

Assessment for learning: Hong Kong needs territory-wide system assessment (TSA) or not

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Abstract

Purpose – Territory-wide system assessment (TSA) was launched and administered by Hong Kong (HK) Education Bureau (EDB) since 2004. Since then, parents and teachers have been questioning its need, value, uselessness, effectiveness, harm for schools, teachers and students. In 2015, the issue blew up with Kau Yan School's principal boycotting the tests. A series of discussions in the public and media and different surveys were then carried out widely in HK. After review, EDB announced in 2017 that the revised version of TSA be extended to Primary 3 students in HK. The purpose of this paper is to propose that TSAs for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 need a further review to judge their need and uselessness.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reviews the educational policy governing the administration of the TSA. Primary and secondary data from focus group meetings, press interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Ouiment *et al.*, 2001) and public reports would be analyzed. Besides, participant observation (Nosich, 1982; Sou, 2000; Sou and Zhou, 2007) and theoretical reasoning (Nosich, 1982; Sou, 2000; Sou and Zhou, 2007) have been applied for the critical review of this controversial test. The contrast study on the conflicting views of stakeholders in the education industry would bring up some insights of this controversial educational policy in Assessment for Learning.

Findings – Conflicting and contrasting perceptions from TSA to basic competency assessment (BCA) among stakeholders of education and government include governmental stakeholder – EDB's awareness; EDB stressed that TSA is a low-stakes assessment which does not need extra practice for students; non-governmental stakeholders including legislative councilors' perception, school principals' perception, teachers' perception, parents' perception and students' perception. Facing the opposition and grievances of different stakeholders, EDB announced in January 2017 that the revised version of TSA: BCA, be extended to HK in May 2017. Parents and legislative councilors were angry and they ask for a review or even cancellation for Primary 3 TSA.

Originality/value – This original study will initiate more thorough revisions and discussions for the TSAs for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 in HK, as a quality educational management step. While TSA for Primary 3 has been reviewed and substantially “revised,” the community at large still asks for further revision for its needs, uselessness and harm for parents, teachers and students. Since the underlying causes of students' suicides are not fully identified, the problem of over-drilling practices for TSAs for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 needs to be satisfactorily resolved. Thus, TSAs for Primary 6 and Secondary 3, like that for Primary 3, should be reviewed for probable revision.

Keywords Assessment for learning, Basic competency assessment (BCA), Education Bureau (EDB), Student assessment (SA), Territory-wide system assessment (TSA)

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Territory-wide system assessment (TSA) is an assessment introduced by the Education Commission (2000) in the report of “Reform proposal for the education system in Hong Kong” in September 2000. Assessments of similar nature are conducted in many

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countries, for instance, Australia, Canada and the USA. These countries make use of the assessment data to gain a good understanding of their students' overall standards and learning performance so as to inform education policies and to narrow gaps in learning.

Administration of TSA

TSA is held in June every year since 2004 for students of Primary 3, Primary 6 (implemented in alternate year starting from 2012) and Secondary 3. TSA is designed for facilitating learning and teaching after evaluating the average learning standard of the students in the subject of Chinese language, English language and mathematics at the end of key learning stages, i.e. Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3.

TSA is launched and administered by the Education Bureau (EDB). It aims to objectively assess the basic competencies (BCs) and learning progress of the students at different stages of learning. EDB claims that the capabilities of students are analyzed through the TSA in order to improve the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Educational policies can be reviewed with the help of the data collected through the TSA.

The TSA (Table I) is conducted in the form of pencil and paper (except Chinese and English oral assessments). TSA is compulsory for all Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students in Hong Kong except for those on sick leave or those from international schools. The assessment results of the students with intellectual disabilities, e.g., suffering from dyslexia can be excluded after getting medical approval.

Research methodology

This paper reviews the educational policy governing the administration of the TSA. Primary and secondary data from focus group meetings, press Interviews (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Ouiment *et al.*, 2001) and public reports would be analyzed. Besides, participant observation (Nosich, 1982; Sou, 2000; Sou and Zhou, 2007)

Aspect	Descriptions
Subjects	Reading, writing and listening assessments for Chinese and English Chinese audio-visual (CAV) assessment at the secondary level Mathematics (pen-and-paper mode) Oral assessments for the two languages
Coverage	CAV assessments at primary levels (conducted on a sampling basis) The basic competencies of Chinese, English and Mathematics are the basic requirements; they are only part of the curriculum
Participants	Primary 3, Primary 6 and 3 Secondary students
Assessment dates	Sampling assessment: April/May Written assessment: mid and late June
Marking	Oral assessments are rated by two oral examiners Teachers are recruited to mark written assessments through a central system in assessment centers
Reporting	Quantitative analysis (assessment data) - School-level reports (each dimension) - Item analysis reports (sorted by sub-papers) - Item analysis reports (sorted by Basic Competency Descriptors) Qualitative analysis (written reports) - Summary of territory-wide level students' performance (with student exemplars)
Functions	For the government: to gauge students' overall attainment of basic competencies For schools: to identify students' strengths and weaknesses to inform learning and teaching, thereby enhancing learning

Source: Education Bureau (2016b)

Table I.
Implementation
of TSA

and theoretical reasoning (Nosich, 1982; Sou, 2000; Sou and Zhou, 2007) have been applied for the critical review of this controversial test. Contrast study on the conflicting views of stakeholders in the education industry would bring up some insights of this controversial educational policy in Assessment for Learning.

