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# **Leaders and contexts: comparing English and Hong Kong perceptions of educational challenges.**

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**Abstract .**

This article investigates the perceptions of English headteachers and Hong Kong principals about the kinds of pressures which affected the way they did their job. 'Portraits' of individuals derived from semi-structured interviews were examined to answer questions about the effects of legislation over the last two decades; the inspection procedures used by government ; the effects of marketisation', parental choice, and competition; and whether problems time and energy were felt by these individuals. In addition, they were encouraged to identify pressures unique to them and their school context. The findings suggested that : (1) English headteachers were more critical of and embattled by their legislative context than their Hong Kong counterparts; (2) Hong Kong inspectorial processes were viewed as much more helpful and benign than the English processes, though both were seen as requiring an excessive investment of time and energy; (3) in both contexts, where pupil numbers were declining, market issues were much more prominent, and where numbers were stable or rising, they had much less saliency; (4) both sets of interviewees described a worrying accumulation of pressure through the sheer quantity of material with which they had to deal; (5) individual personality and local context were crucial for understanding how issues were mediated.

## **Leaders and contexts: comparing English and Hong Kong perceptions of educational challenges.**

### **Introduction**

Whilst a number of writers have suggested (e.g Gibton(2004), Bottery (2004)) that England has been central in developing centralizing educational legislation over the last two decades, they also note that economic and political global factors have been influential in creating a much greater homogeneity of policy making, and therefore in creating greater borrowing of educational practice. This study contributes to this debate by comparing the similarities and the differences in the perceptions of English and Hong Kong headteachers to such issues. Perceptions are important: if an individual believes that the demands of a job are excessive, this in itself can affect decision-making procedures, relationships with other people, and the likelihood of school success. This research then provides information on individuals' perceptions of a critical role in schools, in two culturally different educational systems at an important time in both their developments .

This research also sheds light on another issue, raised in papers by Day et al.(2000), Moore et al. (2002), and Gold et al. (2003), which has suggested that headteachers in England still manage to maintain personal visions and codes of ethics in their day-to-day work. These studies, however, tended to select headteachers already viewed by themselves or others as doing a 'good' job, and it is therefore possible that less high-profile headteachers might be more pessimistic about their efficacy in coping with such centralizing and controlling educational legislation. In addition, an international literature suggesting a profound distrust of professionals by policy

makers across much of the western world(Hargreaves, 2003, Levin, 2003, Gronn), might also contribute, as Wright(2001) has suggested, to such individuals feeling so threatened and directed, that they engage in a much less critical implementation of policy than these more optimistic studies suggest

To investigate these issues, twelve English primary headteachers and twelve Hong Kong primary principals were asked questions about significant areas of pressure.

These areas were initially identified as:

- the effects of legislation over the last two decades;
- the inspection procedures used by government ;
- the effects of marketisation', parental choice, and competition;
- any problems with time and energy encountered by these individuals in dealing with these issues.

In addition, because pilot interviews suggested that personal relationships can be quite as problematic for the leadership and management of a school, a number of other questions were asked which allowed considerable flexibility in their identification.

### **Methodology.**

The questions were piloted in England with English academics and headteachers, and with Cantonese academics and principals to ensure their suitability in Hong Kong.

The feedback indicated that the same kinds of questions were seen as significant in both countries, and so with only minor adjustments, the same format was then adopted for both.

Both samples contained

- the experienced and inexperienced;
- those new and those with a long history at their school;
- males and females;
- individuals in schools in both 'comfortable' and 'difficult' situations;
- denominational and non-denominational schools;

and

- balances which reflected the different ways schools are organized in England and Hong Kong, for whilst there is a predominance of LEA primary schools in England, in Hong Kong there is a preponderance of schools run by sponsoring bodies rather than the government (the 'Education Management Board' or simply EMB).

The questions, as well a description of research purposes, were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, normally by email. In Hong Kong, these documents were sent in English and Cantonese. Interviews of between one and two hours were then conducted. In England, this interview was performed by the English researcher alone. In Hong Kong, in all but one case, the English interviewer led the interview in English, but was accompanied by his Cantonese colleagues, so that if any principals found difficulty in expressing themselves in English, they were encouraged to use Cantonese. Both tapes and transcriptions indicate that the interviews were normally enjoyable affairs between two, three or four people. Only one Hong Kong principal wished to be interviewed completely in Cantonese, and this was performed as requested.

