



Catering for Diverse Learning Needs

Jockey Club "Diversity at Schools" Project team connected teachers and schools in Hong Kong through various professional development activities.

Hong Kong's schools have achieved international success in examinations such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an achievement that the education system is designed to sustain. But as many educators know, examination results are not always a reliable measure of future performance, and students with different learning styles can fall through the cracks of such a system.

With that in mind, the Jockey Club "Diversity at Schools" Project funded by The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust that involves 90 schools, Dr Lo Yuen Yi (Associate Professor, Academic Unit of Teacher Education and Learning Leadership), and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), is under way to transform the culture of Hong Kong schools so they cater for diverse learning needs, while still meeting the demands of the examination system.

"This project aims to change that business by working with it", said Dr Lo. "Exam-oriented practice is in our genes. We're not saying public examinations are not important, but you also have to pay attention to the learning process," added Mr Poon Kai Cheung, Franky, Project Lead and Principal of Hong Kong Red Swastika Society Tai Po Secondary School.

The approach differs from other attempts to promote learner diversity because it is school-based and draws on existing data about students to give teachers and schools a better understanding of performance and areas of improvement. This contrasts with typical diversity training, in which teachers or school leaders are pulled out of their environment for a few hours or few days of training, then sent back to face business-as-usual at their schools.

The project consists of three parts: Profiling Diversity, which involves data integration and visualisation; Maximising Choices, in which HKU and CUHK scholars are helping teachers design lessons that cater to a wide variety of learners and develop an inventory of best practices based on Differentiated Instruction (DI); and Facilitating Collaboration, which brings HKU-trained learning assistants into the classroom to help implement those practices.

For Profiling Diversity, the data is being drawn from records lodged in the Education Bureau's centralised database, which is mainly a storage facility. Most of the records are kept as separate datasets – for instance, one set for academic grades, another for extracurricular activities. The Jockey Club "Diversity at Schools" Project is integrating and visualising these datasets so, at the press of a button, schools can see that, for example, students on sports teams underperform academically, and they can start to specifically address this issue.

The implementation of professional practice comes under the Maximising Choices part of the project. HKU's team, led by Dr Lo, is building an inventory and systematising good practices so they can be easily accessed and understood.

An example of choice in learning is a lesson where students learn about discounts and percentages through role playing. Some students might be the customers and have to decide on the best deal on a range of discounted products. More advanced students might be shopkeepers who have to set prices that cater to different customers. The most advanced students would be auditors. In this way, different levels of ability are addressed without labelling the students.

Dr Lo said: “This kind of instruction is not very common in Hong Kong because of the examination-oriented culture and the large class size. It is based on Carol Ann Tomlinson’s DI model from the USA, which is an approach to learning and teaching that values individual students and caters for the diverse needs of students. In DI, teachers respond to students’ needs proactively and make differentiation according to students’ readiness, interests and learning profiles. We’re looking at which DI strategies are used by Hong Kong teachers and which are most effective.



Dr Lo Yuen Yi (second from right) and Mr Franky Poon (second from left) attended the project’s kick-off ceremony and briefing session with guests of honour, Mrs Wong Yau Wai Ching, Michelle, JP (third from right), former Deputy Secretary for Education, Education Bureau, HKSAR Government, and Ms Winnie Ying (third from left), Head of Charities (Grant Making) of The Hong Kong Jockey Club.

“The preliminary data shows that teachers are not using DI in all areas – differentiated assessment in particular is not being applied. We guess this is because assessment is very important and teachers may not be able to diversify in the beginning. We hope they can start with classroom strategies first, get comfortable with that, and gradually move on to diversified assessment at the last stage.”

Mixing things up in the classroom can be a big ask, which is where Facilitating Collaboration comes in. Dr Lo’s team is training Classroom Learning Assistants to help teachers implement diverse learning opportunities. This will require a change in culture – teachers are used to being the sole adult in charge of their classrooms – but it will give teachers more flexibility in maximising choices.