Assessment of learning is about proving that you have learned something that can be measured, while Assessment for Learning affects school and students' learning by using information produced by rich forms of assessment to enhance instruction and improve learning in schools (Education Bureau, 2016b). This testing approach of TSA is to assess students' performance and has important contributions to educational quality evaluation in Hong Kong as part of a comprehensive evaluation program for schools and students in Hong Kong (Sou, 2009). In classrooms where Assessment for Learning is practiced, students are encouraged to be more active in their learning and associated assessment. The ultimate purpose of TSA as Assessment for Learning is to create self-regulated learners. After leaving schools, self-regulated learners will be able and confident of continue learning throughout their lives.

Teachers need to know from the outset of a unit of study where their students are in terms of their learning and then continually check on how they are progressing through strengthening the feedback they get from their learners. Students are guided on what they are expected to learn and what quality work looks like. The teacher will work for the students to understand and identify any gaps or misconceptions (initial/diagnostic assessment). As the unit progresses, the teacher and individual student work together to assess the student's knowledge, what she or he needs to learn to improve and extend this knowledge, and how the student can best get to that point (formative assessment).

Assessment for Learning occurs at all stages of the learning process. For the TSA, it is used to collect evidence of student learning. It is an integral part of the learning and teaching cycle. Assessment results can provide information for students to enhance their learning and enable teachers to review and improve their teaching. Introduced in 2000, the TSA was intended to provide the government and school management on students' standards in key learning areas for the purpose of school improvement in learning and teaching. After all, the government may provide more targeted support to schools that are in need of assistance.

Review on TSA

In October 2015, more than 40,000 parents and teachers placed a full-page advertisement in the *Apple Daily* asking for the test for Primary 3 students to be scrapped. The Parents and Teachers Group said: "Junior primary pupils are tormented [...] We urge the EDB to show an educator's courage to free pupils from an 'unnecessary' exam system [...] to give them back a happy childhood" (Lo, 2016).

Parents, school organizations and political groups had all spoken out against TSA-related exam pressure and excessive practices. They quoted a survey (Lo, 2016) revealing that majority of primary students were burdened with more than seven daily homework assignments to prepare for the TSA. Some parents even complained of children showing signs of depression, such as crying, whilst toiling over their homework. Some schools face pressure to improve their TSA results, which lead to teachers drilling pupils for the TSA (Pang, 2015). Students are facing overloaded exercises. In some schools, teachers give students a lot of TSA-oriented drillings with practice papers, and some schools even confine their design of learning tasks, homework, test or examination papers to match the TSA only (Education Bureau, 2014a).

The Coordinating Committee on BCA and Assessment Literacy

Thus, the government tasked a committee to review the Primary 3 TSA which submitted its recommendations to the EDB in January 2016. As one of the recommendations, the tests

were suspended for the rest of 2016. Instead, some 40 primary schools, or about 10 percent of the total number of local primary schools, would be invited to take a revised and more simple assessment under a trial scheme.

The mix of participants was representatives of schools from different districts, ranging from large- to small-scale enrollments. Based on the result of the Trial Scheme in 2016, a revamped version of the controversial TSA shall resume in 2017. The revamped version of TSA is known as Basic Competency Assessment (BCA).

Comparing with TSA, BCA for Primary 3 students is less demanding. For instance, the language reading section is set to be reduced from three articles to two. The word limit would be capped at 1,200, and the use of more complex words would be reduced. After all, topics would be more direct and relevant to daily life. Also, the number of questions for the mathematics paper would be reduced by about 20 percent.

However, the parents said that the suggestions did not address the problem of excessive drillings. A mother of two said, “We are still very worried. It’s just small changes to the format, such as the type of questions [...] As long as there is an assessment, there will be a pull to make schools train better” (Lo, 2016). A father of two echoed, “I think the changes are pointless. During my time, there were no such tests conducted to gauge students’ standards [...] I believe that having assessors come in to monitor classes is sufficient and at the same time stress-free” (Lo, 2016).

When the Coordinating Committee on BCA and Assessment Literacy submitted the review report on TSA to EDB in 2016, TSA Concern Group Spokeswoman, Rachel Chung-yeetong rejected it as unnecessary, useless and unacceptable. Education Sector Lawmaker Kin-yuen Ip criticized, “It also shows the government has no sincerity in listening to the parents.” Simultaneously, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union (HKPTU) urged its members not to help with examination papers.