All interviews were transcribed, and then these transcriptions were re-checked for accuracy. From these transcripts, 'portraits' of about five thousand words each were then written, each describing how that individual dealt with the issues described above. These portraits were generated by a careful reading of the transcripts, and then an initial choosing of five or six distinguishing characteristics for each individual. As each of these characteristics was developed by a detailed reference to the transcript, an iterative process occurred, whereby adjustments were made to the depiction of these characteristics, some being combined into one section, and others being expanded into two or more. There was then a strong artistic element to the creation of these portraits, as indeed there needed to be. However, the process did not stop there, for the portraits and the interview transcripts were then scrutinised by a different member of the academic team to ensure that the portrait did not claim more than was evident from the transcript. After this, both the transcript and portrait were then sent to the interviewee involved, for their approval or amendment. Whilst all interviewees were invited to participate in a second interview, in almost all cases they did not think this necessary, and only minor points of detail were changed.

## **Results**

### **The effects of legislation.**

Despite the ability and desire by some individuals to challenge aspects of the national legislative architecture within which they worked, all accepted their specific legislative context as a general framework within which they positioned themselves, their practice, and their school. None enunciated radical educational visions, nor a desire to move towards these. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that these individuals had grown up, trained, and practiced within a particular evolving body of

educational legislation, and so, whilst criticising aspects of this, they accepted it as the educational reality within which they practiced.

There were however distinct perceptions of differences between the two architectures, particularly to questions about legislation and inspection, even if there was also considerable variation in the perceptions of individuals within these two cohorts. This section will therefore report on the different national responses, with illustrations of individual variation in response.

(i) English Responses.

Perhaps the most prominent difference was the more critical approach to legislation of the English headteachers, with the fundamental difference relating to their perceptions of their relationships with their government and its policies. The strongest example of such an adversarial approach was probably that of Michael K., an English headteacher who some years previously had suspended the National Curriculum at his school. Michael said that *if you have something that is successful, that you have nurtured, that you have seen grow and blossom, and it brings the results, I refuse just because somebody says that this is the latest idea...to be moved on that. If somebody can do it better, they can come in and show me how they can do it better, and then I might think about it...but I am not going to implement it [simply] because somebody says this is the latest thing.*

Michael was not alone in this view. Joanne F. had similarly challenged legislation by taking a third of her year 6 children out of National Curriculum provision because *they just could not access the curriculum*. She, like Michael, was aware, however, that such school initiatives needed to be backed up by evidence: *if you can prove that*



*what you're doing is going to make [the results] better, that's fine. So we monitored it carefully and the maths ages of all those children went up significantly by the end of the year.*

Penny R. was similarly resolute: *I would not be defeated by someone who told me I could not do something...it would make me more determined to actually do it.* She was very concerned at *how desperately boring [the curriculum] had become for children.* However, she believed that any alterations at the school needed to be backed up by *all kinds of systems and procedures that make sure it works, and lots of record keeping systems, because ... that will be my evidence to Ofsted* (the national inspection body).

Whilst such embattlement was displayed by the most confident of the English headteachers interviewed, it was even more marked in other interviews – normally by those with the least experience in the job. Harry C., for instance, had only one year's experience - *everything's been a first* – and was working in a school with very low socio-economic status and exam results to match. In addition, his school was in a Local Education Authority which had been heavily criticized for its own performance. Harry was therefore receiving intense pressure from it to raise his standards, in order partly to raise their own, so much so that at times he said that he felt he was reduced to *raising standards by paperwork*, rather than being able to work on more proactive – and for him, more important - strategies of developing relationships with the parents.

Similar frustrations were expressed by James R., also newly appointed to a school in a poor area of a city with a declining population. He felt that despite suggestions of

local financial autonomy, for him this was mostly an illusion; his budget was so tight that there was little room for movement: *you've got the freedom of your budget on the one hand, but on the other hand, you haven't...* . As far as James was concerned, *either they want locally managed schools, or they don't, and at the moment, they want locally managed schools, managed in their own way.* He also expressed similar feelings of powerlessness to much current legislation: *to be honest you just nod and say 'well we're going to have to make the best of it'*. Yet like Harry, he felt that despite his lack of years in the job he had the local knowledge to address the school's real problems, but was not able to use that expertise.

(ii) Hong Kong responses.