Dr Lo and her team have also been actively promoting the project to teachers, parents and the

community through talks, infographics, animations and the like. Short videos about DI, lasting for two to three minutes, provide a quick, easy reference for busy teachers.

“We know from the literature that if we want teachers to change their approaches, the most important thing is to change their beliefs and mindset. So I would consider this a measure of the success of the programme,” she said.

All three components of the programme are being implemented in two laboratory schools (including Mr Poon’s), with other schools joining in for one, two or three components. Some of these other schools have been selected for case studies and others are completing questionnaires. Altogether, 30 primary schools, 56 secondary schools and four special schools have signed up – and many more applications to join were received. This is good sign that there is interest and need for diversity management in Hong Kong schools.

“Knowing students, using student data well, providing as many choices as possible to engage them in active learning and, ultimately, enough staff in the classroom to support students – there’s nothing totally innovative in a sense. We’re not building something new, we are making things more connected and holistic.” said Mr Poon.

“But you have to look at the context. Hong Kong has been very good at pen-and-paper examinations but the world is changing. And the expansion of compulsory education means most students stay until age 18, which means learning diversity is increasing,” he said.

Dr Lo believes that DI and diversity management in schools can even help with the issue they are meant to address: the examination-focused curriculum.

“In the lower bands, schools want to sustain students’ motivation so that they don’t give up. In the elite schools that care a lot about examinations, they worry about how to cater for growing diversity, where you have more gifted students as well as those who may not be able to catch up. Our project can help all of them to deal with these challenges,” said Dr Lo.

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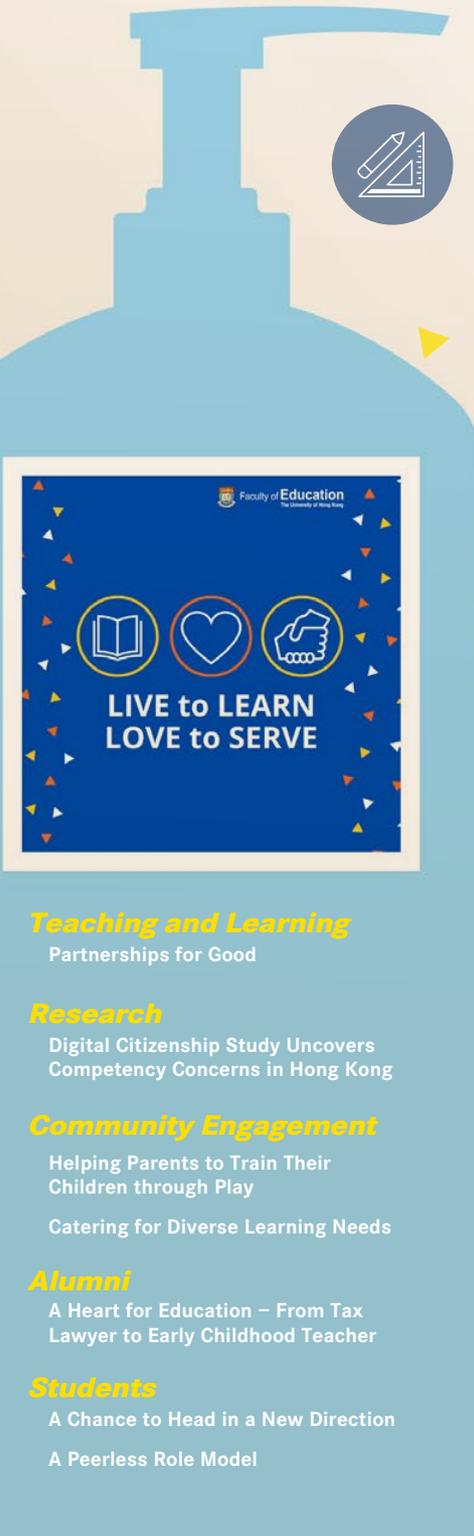
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