Eddie Hak-kim Ng, former Secretary for Education in Hong Kong, defended the TSA and said, “TSA itself was a really good tool. When we ask [for] opinions from schools and so on, they did tell us that this was a very important, meaningful and effective tool for them to work together with students, improving the teaching and learning” (Lo, 2016). In such belief, from TSA to BCA, the government promoted “The Coordinating Committee on Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) and Assessment Literacy” as one of the seven participating sectors (Figure 1) in the education industry.

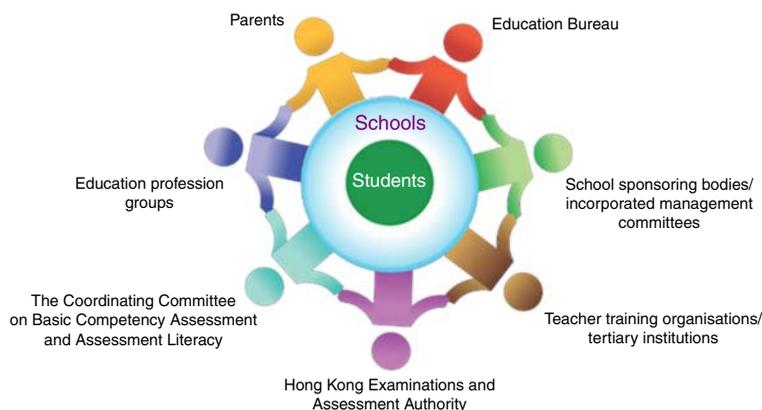


Figure 1.
Seven participating
sectors in promoting
“assessment for
learning”

Source: Education Bureau (2016a)

EDB also suggested different roles of participating sectors in promoting “Assessment for Learning” (Table II). To synergize the participants’ efforts, EDB elaborated the roles of nine stakeholders of the seven participating sectors.

Status quo of TSA

In 2016, the TSA was suspended amid fierce public opposition. In 2017, it is being replaced by the BCA test, which critics say is not much different (Pang, 2017). The incumbent Chief Executive Carrie Lam commented, “Having the test this year is meaningless” (Pang, 2017). In response, the former Chief Executive Chun-ying Leung said this year’s BCA would not be canceled. “Whether or not to cancel the assessment will be left to the next administration after July 1,” he confirmed (Pang, 2017). Meanwhile, the current administration and the last administration have different views on the revamped version of TSA, which is also known as BCA.

Student assessment (SA)

The SA is a web-based assessment resource bank. It provides schools with an assessment tool featuring a greater variety of educational needs. Teachers can conduct this assessment according to their students’ needs and learning progress. The assessment can be flexibly used with other assessment tools at schools so that the effectiveness of student learning would be further enhanced. The features of the SA include:

- web-based central assessment item bank;
- online assessments; and
- computer marking and instant reports on students’ performance.

Based on the online assessment results and their knowledge about the students, teachers can provide appropriate follow-ups to enhance student learning.

Territory-wide system assessment

The TSA is an assessment administered at the territory level. It facilitates Assessment for Learning by providing schools with objective data on students in Chinese language, English language and mathematics. TSA reports and school reports provide information about students’ strengths and weaknesses against specific BCs. They enable schools and teachers to enhance their plans on learning and teaching.

To enhance learning and teaching effectiveness, the EDB provides web-based learning and teaching support (WLTS) for schools according to assessment results and analysis of SA and TSA. The territory-wide data also help the government provide focused support to schools.

Student assessment repository (STAR)

In “Assessment for Learning”, assessment is an integral part of the curriculum and an integral part of the learning–teaching–assessment cycle. Its main function is to help schools understand students’ learning progress and needs, as well as their strengths and weaknesses for planning the curriculum, designing teaching and developing school-based assessment to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching so as to help students learn more effectively.

The Education Commission issued “Learning for life, learning through life: reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong” which sets out detailed proposals for BCAs in Chinese language, English language and mathematics. BCA Program (Figure 2) has been refined to three components: STAR (formerly called SA), TSA and WLTS with a view to carrying out “Assessment for Learning” in everyday teaching.