The attitude of the Hong Kong principals was rather different. Most were generally favourably disposed to current educational reforms, and few had complaints about their direction, and this is despite the fact that there exists a critical academic literature about educational policy changes in Hong Kong (e.g. Tse (2002), Cho (2005)) which suggests that the kind of legislative mechanisms so prevalent and so criticized in England – those, for instance, to do with privatization, managerialism, competition, standardization, and surveillance – are quite as problematic there. Such criticisms however were seldom vocalized. Eva L. for instance simply gave a firm *yes* when asked whether she felt that the reforms were heading in the right direction; and she was equally firm, but this time in the negative, when asked whether she had ever contemplated any violation of them. Susan H. also said that she *could not think of any examples* where she had been in conflict with it. *It is very difficult for me to find...I agree with the guidelines and also the ordinances....* This was largely because *usually I agree with the rationale behind the policies.* In like manner, Peter L. said that the EMB's *requirements and guidelines...[were]not too many*, and they were also

rather *reasonable ones, and therefore I seldom have problems in this respect.*

Moreover, he felt that even if *your satisfaction differs for each guideline, these were not cast too rigidly, for actually you can still have some flexibility in implementing these guidelines.*

This flexibility was also mentioned by Emily W., who said that *you don't need to listen to all of the things they say: you need to distinguish what is right and which is wrong...no matter what they want you to do, you still can find some ways to deal with them, right?* However, by and large, Emily was still not critical of educational reform trends. Finally, Sandra W. was very clear that *I do not think that so far I have come across an instance where I have had to make a decision which is conflicting with the educational ordinances.* Interestingly, Sandra did qualify this by saying that *I have not been in this job for too long*, but it seems likely that further experience would not have changed her mind, for had this question been asked in England, it seems likely that a new principal would have drawn upon the wider educational context to talk about the pressures from Ofsted, finance, Pandas, etc. – problems which form the architecture of many English teachers' consciousness. A second reason is that some of this research indicates that the inexperience of some English headteachers is precisely what makes it difficult for them to deal with these pressures. Sandra's relative inexperience, had it been in England, would probably have led to a very different answer.

The Hong Kong principals, then, felt reasonably well in tune with the direction of educational reforms, and showed much less inclination to critique or challenge what was occurring. There was then a general sense by them of being trusted. The English headteachers, in contrast, generally seemed to feel more distrusted, and confronted by

legislation which expressed that distrust. Such different perceptions of governmental attitudes towards them and their profession also affected the way in which evidence for practice was seen. Whilst the English headteachers tended to describe 'evidence' as a form of defence, the Hong Kong principals interviewed tended to see it as more a confirmation of the success or failure of a particular approach, which was then shared with interested outsiders. There were, then, some distinct differences between two cohorts with respect to their attitudes to the legislative context within which they worked.

### **The effects of inspection procedures used by government.**

#### (i) English responses.

The critical and embattled attitude of English headteachers to legislation was strongly reflected by their feelings about Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, created in 1992 to inspect schools, and whilst this process now incorporates schools more in self-evaluation, there is good evidence (e.g. McBeath(2006) that the concern, and in some cases fear, of Ofsted lingers. This is not to say that these headteachers did not agree with the concept of a body such Ofsted. David G., for instance, believed that a body like it was needed to achieve *a sort of quality assurance right across the nation...and of seeing what works well in school...of being able to disseminate good practice.* Yet he felt that Ofsted had adopted the wrong approach from the start: *it became a threat when it didn't have to be a threat...* Harry C. agreed: *people feel that careers are made or broken on the strength of a group of people for a few days in your school looking round...*

It is also not to say that one or two of the interviewees did not feel in control of this situation. Michael K., for instance, said that *when you've been through it once or*

*twice, it certainly takes away that sense of fear and suspense.* But his strategy went further than that, to the extent of himself *having been an Ofsted inspector for about eight years* – and how, *when it comes to an Ofsted inspection, whilst I don't drop it [the fact that he was an inspector himself] into the conversation too early...* he clearly thought that letting them know that he knew what they were about, warned them against trying to take any liberties with the process.

Nevertheless, many of the English headteachers interviewed felt that they were in a situation made dangerous by the punitive nature of Ofsted, and its demands were therefore never far from their thoughts. Penny R, for instance, said that *whatever we are discussing, it's always got the Ofsted element, it's always there... 'we can show this to Ofsted' always comes up, no matter what you're doing.* Evidence which supported practice, then, was once again largely for defence.

The danger of such a defensive attitude is, as Lauder et al.(1998) argue, that people become so used to control and direction that a 'trained incapacity to think openly and critically' (p.51) is created. There was some evidence from the research to support such a concern. Penny R, for example, was concerned that her [younger] teachers were reluctant to adopt more creative approaches to teaching, for whilst she said that she personally *would not be intimidated by [Ofste]*, she thought that *it is very scary stuff for my young staff because they've grown up in this culture....* Building a more creative school might then be essential for good learning, yet she also believed that it still meant keeping a wary eye on Ofsted, and the other on a staff who *don't want their subject to be the one that goes down, so to speak....*

This kind of concern was developed by Alison L., who argued that *if you know that is*

