

CONSOLIDATION OF RURAL EDUCATION IN HONG KONG AND AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

Structural change in the provision of rural education appears to have two causes. It can result from demographic change within the framework of existing policy or from changes in government policy. On such policy change was the consolidation of rural primary education in Hong Kong during the 1980's and 1990's. The policy involved the closure of a number of small rural primary schools and transporting the children to larger consolidated schools. Recently, in Australia, Victorian Government has marked 18 primary schools and 3 secondary schools in rural areas for voluntary closure or would be asked to consider merging.

In this paper, a historical review of policies of two governments and their consequences of consolidation policy are the main concerns. The first section will cover rural education development in Hong Kong followed by a review on the consolidation of rural education in Australia at Wimmera, one of Victorian rural areas. In the final section the consequences of consolidation of rural education in Hong Kong and Australia are discussed.

CONSOLIDATION OF RURAL EDUCATION: THE HONG KONG PERSPECTIVE

Changes in Urban Development and Population Redistribution

After the Second World War, Hong Kong has experienced an unprecedented increase in population. In 1949, the population in rural areas was approximately 270,000 of a total 1,860,000 which accounted for 15 percent of the total Hong Kong population. At that time, many of the residents in rural area were farmers, fishermen and craftsmen. Many of the schools were the product of local voluntary effort. The civil wars in China caused a mass influx of refugees and coupled with high rates of natural increase, the population in Hong Kong rose to about 3 million by 1960 (Ng, 1989). In 1960s, the New Territories was rapidly developed with the growing population and an urban and industrial population was joining the earlier rural and agricultural inhabitants (Report of Education Commission, 1963). After the 1970s, the birth rate in Hong Kong declined progressively. Alongside the decline in fertility rate, there had been a significant pattern of internal rural-urban migration. Against this background, there are repercussions on the development of rural schooling.

Critique of Governmental Policy on Rural Education

In Hong Kong, only five official reports mentioned about the government policy of rural education from 1950 to 1980: (1) The Fisher Report on Government Expenditure on Education in Hong Kong (1951); (2) Report of Education Commission (1963) and Education Policy (1965); (3) The Green and White Papers on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services (1980 and 1981). It is apparent that the Fisher Report, Green and White Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services have only highlighted the poor quality of small rural schools. These documents have not discussed the positive aspects of small rural schools. Despite that there is

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still a need to undertake in-depth research on the quality of rural schooling in Hong Kong, the experience from overseas suggests that some of the accusations may be questionable (e.g., Bray, 1987).

The Fisher Report only raised the less satisfactory issues of rural education but without any further recommendation. In 1965, Government accepted the major recommendation of Education Commission to provide more places for secondary education in rural areas (Hong Kong Government, 1965). Nine years later, the Green and White Papers suggested the following major measures to improve the quality of rural schooling: adoption of Activity Approach, and more visits by the Advisory Inspectorate, building of central primary schools, and conversion into whole-day (unisessional) schools. Our visits to five rural schools and some other studies (e.g., Chu et al., 1994) revealed that the adoption of Activity Approach in these schools has been slow. There may be several reasons for slow adoption: (1) Some rural schools only have upper primary classes which were perceived to be less suitable for using the Activity Approach; (2) The multigrade or combined classes make the implementation of Activity Approach impractical; (3) Some teachers in rural schools may be unreceptive to the worthiness of Activity Approach. Conversation with the staff of rural schools showed that there seemed to be no additional visits by the Advisory Inspectorate. The last measure of complementing whole-day schooling appears to be more successful. In 1996, 65 out of 104 rural schools are whole-day schools (Ta Kung Pao, 1 February, 1996). The results, however, revealed that the government has not fully achieved the proposals as stated in the 1980 Green and 1981 White Papers.

Consolidation Rural Schools and Its Progress

Following the publication of the White Paper, there is a general trend of closure of rural schools with less than six operating classes. Table 1 shows the approximate number of rural schools from 1988 to 1996.

Table 1: Number of rural schools in Hong Kong, 1988-1996

Year	Number of closed schools	Approximate number of rural schools*
1988	6	165
1989	13	152
1990	9	143
1991	4	139
1992	4	135
1993	6	129
1994	13	116
1995	5	111
1996	7	104

* The figures are extrapolated from different sources: e.g., Sing Tao Daily, 16 November, 1992; Ta Kung Pao, 11 October, 1993.

One official explained that there were generally four types of rural schools in Hong Kong: (1) Those previously mentioned schools with declining enrolment; (2) rural schools in remote areas; (3) rural schools in vicinity to public housing estates in new towns; and (4) 'central' primary schools (Ta Kung Pao, 11 October, 1993). Except for the first type of rural schools with declining enrolment, the government realises the existent value of the second type schools which serve children living in remote areas, the third type schools which can help relieve the demands for school places in new town development as well as the fourth type schools which are situated in more centrally located areas and replace some nearby rural schools.