Sector	Suggested role
Education Bureau	<p>Maintaining close communication with various stakeholders on an ongoing basis to gather views and recommendations to serve as reference for the development of TSA</p> <p>Making good use of assessment data to grasp the overall basic competency levels of students in Hong Kong in order to review education policies, determine the directions of professional training, provide learning and teaching resources, and conduct a further data analysis to understand the learning needs of students at different stages</p> <p>Providing schools with various support measures, including professional development activities for promoting assessment literacy, the provision of school-based support services, the enhancement of the WLTS and assessment bank, etc.</p> <p>Enhancing school professional leadership and capacity (including aspiring principals, newly appointed principals, prospective teachers, appointed teachers, serving teachers, newly appointed school managers, etc.) to promote whole-person development and a balanced curriculum</p> <p>Strengthening internal guidelines to enhance public understanding of how EDB will use the TSA information to refine the curriculum development, and enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching</p> <p>Removing TSA from the “Performance Indicators” to put emphasis on “assessment for learning”</p>
School sponsoring bodies/ incorporated management committees	<p>Encouraging schools to develop the school-based curriculum and assessment policies based on professional decisions in the light of school culture and students’ learning needs to support the varied pace of development among different schools</p> <p>Assisting schools in consolidating and making optimal use of different assessment data, and analyzing and adjusting teaching strategies by incorporating information on students and school backgrounds to facilitate effective student learning</p>
Schools (principals/panel chairpersons/teachers)	<p>Formulating and implementing school-based homework and assessment policies having regard to school context, students’ learning needs and schools’ professional decisions; and promoting home-school communication</p> <p>Making use of various assessment data to provide feedback to learning and teaching, enhancing the curriculum and facilitating student learning</p>
Teacher training organizations/ tertiary institutions	<p>Collaborating with EDB to deepen the concept of “assessment for learning” in various training programs and courses for principals (aspiring principals and newly appointed principals), teachers (prospective teachers, appointed teachers and serving teachers) and newly appointed school managers</p> <p>Conducting partnership research programs/projects to support the Government in making good use of assessment data for tracking studies to serve as reference for education policies and school practices</p>
Parents	<p>Grasping and understanding the concepts, strategies and arrangements of the school-based homework and assessment policies</p> <p>Communicating and collaborating with schools to facilitate students’ learning and healthy development</p>
Parent-teacher associations and regional federation of parent- teacher associations	<p>Assisting schools in gathering parents’ views and understanding their concerns, and helping parents grasp schools’ homework and assessment policies, as well as the objectives, implementation and functions of assessment</p> <p>Organizing various activities with different groups to deepen parents’ understanding of the concept of “assessment for learning”</p>
Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority	<p>Ensuring and maintaining the reliability and validity of basic competency assessments, including maintaining the stringent process of item setting</p>

(continued)

Table II.
EDB’s suggested
roles of
participating sectors

Sector	Suggested role
	and moderation, improving the papers and question design, enhancing TSA school reports, etc.
Education profession groups	Assisting the Government in promoting the culture of “assessment for learning” in the education sector Taking forward public education activities to encourage and guide the public and the education sector to make use of assessment data with a right and positive attitude to serve the function of “assessment for learning” Drawing on different educational resources to form learning communities to share successful experiences in making good use of assessment to benefit learning and teaching
The Coordinating Committee on Basic Competency Assessment and Assessment Literacy	Advising the government on the overall direction for enhancing assessment literacy (including the use of quantitative and qualitative assessment data and the optimal use of information technology to facilitate learning and teaching) Reviewing and monitoring the development, implementation and effectiveness of TSA on an ongoing basis, and offering professional advice and recommendations on the development, implementation and effectiveness of TSA

Table II. Source: Education Bureau (2016a)



Figure 2.
BCA program –
STAR+TSA+WLTS

Source: Education Bureau (2016a)

Schools can use the assessment information (including TSA and STAR information) to:

- understand whether students have attained BCs in the three principal subjects (Chinese language, English language and mathematics);
- promote the use of assessment data and schools’ development needs; and
- make reference to various resources (such as WLTS) to formulate learning and teaching strategies to enhance learning and teaching.

Basic Competency Assessment

BC refers to a minimally acceptable level from which a student should be able to continue to the next key stage of learning without extra learning support. For the first year of TSA implementation at each level (Primary 3 in 2004, Primary 6 in 2005 and Secondary 3 in 2006), independent panels of judges providing professional judgment alongside with psychometric methods, setting the BC standards which were then benchmarked against international standards.

The BC standards set in the first year remain unchanged across the years. Like the qualifying height for the high jump, a student jumping over the bar of qualifying height means that the student has achieved BC. Over the years, TSA is implemented on the basis of BC (Figure 3).

BCA has two components, namely, the “SA” and the “TSA” under the platform of “WLTS”. They cover Chinese language, English language and mathematics.

Findings

Tai-fai Lam, the Supervisor of Lam Tai Fai College and delegate to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, was extremely disappointed at the former Chief Executive. He said, “[The old government] pushed ahead a policy that will be scrapped several months later by the next government,” adding it would only confuse students, parents and schools. The incumbent Chief Executive Carrie Lam remarked, “If the old government thought it was too difficult to suspend, I would respect its decision. I shall do what I can do for the next school year after I assume office” (Lo, 2016).

Obviously, there are conflicting views from TSA to BCA among the stakeholders of the education industry, politicians, and even government leaders. The most controversial issue is the Primary 3 TSA. To this end, we shall consolidate the contrasting perceptions of governmental stakeholder – EDB’s Awareness and Non-governmental stakeholders including legislative councilors’ perception, school principals’ perception, teachers’ perception, parents’ perception and students’ perception.