*what you are being judged against, you work towards it.* There was a real temptation, she felt, *to stick to the tried and tested formula...* which was particularly true *in year 6* (where the published testing occurred), and so *there is a big reluctance to alter anything at the top [of the school], unless it is dramatically poor.* The temptation was then to *use other children who are not going to be publicly acclaimed just yet, as guinea pigs...* The overall result then seemed to be that experimentation was depressed in such a climate, both for high attaining and struggling schools. As Alison said: *I think a high attaining school would have felt that [an innovation] was a risk because they had something to lose...if your standards are pretty good...then you are reluctant to really try something else in case they do fail.* In a struggling school, the situation was likely to be even worse. In Harry C.'s school, for instance, whilst he felt the critical question for his school was *what is it that would bring parents into school?* he still felt that whilst *I'm not here to satisfy some man with a clipboard...* his current reality was that *that drives me more than the needs of the community.*

This research then suggests that whilst some English headteachers had the courage to embrace new approaches, all were aware of the dangers of doing so, and not all felt they could engage with them. Even if they did, they all knew that any opposition, deviation, or experimentation needed to be backed by evidence and support. Even so, simple planning ability does not adequately explain why some did and some didn't go down such roads: it was also a matter of personality and courage. Jill S., for instance, said that any innovation *might take two or three years to see the benefit of doing something differently,* and results might even dip; yet she also felt that as a professional with a commitment to children, *you've got to be brave.* This ability to do something different then seemed to be driven by a number of factors. One was possessing complementary personal values; a second was being in the job long

enough to have collected the evidence to defend one's practice. A final factor was having the personal courage to dare such things. The likelihood of opposition, mediation, or experimentation - or their absence - was then not easily predictable, for the factors generating such actions were complex, and were personality and context-dependent.

(ii) Hong Kong responses.

The situation with the Hong Kong principals generally paralleled their approach to legislation, though there was considerable variation in the reasons for their views. Eva L. felt there were two reasons why inspection procedures were manageable. One was that they were not too frequent: *the EMB seldom inspects schools*; the other was that *they usually come to school because our schools are doing some good practices, not the bad ones...they have good intentions, not pick your faults*. Like Eva, Susan H. said that *I know the ESR [external school review] is a friend to me*. She saw external inspection as a good way of helping self-examination, for it *is good to let us know what we are going to do*. She also felt that it was *a good means for the school to do something after [listening to] their expertise and ideas*...Now Eva and Susan were principals of sponsored schools; Julia H., by contrast, was the principal of a government school, and felt that this gave her a distinct advantage because it meant that *we need to follow all the instructions and we do this routinely*. In other words, because her school followed the detailed guidelines so closely, inspections simply examined what they were doing anyway. This did not mean, however, that Julia only did what was ordered; there were things, she said, which were vital which could not be inspected in some simplistic way: *teachers' development is not something established because of inspection*.

Other principals were generally positive, but with notes of caution. Phillip H. said that *I don't fear the ESR because I don't think they are our enemies*. He thought that *if inspectors were to come like a friend, and had the background of a very experienced teacher or educator...the general picture is OK*. However, he also believed that if a school was struggling, the attitude would not be so relaxed: *then I don't think they would be our friends: they would be just like auditors*. John L. expressed a similar caution, but for rather different reasons. Whilst saying that *I am not worried about external inspection because I can justify what we did...* he had a wider concern than this. Working to keep a school open in an area of a dramatically declining population, he was fully aware that *if your school does not have a good report from the EMB, that may mean that parents do not like your school*; and the implications of such bad publicity for a school poised on the edge of closure were too dire to contemplate.

Finally, two principals, Sandra W. and Mary N. Mary were fairly relaxed about the activities of the EMB, including inspection, and felt that they *very seldom dictate the things that you have to do*. Yet she also felt that any inspection would add pressure to what she regarded as an already over-burdened school. So whilst with respect to the government reforms, she felt that *all things are good*, she also felt that *all the things put together is not good*. Sandra developed this point when she said that an external inspection *does put a kind of pressure on the school...* and she did know of a number of schools that *did a mock inspection before the real thing happens*. As she talked, some other issues reminiscent of English concerns were mentioned: things like the paperwork: *...there are lots of paperwork that the school will need to prepare*; things like the uncertainty attached to the process: *...because they are not telling you how much that you need to prepare, so actually you are using a lot of resources doing that*; things like complaints from teachers that this was taking them away from their 'real'



*job: a lot of teachers I think they wanted to just do the operational work; and finally, the need to provide proof, to have evidence for what you are doing...they have to keep a record, because this is evidence...*

The similarities and differences between the English and Hong Kong contexts with respect to inspection then are interesting. There is a fairly clear divide between them on their perceptions of their respective inspectoral bodies: in Hong Kong, they were generally regarded at best as friends, at worst as neutral observers; in England, on the other hand, at best they were viewed as an ever-present threat, at worst as the enemy. There are, however, similarities, the strongest being the perception of an excessive investment of time and energy that needed to be put into the process. This question of time and energy is one which will be returned to later in the paper as having a wider, and more critical importance.