Another government official claimed that the government had no deliberate plans to close or eliminate rural schools. Rather, the Education Department would encourage the schools to stop recruiting pupils when the following situations occur: (1) No or only a small number of primary one pupils (e.g., four to eight) were admitted in the last two years; and (2) There were no neighbouring primary schools (Sing Tao Daily, 16 November, 1992). In general, the rural school policy of "natural elimination through selection" is adopted (Sing Tao Daily, 22 June, 1990).

The government did, however, make efforts at consolidation of rural education by establishing 'central' primary schools. These schools are different from the 'central' or 'straight-through' schools in Australia where primary and secondary sections are combined (Bray, 1987). At present, there are four 'central' primary schools in Hong Kong. Three of these primary schools run whole-day sessions and have twelve rooms whilst the other one is a bi-sessional school (a.m. & p.m. sessions) with twenty-four rooms.

Problems of Developing 'Central' Primary Schools

Whilst the establishment of 'central' primary schools allows the consolidation of resources, there are some problems for developing these primary schools. First, many supervisors or headmasters from rural schools are themselves original village inhabitants. Because of the problem of 'face' and years of committed effort, they do not want their schools to be closed and replaced by a 'central' school. Second, the establishment of a 'central' primary school usually involves the consolidation of a few (five to eight) schools. However, it arises the problem of who will be the supervisor and the headmaster of the 'central' primary school. As a headmaster remarked,

Where will the central primary school be located? Why is it not near my village but adjacent to your village? Why is he going to be the supervisor (of the central primary school) . . . If the central primary school employs all the teachers from the rural schools, it will be fine. If not, there will be dissatisfaction. Why do the staff from my school have to be cut? (Personal interview by one of the authors.)

In addition, it creates the oversupply problem of headmasters and senior teachers from the original rural schools. Even though the Education Department will arrange new appointments in other schools, these teachers might not be offered the same post of headmaster or senior teacher as in the previous school. This will be likely to arouse feelings of discontent and disgrace amongst these rural teachers.

Problems of Survival of Existing Small Rural Schools

At present, school admission of primary one pupils is managed and controlled by the Education Department. Despite schools in remote areas have 65% discretionary places quota, the lack of parental preference for rural schools causes severe problems of pupil intake and in turn problem of survival for these schools. As a teacher remarked,

The building of the school premise was sponsored by the original village inhabitants. The outer appearance is quite good. In reality, the structure of the school building, particularly the lavatory, is shabby. Some primary one pupils are sent to this school but they are unwilling to be admitted. They prefer to choose larger schools. It is because the school premise is not eye-catching. (Personal interview by one of the authors.)

In recent years, the major sources of pupils in rural schools are new immigrants from mainland China who live in rural areas because of lower cost of living and accessibility to work, children

of original village inhabitants, pupils who have academic and behavioural problems and are expelled from other schools, children who are admitted on the basis of referral by the Social Welfare Department and those who are mentally handicapped (Chan et al., 1995; fieldnotes). Seemingly, the rural schools become a 'refuge' for disadvantaged children. Some education professionals even suggest that rural schools can be developed into special schools (e.g., Ta Kung Pao, 11 October, 1993). If such a trend follows, the rural schools would become, in the eyes of parents and village inhabitants, substandard and inferior schools. With no further support from the government, the only fate of these rural schools will die silently.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT OR RURAL EDUCATION

The Consolidation of Primary Education in Rural Areas of Victoria

In Australia, Nunn (1981, p. 8) pointed out that the Victorian consolidation policy of primary education was implemented in 40s and 50s whilst consolidation of senior secondary school was adopted in the 1990's. A number of strategies have been employed with a view to providing a curriculum more responsive to the needs of rural children, some of them include introduction of enrichment activities, co-operative learning and peer tutoring strategies, as well as increased use of local community resources (Matthews, et al., 1986).

In Victoria, the agricultural base of rural areas had an important influence on the provision of education. With further development of capital intensive farming methods, farm consolidation, the growth of urbanisation, improved transport and the decline in the birth rate since the early twentieth century, the rural depopulation has continued and this caused the number of small rural state primary schools to continue to decline as shown in table 2 (Nunn, 1991, section 1.6).

Table 2: Number of State Primary Schools in the Wimmera, Victoria
1940-1985

Years	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985
No. of Primary Schools	251	181	118	90	68	64

In 1985, fourteen percent of the children attended 41 of those schools. Conversely, 86% of the school children attended 23 of the schools. These figures show that the small rural school is still important in the Wimmera.