Governmental stakeholder – EDB’s awareness

Having consulted various stakeholders and examined their views, the EDB decided, from 2014, to change TSA into a low-stakes assessment with the removal of the

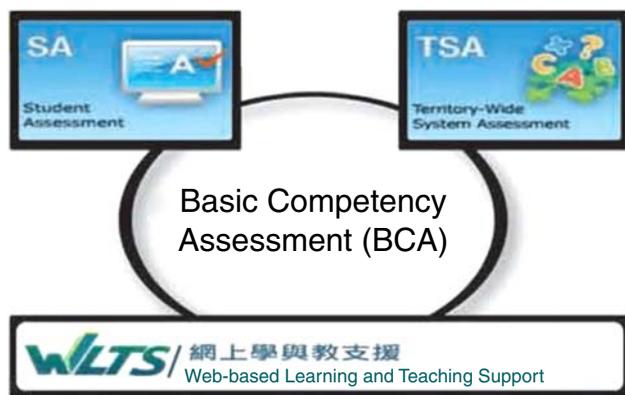


Figure 3.
Components of Basic
competency
Assessment (BCA)

Source: Education Bureau (2016a)

performance indicator, not to disclose to individual primary schools the percentage of their students achieving BCs in Chinese language, English language and mathematics and to remove the TSA from the key performance measures for primary schools (Education Bureau, 2014b).

Apparently, many parents, teachers and students disagree with having the TSA, too. It is difficult to manage school internal examinations and TSAs, and the TSA questions are a bit too hard for the kids. Politicians urged that the EDB should ask the public if they want to keep them. On April 9, 2017, teachers both in support and against the BCA attended a forum held by the HKPTU. Professor Wing-kwong Tsang from the Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and education sector Lawmaker Kin-yuen Ip suggested the government should scrap the new version of TSA being launched in May 2017, saying it would not improve teaching and learning quality.

Ip added that the TSA had transformed from a low-stakes assessment into a high-stakes one, imposing huge pressure on Primary 3 students who have to go through extra drilling practice. On the other hand, Professor Kit-tai Hau, also from the Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong believed that schools could make improvements based on the TSA reports, adding that the test is a low-stakes assessment, as schools are under no pressure from the government to prepare for it.

The EDB stressed that the TSA is a low-stakes assessment used mainly to gauge Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 students' performances in three principal subjects, namely, Chinese language, English language and mathematics. The EDB assured that the main purpose of the TSA is to provide the government and schools with information on students' standards, including strengths and weaknesses, in key learning areas for the purposes of school improvement in learning and teaching, and government's provision of targeted support to schools, which need assistance.

The EDB argued that it was not necessary to arrange extra practice for students in preparing for the TSA. BCs represent just part of the curriculum requirements. Schools should not change their teaching and assessment methods because of the TSA. The EDB claimed that over-drilling not only wears out students' interest and motivation in learning but also affects the rest time of teachers and students, resulting in unnecessary pressure on teachers and students. In the long run, over-drilling may demotivate students to learn and affect their next stage of learning.

Non-governmental stakeholders

Legislative councilors' perception. Michael Tien, a Legislative Councilor, recognized the need of an assessment tool like TSA to gauge students' attainment of BCs which provided data for the government to allocate education resources (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017). Another Legislative Councilor, Hoi-dick Chu, queried about the possible adverse impact, if any, on schools if TSA was abolished (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017).

School principals' perception. Although the former Legislative Councilor and School Principal Yok-sing Tsang said the EDB pressurized those schools which failed to meet the average score in the TSA to do more drillings and to review their teaching (SCMP, 2015), the Principal of Ma On Shan Methodist Primary School, Kam-fai Chan said the test did not put pressure on the school and students. "We don't focus on drillings as the test shows as what levels the students are at," he said (Pang, 2015). Mr Chan said TSAs are important to schools to show where they might be going wrong. He said that the TSA is an important guide to show a school's strengths and key areas that need changes. So, he thinks it is more appropriate to make the TSA more suitable to pupils' levels and needs rather

than scrapping it (Pang, 2015). Another secondary school Principal, Dr Ambrose Chong, Convener of the Working Group on Papers and Question Design of the Committee, stated in a Legislative Council Meeting in December 2016 that while there was a concern over school pressure induced from TSA, he, being a Principal, considered that TSA school reports enabled schools and teachers to understand students' strengths and weaknesses and make adjustments to enhance teaching and learning (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017).

Teachers' perception. On October 30, 2015, Kau Yan School (www.kauyan.edu.hk/), a private primary school in Sai Ying Pun, announced that it would boycott the tests that academic year, saying the scheme was not in line with the school's mission and was no good for students. Then, on the next day, October 31, 2015, the EDB admitted that there were problems with the controversial TSA and pledged to review the assessments.

A survey carried out by the HKPTU found that 65 percent of its members thought that the TSAs should be abolished because they put too much pressure on students and teachers (Cheung, 2015a). This largest teachers' union in Hong Kong revealed that most of its members thought that a government test, like TSA, used to track pupils' progress in primary schools should be scrapped.