### **The effects of marketisation, parental choice and competition;**

Both sets of interviewees showed a keen awareness of these issues, but varied considerably in the importance attached to them with respect to their own school. Mary and John in Hong Kong, and James and Jill in England all took these very seriously because of declining numbers. For Mary, such diminishing numbers meant that *parents will compare this school, this school, and this school...and would ask why my daughter and my son study in your school, why can't I find this [in your school] but I can find it in this school.* This led, she felt, to a need to reply to such questions, and to 'sell' the school and publicize its achievements, and when Mary was asked how she felt about such activity, she said that these were things a school should not be involved in, but were now things which *I simply have [to do].* John L., in

Hong Kong, whilst also principal of a school facing closure due to declining pupil numbers, did not appear to be as conflicted in having to address such issues. He simply said that *I do my best to keep my school open, and I will try anything to do that, provided it is in the interest of the students...*and this included a revamped curriculum, the purchase of musical instruments, and a variety of other initiatives in order to bring the school to prospective parents' attention. This involved, he told us, working extraordinary hours at his school in the attempt to keep it open; yet he was so involved in this, that he seldom felt a sense of exhaustion. In England, James R.'s school was losing children, largely, he believed, because *houses no longer belong to first-time buyers and owner occupiers...there's a much bigger turnover of people, and many of them don't have children, so there are only single people left,*...and he was losing children in an area of a city that overall had a declining population. This led to feelings of exasperation: *it's not that we have done anything in particular that has upset people...it's just that the area is drifting away.* In this situation, he felt himself being pressured into adopting things with which he did not particularly agree, such as 'breakfast clubs', but which he knew that other schools in his area were adopting, and thus being torn between wanting *to run your school in the right way...and yet on the other hand, you've got to try and sustain your numbers...* Finally, Jill, being headteacher of a English denominational school, did not have the benefit of a catchment area – that geographically bounded area within which children were expected to go to a designated school. The result was that *when anybody rings up the LEA, and says 'can you tell me a catchment school', we're never mentioned.* Because of this, *marketing for us is big...*and Jill had even leafletted households in the local area, *but I got told off for that by the other Heads because they said it's our catchment, and I can see that they see us as poaching...it's just that if we didn't get them from somebody's catchment, we wouldn't have any children at all...*

Others were aware of such issues, but for different reasons. For Penny R., in England, her problem she felt was not declining numbers per se, but *with lack of confidence in our feeder secondary school...So I lose children from top of year 2, and then into key stage 2*. The critical issue then was that it was *the secondary school that they are looking at, not the practice of the primary...* and whilst she believed that she had lost some parents because of her firm implementation of some policies, particularly those to do with behaviour, her view still was *they love our calm beautiful school, and I have to say to them: you cant have the one without the other*. Finally, Clio C. principal of a private school in Hong Kong, was seeing her numbers constrict, in part because of declining numbers across the city, in part because of parents finding it difficult to find private school fees, and in part because of the perceived attractiveness of the new part government-funded 'DSS' schools. This squeeze on numbers led to a number of issues. One was that there was a greater need to accept children on the basis of ability to pay, rather than because of an aptitude for the preferred teaching method at the school...*Now we not have such luxury to choose...* Yet she firmly believed that *quality education should not be a special category for those who can afford or cannot afford. But without the finance, we cannot do the quality education*. Moreover, whilst she felt that the best form of advertising for the school was word of mouth personal recommendation, she was now having to visit more commercial ways of attracting students – even though she felt that *education is not something that you packaged*.

There were also a couple of individuals who one might have expected to express more concern, but were currently steered by even more potent forces. We have already seen how Harry C., an English headteacher appointed to a school with very low socio-economic status, was receiving intense pressure from the LEA to raise

published results, rather than the more critical issue, as he saw it, of developing relationship between home and school, and thereby preventing a decline in numbers. In somewhat similar vein, Emily W. was principal of a 'PM' or afternoon school in Hong Kong, which existed on the same site as one running in the morning. Both schools suffered from declining numbers, and yet little of her attention seemed focused on this. Thus, whilst there was supposed to be relative independence between the two schools, the reality was that the 'AM' principal was the 'senior partner' in this arrangement, and Emily, the new principal (*a greenhorn*), felt undermined at every turn by the well-established AM principal, which she felt prevented her from developing much-needed innovations, which might have helped to halt the decline.

