation process. A reflection on the first wave of school reform and we can see in the past 20-plus years, all over the world many schools have undergone reforms in pursuit of better school efficiency. Regrettably, they could not satisfy the increasingly higher demand and expectations from the community. Why? We'll seek the answers in the second wave.

The value of education in the second wave (of school reform) highlights the objective to foster citizens with competitiveness, to avoid obsolescence, where teaching symbolizes a course of services for the stakeholders, parents, students and the community, and where learning signifies a process in which students receive the services and thus become competitive. As for school leaders' (management) philosophy, it emphasizes Quality Assurance to satisfy social beings' demand for education, pursuing external efficiency (market efficiency). However, a bottleneck effect emerges in the second wave, characterized by the following features: surpassing competitors by innovation, market-oriented strategies, and competition for resources; "market-based" and short-sighted, losing the "people-based" core value. Then education becomes a short term undertaking seeking instant reward and yet lacking long term responsibility. What's worse, new measures adopted in the second wave largely have no direct relationship with teaching, resulting in the alienation of education that plunge teachers into a crisis. These lead to the emergence of the third wave of education reform.

The third wave highlights two education characteristics: 1) Development of creativity and CMI (Contextualized Multiple Intelligences including technological, social, cultural, political and economic intelligences, of which the core is learning intelligence. 2) Triplization of education, that is, its globalization, localization and individualization, under which students are offered unlimited learning opportunities to develop their CMI, ultimately embracing the future for a free developmental journey in the world.

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