The HKPTU President Wai-wah Fung said most of its members felt students and teachers had to prepare specifically for the TSA. The union surveyed more than 1,900 primary school teachers in March and April 2015. The survey also revealed (Cheung, 2015a):

- 97 percent of primary school teachers required students to purchase TSA practice exercises for the examinations;
- Primary 3 and 6 students on average purchased three TSA practice exercises to prepare for the examinations;
- 73 percent of teachers felt the TSAs put "serious" pressure on students; and
- 80 percent of teachers felt the TSAs put "serious" pressure on teaching staff.

The HKPTU suggested that previous attempts to improve the TSA were ineffective in reducing the pressure on students and teachers. In a statement, this teachers' union argued that "normal classroom teaching and examination methods were gravely distorted" because of the TSA. The union also appealed to teachers and parents to put pressure on the EDB to cancel the examination (Cheung, 2015a).

It was reported that a student with autism suffered from depression due to the TSA examination. His mother said that, on one occasion, he asked her in tears if "his survival is only for finishing homework." But the EDB issued a response by emphasizing that the TSA did not require special preparation. The government said that many schools believed that the TSA figures were effective in evaluating teaching and learning, adding that the TSA should be retained (Cheung, 2015a).

In a questionnaire survey conducted in May 2008 by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), 96 percent of the responded school principals confirmed that their teachers had made reference to the TSA data in enhancing their teaching plans. Most teachers found the school reports useful for analyzing students' performance. They agreed that the TSA could provide an objective assessment, system context for schools to identify areas where their students were faring relatively well and areas where they might need to improve upon including the possibilities of seeking professional support and additional special educational needs (SEN) resources or adjustment in curriculum planning (Education Bureau, 2014a).

Parents' perception. Parents concerning the effects brought by the TSA started an online petition, requesting a cancellation of the Primary 3 TSA exam. Over 30,000 Facebook users, including parents, teachers and students, etc., signed up. Parents said the schools were very concerned about the results of TSA since it affected the banding of the school because before 2014, TSA was one of the key performance measures for primary schools in Hong Kong for the EDB to assess the school's performance (Education Bureau, 2016a). This resulted in extra TSA drilling practice and after-school classes appearing in the learning curriculum.

As most of the schools required students to finish a lot of complementary exercises and attend extra lessons conducted for the TSA, parents were worried about the health and mental states of children and so forth requested for the cancellation of the TSA. A parent interviewee once said:

Let's not make our children exam machines. Let them have a good childhood, let them regain their interest in learning. Give the children space to understand themselves and develop their potential.

Another parent in an interview said:

It's an inhumane way to live [...] the children go to school, do their homework after school, continue doing their homework after dinner, prepare for tests, go to bed, and the next day it repeats all over again. The system forces the school to put pressure on teachers, the teachers put pressure on us, and then we put pressure on the children, and it's an endless loop [...] TSA should be cancelled! No more students should kill themselves because of school pressure! Please let them have a happy childhood and have time to play!

A survey of more than 500 parents conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Family Education in 2015 has found that about 35 percent of parents whose children are in Primary 3 or Primary 6 spend more than an hour everyday preparing for the TSA. It found that more than 60 percent of them believe TSA puts too much pressure on their children. The institute's Director, Chi-yuen Tik, said he thinks the TSA evaluation committee should consider the concerns of parents as well as teachers when reviewing the current policy (Leung, 2015).

Students' perception. Some students wrote to the newspapers and thought that the TSA exams should be marked on a simple pass/fail basis (Gusway, 2015). This way, schools and teachers, as well as students and their parents, would not be so stressed about them. Dr Fernando Chiu-hung Cheung, a former Legislative Councilor, commented in a Legislative Council Meeting that TSA had already deviated from its original purpose and imposed undue pressure on students. He said that a recent survey indicated that child abuse cases reached its climax during the TSA period (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2017). Primary 3 students in Hong Kong are not mature enough to tackle such complicated TSA tests. They might feel a lot of stress from being pushed by their parents and teachers to do a lot of preparation. About 97 percent of teachers would ask their Primary 3 and 6 pupils to buy extra printed exercises, an average of 3.1 exercises each (EJ Insight, 2015).

Furthermore, they may be worried that they have to do well on them. Overloading students like this could make both students and their parents depressed. If students just needed to get a pass, they would not need to worry about aiming for higher marks. The pass/fail scheme is supported because it puts less pressure on schools and students. It would reduce the negative consequences caused by TSA exams.

Some students said that it would be better if the TSAs were canceled altogether (Gusway, 2015). It is because they feel stressed because the exam results were not very good. And in addition to the usual exams, they still had to revise for the TSAs. It was tough and tiring.

They said that kids needed to play for at least one hour each day, but if they have the TSAs, they cannot play because they are too busy revising.