For both Harry and Emily, then, market issues were being drowned out by even stronger forces. In like manner, Joseph L. and Susan H., both Hong Kong Principals, did not regard market issues as a major consideration at present, though in both cases it seemed that this was because they were in the relative calm of the eye of a hurricane, rather than because it wasn't near them. Thus, Joseph was only an interim principal, before a merger, forced by declining numbers, happened in the near future. He was clear, however, that market pressures would be a problem for the newly merged school: *I think for the [new] school, we still have to face it, we have to publicise our new school with a lot of effort.* Susan H. was also in an area of declining student population, but a series of fortuitous events had occurred quite recently to reduce these pressures, perhaps the most crucial being that six schools in the area were going to be closed, and whilst that was *very cruel* for the staff and the children at these institutions, it meant that her school would be a major beneficiary of the redistributed numbers. So whilst neither principal saw market issues as a concern for the immediate future, it seemed clear they would return to being a serious issue in the future.

Yet if the market was a critical area for some, for many others it clearly was not, and the overriding factor here seemed to be that the schools had stable or increasing populations. In Hong Kong, Sandra, Julia, Phillip, and Eva were principals of schools in precisely this situation. Sandra, for instance, recognised that *the market consequences now have become a lot of the drive of most schools in Hong Kong, and this was largely because they have to survive.* However because of a variety of factors – the larger number of applicants at the school than places, the high reputation of the school, good academic results, and her belief in her and her staff’s ability – she did not see this as a problem. Phillip, similarly had high application rates for places, good academic results and with *many newspapers, radio and media...always report our school,* he was not very concerned about market pressures. Moreover, whilst he did believe in publicity, *the most important thing is that when you work, you must do very well, and then everyone knows your school is a good school...it’s the results more than anything else...*

Another Hong Kong principal, Julia H., despite being aware that *nowadays for many school, the major problem has got to be the market,* went on to say that *this is not a problem for my school,* as she had many more applicants than places. Nevertheless, she felt that it was *crucial to grasp the rhythm of the market,* and that meant *you have got to have a high transparency to let [parents] know what the children have learnt from the school, what the school has provided fro their children,* and her reason for this was very simple: *no students, no school.* Finally, Eva also believed that *maybe due to the recent keen competition among schools, maybe the market is quite important,* but with stable numbers this was not for her a major issue, though its unpredictability was something that made it potentially more of a problem than it

might have been.

On the English side, Michael K. didn't see market issues as a problem. This was firstly because of the partnership with other local schools which he had helped engineer: *we have tried very hard not to play at pulling the children from each others' schools*. The other reason was simply because *we have had increasing roles continually...and while we remain buoyant with numbers*, market issues would not be a cause of concern. Julian B. was in a similar position: when he arrived at the school, it had approximately 570 children, and now there were nearly 700. Other English headteachers were similarly insulated by steady or rising numbers, though in the case of Angela, there seemed the additional reason of her heavy faith commitment and the school's mission *which has a spiritual as well as a temporal emphasis*.

Both Frances G. and Tim L. understood the nature of the market, though both had school populations which were relatively stable, and the term 'market' tended to take a backseat. Frances therefore said that whilst *we have to be realistic and maintain numbers, purely for the fact that children have a price tag on them...* yet she went on to say that *I don't believe it is a major part of my thinking because I am driven by the quality of education that I provide*. Tim was perhaps even less committed to the concept: *I've never thought it being part of a marketplace...I feel that I need to remain aware of what the community is about and that's the part that drives me*.

In summary then, it can be said that where schools had declining numbers, most of those interviewed were keenly aware and reactive (or even proactive) to market issues; and many of those who did not see this as a particular problem still realized the potential significance of this issue, even if their relatively stable positions tended to

facilitate the achievement of their educational visions more than it did their more pressurized colleagues.

### **Time and energy.**

One of the key themes that came out of these interviews was the degree to which personality and context made generalization difficult, and this is particularly so with respect to issues of time and energy. To take two examples: Phillip H., a very experienced Hong Kong principal in his mid-fifties, described a very demanding job, which included being chair of a major educational organization, and said he only got five hours sleep a night, though he found this quite sufficient. He also related how he had recently trained for and run in a marathon, almost as a mental discipline to ensure that when he set himself something to do, he made sure he finished it. Tim L. on the other hand, was an English headteacher nearing the end of his career, but he was finding that not only was the pressure that the many varied roles the head of a small school brought to the job very demanding, but increasingly he said that he lacked the energy to do jobs to the degree which had once been possible. So whilst it is important to be aware of the societal context, and particularly the degree to which legislation and inspections contribute to problems of time and energy, it is also very important to appreciate how individuals coped differentially with much the same pressures.