Commonwealth Government's Strategy for Rural Education

In 1989, the Federal Government expressed the major concern on the rural education and training in the future. The report, *A Fair Go* (1989), stated the need to address the broad issues in rural education at different levels. The basis of the Government's approach to rural education and training is in two-fold:

- to ensure that broad-based education and training initiatives are appropriate and effective in non-metropolitan areas; and
- to target specific initiative directly at particular problems faced by rural Australians.

More specifically, the Federal Government's objectives in rural education and training are to:

- 1) Increase non-metropolitan school retention rates to year 12 in line with national objectives;

- 2) Increase the transfer rates of students from school to post high school education to levels comparable to those in metropolitan areas so that more non-metropolitan students transfer to TAFE and higher education;
- 3) Increase overall participation in education and training so that the proportion of the non-metropolitan workforce with qualifications after high school approaches the national average.

Recent Development of Consolidation of Schools in Victoria

Recently, the Victorian State Government has marked 113 schools for voluntary closure, 86 primary schools with fewer than 175 students and 18 secondary schools with fewer than 400 would be asked to consider merging. The State Government will offer additional financial and material incentives for parents and schools undertaking merging. On the other hand, it announced that A\$2 million will be saved under this merging action (Age, 24 October, 1996; Herald Sun, 31 October, 1996 and 2 November, 1996). But some of the schools and their rural communities have action of fighting to survive despite encouragement from the State Government to merge. One school principal said that his school was a community within a community and provided a close-knit atmosphere that larger schools could not offer. At the late of 1996, community opposition to school mergers and closures was stepped up, with two Victoria councils pledging their support to help save 13 threatened schools within their boundaries (Age, 26 October, 1996; 7 November, 1996; Oakleigh Monash Times, 30 October 1996).

DISCUSSION OF THE MAJOR CONSEQUENCES AND CONCLUSION

The Economic Consequences

The economics of consolidation of rural education has been given attention in the process of restructuring of primary and secondary education. For example, the recent restructuring of Victorian primary and secondary schools was considered more cost-saving and conserved resources, both staff and facilities. But contrary to this opinion, an investigation has shown that consolidation of rural primary and senior secondary education in the Wimmera was more costly than the educational provisions replaced. Two major factors in the increased cost of primary education consolidation were transport and capital costs (Nunn, 1991, p. 325). Whilst there is no studies on the cost-benefit analysis of rural school consolidation in Hong Kong, there are concerns that the development of central primary schools is often hindered by its heavy cost compared with ordinary schools. It is because these central schools are whole-day (unisessional) schools and transport subsidies are provided to pupils for bussing (Ta Kung Pao, 11 October, 1993; Bray, 1990). Given continuing pressures on education budgets, both Governments may have to review the means by which education is offered in rural areas either to effect cost savings or to ensure the maximum value is obtained from money spent.

The Educational Consequences

Consolidation of primary and secondary education increased the curriculum range for the senior primary and secondary students. In Australia, the consolidated school extended and enriched the basic curriculum-numeracy and literacy skills, emphasising agriculture and home-keeping skills. Other areas such as science, mathematics, commerce, arts, technology, languages and humanities are also included. In the primary consolidated rural schools, there were teachers with more experience and specialist qualifications than their counterparts (Nunn, 19971, p. 326-328). In the case of Hong Kong, the curriculum for rural school seems to be as the same as the schools in urban areas. It is suggested that curricula for rural schools may be adopted using broad system-wide guidelines, complemented by local adaptation. The guidelines should reflect societal values and the knowledge necessary to allow students' progression to higher education or

entry to the workforce. They would be supplemented, expanded and adapted through procedures that ensure the representation of local interests.

Consequences for the Communities

Consolidation of primary and secondary education enabled more children of a similar age to meet from a wider geographical area. This would provide opportunities for children to interact in activities which assist social development. It is believed that the consolidation provided social advantages for the rural primary children and a more suitable social environment for senior secondary students which would prepare them better for tertiary education or the workforce. In the case of Hong Kong, closure of rural schools may lead to the loss of cultural centres that act as communities within rural communities.

Concluding Remarks

From the above study, it is noted that the incentives offered by government have a positive influence on the restructure. The careful selection of the centre of the consolidation and the participation of local communities' decision-making in regard to the nature and form of services provided by rural schools were other factors to influence the acceptance and introduction of consolidation policy.

There have been calls for the closure of small rural schools both in Hong Kong and Victoria, Australia. Whilst the official documents allow us to understand what the government does not value about the education which small rural schools can offer, the assertions that are made may be incomprehensive and grounded in relatively little substantive evidence. In addition, there has been relatively little research on rural education compared with studies focusing on urban education. We hope that this paper can arouse the attention of our professional colleagues towards the issue of neglected and dwindling rural schooling in modern society.

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