However, Kitty Chan, a Primary 4 Student at Yaumati Catholic Primary School (Hoi Wang Road), said that she was “happy” and “relaxed” taking the TSA because the tests would not be handed back to her for corrections, which meant that she had more time to play. She also said that the TSA was “no pressure at all” and that there was no need to abolish them. “Should we ask the government to block the road just because there has been a small accident?” she said (Cheung, 2015b).

The way forward

Facing the opposition and grievances of some parents, teachers and students, EDB announced on January 23, 2017 that the revised version of TSA is extended to Hong Kong in May this year, namely, the Primary 3 “BCA”. The EDB also issued a circular to all primary schools on the same day to adjust the school calendar and notify parents of the government’s arrangements.

The government stressed that the new scheme BCA is not a re-examination of TSA and will not be used to assess school performance. Hong Kong Government primary schools will not need to buy TSA-related exercises. Parents and members of the Legislative Council who opposed TSA were angry at the decision and they asked for a further review or even cancellation for the Primary 3 TSA. To this end, BCA will be most likely taking place in May 2017. We strongly proposed that Primary 3 BCA needs to be reviewed on its needs and uselessness for Hong Kong. What then is the way forward for Primary 6 TSA and Secondary 3 TSA?

Primary 6 TSA

To alleviate the pressure on Primary 6 students, Primary 6 TSA has been implemented only in odd-numbered years since 2012. Schools can participate on a voluntary basis in even-numbered years according to the needs of individual schools. Schools may request question papers from the HKEAA for reference or use to facilitate teaching. Although not every year of Primary 6 students need to take the TSA, some stakeholders think that it is important to review and to evaluate its importance and adverse effects on Primary 6 students.

Secondary 3 TSA

For Secondary 3 students, TSA is a way for the EDB to monitor their study progress and education results of schools. The examinations are held for Secondary 3 students to test their BCs in Chinese language, English language and mathematics. Nevertheless, the recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) finds that Hong Kong secondary students fall to ninth in world rankings – down from second three years ago. Should this raise an alarm for the new senior secondary school curriculum or the TSA as a monitoring tool? The problem may lie behind how the assessments are subject to appropriate quality control. The NSS school curriculum launched in 2009 may not be the cause of the drop in PISA science score. PISA 2015, presented in 2016, showed the results for around 540,000 participating students of 15-year-old in 72 countries to test scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading.

Hong Kong participated for the sixth time in this three-yearly PISA in 2000. Hong Kong students have always been in the world’s top ten in all three assessed aspects. Our secondary students ranked second in science in 2012 but dropped to ninth in 2015. Hong Kong ranked second in mathematics, up from third in 2012 and remained second in reading.

A possible contributing factor behind the drop might be the launch of the NSS curriculum, which does not require students to choose subjects in either the arts or science stream. Nevertheless, Hong Kong students performed best in the PISA 2012 assessment when the NSS curriculum was already in place. If the change to the curriculum is a contributing factor, then it might be TSA being ineffective in assessing specific BCs as enabling tools for learning other subjects, including science subjects.

Setting standards is not an exact science, involving making judgments and choices about where to make. What is in essence, an artificial dichotomy on a continuum of performance? The preparation process of TSA blended technical as well as professional and policy-oriented considerations. The more subjective considerations should be reviewed frequently.

In addition, while TSA for secondary school students facilitates assessment for learning by providing objective data on students' performances in the three principal subjects, it may not predict the performances in the science subjects. The territory-wide data are supposed to help the government review policies. There now exists a need to review whether TSA should include the science subjects in the assessment scope.

Implication for assessment practice and policy

Opponents of TSA believe that the EDB should review TSA more thoroughly. They associate TSA with overloading teachers, depressing students, children's happiness and accommodation for SEN students.

First, some stakeholders might have perceived the high stakes involved in the TSA. The HKPTU Survey in 2015 showed that most teachers believed the government should scrap TSA because the examination forced over-drilling practice. About 70 percent of the 2,055 teachers, including those in focus group interviews, who responded said TSA preparation had affected their daily teaching. Teachers set up after-school tutoring sessions for Primary 3 and Primary 6 students lasting for an average two hours per week (Cheung, 2015a). There were evidently fewer drillings for Primary 1 and 2 students as compared with those in Primary 3 and 6 (Education Bureau, 2014a).

Second, some parents who have children with SEN studying at mainstream schools reveal that their children have to rely on antidepressants to ease the pressures arising from extra studies due to TSA drillings (Cheung, 2015a). Another case from *Apple Daily*, a Hong Kong newspaper, reported that a student with autism suffered from depression due to the TSA examination. His mother said that, on one occasion, her son asked her in tears if "his survival is only for finishing the TSA examination and worksheets" (Cheung, 2015a).

Third, the Hong Kong Children's Happiness Index, commissioned by the Hong Kong Early Childhood Development Research Foundation, revealed that the Index in 2015 dropped in two consecutive years, with the overall index in 2015 dropped noticeably to 6.49 (on a scale of 0 to 10) from 6.74 in 2014. It was found that study pressures and homework hours pose the significant impact on children's happiness (Early Childhood Development Research Foundation, 2016).