Thus there was considerable variation in the success with which English individuals coped with the pressures they were experiencing. Tim L. and Frances G., for instance, were both heads of small schools, and both mentioned this as a source of stress. Pat said that *we haven't even got time to think about the fact that we haven't got time*. Yet, this had an upside as well: *I really feel that just trying to do all those jobs... I've*

*probably got a finger on the pulse with things, and believed that by and large her role was manageable. Tim L. said that I can't complain about the lack of time because I've actually made my own time schedule; nevertheless, as we have seen, he felt that I've got much less energy now, physically, I have less energy in terms of being able to coordinate mind and body, and admitted that I need somebody who could actually be my legs. Michael K., the head of a large school was very grateful he was no longer head of a small school as I do not know how I would cope as head of that school now. Nevertheless, this did not mean he was not busy – I think that any head that says that they have time on their hands is lying: we are all under immense pressure. However, it did seem that he was a good time manager, added to which he had learnt slowly over time to delegate. Others seemed to have similar demands, but also seemed to be coping pretty well: David G. said that there are huge demands made upon schools nowadays, and that you had to use your judgment in picking out what you're to go with. So whilst he believed that he was pressured for time...he felt that he was not stressed by it. In similar vein, Joanne F. said that she was not the kind of person to do things half-heartedly, and this meant that she needed to adopt the strategy of finding the time to deal with the issue there and then, or that you needed to postpone it until you do it properly.*

Other comments by some English headteachers were rather more concerning. Angela M., for instance, felt that her problems arose less from the legislation itself, than from the fact that there was a surfeit of it. *Everything comes in great big piles. I take home boxes of the stuff. The result was that it produced huge amounts of reading matter, which in turn necessitates huge amounts of time to assimilate and transform it into action.* Penny R. also talked of *countless, countless, countless initiatives...and sometimes you come in and the desk is a heap, and I'm desperately toiling away and*



*getting tired....*And whilst Jill felt that she still managed to get her priorities right, nevertheless *there are so many other things that come into school...then it takes longer to implement things that are really important.* There seemed little doubt from these interviews, that this was a serious issue, and some found it more problematic than others.

With respect to the Hong Kong principals, whilst we have already seen that most felt that there was good flexibility in the legislative reforms, there was also a critical element to some replies, stemming largely from the accumulated pressures they generated. Susan H, for instance, whilst believing both that there was reasonable flexibility, and that the reforms were generally progressive, remarked that there was simply too much of them: *it is too many things, and also a lot of changes, something done in this way, tomorrow another thing comes out...I can do things very quick, very fast, but you see coming a lot of papers, circulars...*Another concern was that whilst she personally had developed coping strategies for these pressures, she was very concerned that *not many deputy heads want to be principals nowadays...it's too hard for them.* Peter L. also felt that *it's a tough job to be the head, so no one wants to take up this position,* and like Susan, whilst also generally in agreement with the direction of the reforms, was concerned about the overall pressure produced. In his case, the result was fairly dramatic: *mainly because of my health, I can no longer endure the workload in the school,* and he had decided that *I am going to retire soon.* Now Peter was not far away from formal retirement, but another couple of interviews were perhaps more worrying. Eva L. was in her first headship, and doing a successful job, yet she said that she was greatly dissatisfied by her inability to *reduce the workload of teachers,* and when asked about her own situation, her reply was simply that *actually we are on the same boat.* Moreover, at the end of the interview, she told us

that *I have just quit my job...the reasons being largely that for the principal, everything you have to handle, complaints from parents, other things.* This picture is strengthened by that of Gloria L., who felt that being principal of a DSS school gave her the creativity she wanted, and was therefore very much in agreement with the prevailing government curricular philosophy, yet nonetheless she was resigning because *time and effort are the main issues that I am concerned with...even when I'm not working, you have to think all of the time...* The overall impression was of an accumulation of pressures which accompanied the role she felt she needed to take on in order to be effective. Of course, Gloria may have been more susceptible to pressure than some, but Macbeath's(2006) research in this area indicates much the same problems on a wider scale. The overall conclusion must that there was too much uncomfortable similarity between English headteachers and Hong Kong Principals in this respect.

### **Personal issues.**

An important aspect of this research, it has been argued, is that to understand the nature of the work of these individuals, it is essential to understand the person and the context they work in. We have seen, for instance, that in England, Penny R. was an entrepreneurial headteacher of a privately financed primary school, who was having to work within a local education authority which had for decades been 'Old Labour' in political orientation, and who was losing numbers, she believed, not because of her schools performance, but because of the performance of the feeder secondary schools. We have also seen how Harry C., a new headteacher in a school needing much closer connection with parents, was driven almost exclusively by the demands of a local LEA to raise test standards. There was Tim L. a one-school headmaster for all of his

long career, now increasingly finding it difficult to match previous energy levels, ; and we have also seen some of the views of Michael K., head of a successful large school, seemingly acting like a chess player, keeping abreast of both local and national initiatives, and trained to be an Ofsted inspector to ensure that **he** would do the intimidating when the next inspection occurred. All display different personalities, and work in different contexts – and each situation then is different, as must necessarily be each solution.