Lastly, support measures, with ongoing improvements every year, are needed for students with SEN to participate in the TSA. Given that the TSA is a low-stakes assessment which serves as an assessment tools for Hong Kong schools to enhance learning and teaching, students with SEN are strongly encouraged by the HKEAA to take part in it. Therefore, support measures with ongoing improvements yearly, according to the usual practice in schools are necessary for providing accommodation for the needs of students with SEN in attempting the TSA (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017).

Upon requests from schools and students, the measures for SEN students include the following, with ongoing improvements every year (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2017):

- (1) extension of assessment time;
- (2) use of colored paper (i.e. green);
- (3) single-paged printing of question papers;
- (4) double spacing answer areas; and
- (5) students with visual disabilities can choose Braille scripts or use screen readers to answer: for use in screen readers, encrypted “WORD” files with assessment content are delivered to schools by the HKEAA on the days of assessment.

The EDB reaffirms the intent and value of the establishment of TSA after a review in 2016. However, quality education should encourage learners to read more, see more, think more, ask more and reflect on the answers but should never demotivate learning in endless drilling practices. In fact, the Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides admitted that it was important to review the relevant domains of the education system to protect the students from the risk of suicide (Committee on Prevention of Student Suicides, 2017). If the underlying causes of the over-drilling practices are not fully identified and the problem satisfactorily resolved, TSAs for Primary 6 and Secondary 3, like that for Primary 3, should be reviewed for probable revision.

A more thorough revision is always called for the TSA for Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3, as a quality educational management step. While TSA for Primary 3 has been reviewed and substantially “revised,” the community at large still asks for further revision for its needs, uselessness and harm for teachers and students.

On the other hand, TSA for Primary 6 and Secondary 3 should also be refined. Every child has worth and demands the best possible chances of life and there is always a room for improvement in helping students toward the goals of whole-person development and life-long learning.

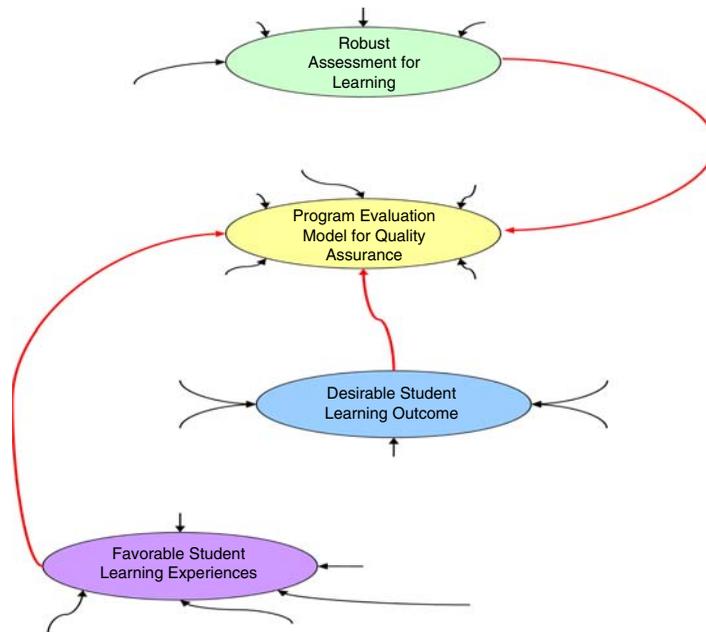
Former Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower Fanny Law said it would be beneficial to test Primary 3 students with the BCA. She commented that the aim of the BCA was not to rank students or schools, but added that participating schools would know from the tests the level of their students to improve their teaching methods. She stated, “I support the Government to let schools try the new method (BCA) and see whether there are any benefits or inefficiencies, then we can review it” (Hui, 2017).

Further research works on assessment of program, SLO and SLE

Having reviewed the TSA and BCA and studied the conflicting views of stakeholders, we call upon the education sector to avoid political interference whilst discussing the TSA and hope that the EDB could support the schools without giving them pressure.

When we wish to assess the quality of a training program or kindred programs offered by various schools, we shall adopt appropriate program evaluation models (Kellaghan and Stufflebeam, 2002; Sou, 2008; Stufflebeam *et al.*, 2000) to assess program effectiveness or institutional effectiveness.

When we wish to measure student learning outcomes (SLO), we need tools for direct measurement of SLO (Brown *et al.*, 1997; Sou, 2008). Likewise, for student learning experiences (SLE), we need tools for the understanding of SLE (Baird, 1976; Berdie, 1971; Chun, 2002; Ouiment *et al.*, 2001; Pace, 1985; Pike, 1995; Pohlman and Beggs, 1974; Turner and Martin, 1984). These three concepts may be regarded as food for thoughts for further research works (Figure 4).



Source: Sou (2011)

Figure 4.
A holistic view on
“assessment for
learning”

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