In Hong Kong, we have seen a similarly different display of personality and context. There was for instance, Mary N., a principal of deeply religious convictions, now feeling that she could no longer concentrate on these aspects of the school to the extent she felt necessary because of all the other external demands imposed on her; there was also John L., working fourteen hours a day on a variety of different initiatives to keep open a school with declining numbers, and yet apparently relishing the task; and there was Phillip H., an experienced headteacher in his middle fifties, running a successful school, and preventing complacency by setting himself physical challenges – like running a marathon – because this not only trained his body, but trained his mind to be disciplined. Finally, there was Clio C., principal of a private school, trying to hold onto a vision of a school committed to enrolling those children most capable of benefiting from her view of education, in an era where rising costs and increased competition from the public sector made this more and more difficult.

More of the individuals interviewed could be described, but the point has been made: each is different, each may face challenges that are similar, but each will probably interpret and mediate these in different ways, and each will certainly have a set of problems unique to their school, and a personality which then makes the resolution of

these problems even more unique. At the end of the day, such personal issues, and the different approaches to the sections described above, are one of the most important elements of this paper.

### Conclusions.

The findings from these interviews suggest a number of conclusions. A first is that English headteachers were more critical of, and embattled by, their legislative context than their Hong Kong counterparts. In this respect at least, Hong Kong principals would currently seem to experience less pressure, and this might bode well for the future implementation of reforms there. However, there is also an argument to be made that some of the Hong Kong reforms have not fully 'taken' as yet, and so any pressures stemming from them may still be a little way in the future. For example, most schools there still experience a form of school governance in which a sponsoring body mediates the effect of the EMB; however, by 2009, the sponsoring body will only contribute to the governance of a body which reports directly to the EMB. This may well increase the surveillance and pressure from government, and contribute to a change in perceptions of these principals. In England, whilst there have been moves over the last few years by government to move away from excessively distrustful attitudes towards the teaching profession, there is still some considerable way to move before any form of genuine trust by the profession is restored.

A second conclusion is that Hong Kong inspectorial processes were viewed as much more helpful and benign than the English processes, though both were seen as requiring an excessive investment of time and energy. Indeed, in some ways inspection is the touchstone of attitudes to government, as it has the potential to carry

substantial penalties for those who fail to reach a satisfactory standard. The fact that Hong Kong principals generally felt that this was a helpful process, whilst English headteachers felt it was essentially punitive and distrustful in nature, seems to have implications for both systems, suggesting rather different journeys to partnership. Yet again, caution is needed here with respect to Hong Kong, for in an era of declining student populations, public knowledge of such inspections – and therefore the inspections themselves - could well inspire more concern in the future. Moreover, given the fact that movements in Hong Kong towards reducing class sizes, which would considerably reduce competition and the pressures for school closures, have been consistently opposed or delayed by the EMB therefore competition, suggests that in this respect at least, the EMB may well be pursuing a different path from its educational ‘partners’.

A third conclusion is that in both contexts, where pupil numbers were declining, market issues were much more prominent, and where numbers were stable or rising, they had much less saliency. This finding almost certainly transcends these two cultures, as such demographic issues are seen across much of the developed world. What is perhaps interesting is that whilst pupil numbers was the key issue, there seemed little doubt that government policies in both contexts were making the situation more acute (such as with respect to the issue of class sizes), and probably were adding to feelings of pressures, and having to spend excessive amounts of time in dealing with these issues.

This in part then accounts for the fourth conclusion: that both sets of interviewees described a worrying accumulation of pressure. A critical part of this, as clearly described by many interviewees, is the sheer quantity of material with which they

had to deal. Much of this is produced by government; but where there are issues of pupil numbers – and this situation is likely to continue in both contexts, as well as beyond them - then this can only add to this kind of pressure.

Yet, finally, and as demonstrated throughout this paper, individual personality and local context were crucial in understanding how issues and such pressures were mediated. So if one returns to the research question asked at the beginning of this paper: do headteachers and principals manage to maintain their personal visions, and personal codes of ethics? there is no simple answer. All appear to try to do this, but some are more successful than others, and the success seems to depend upon who they are, where they are, and what they have to face. Whilst this may seem almost a truism, it does point to something important: that few central initiatives actually take this statement of the obvious into account when designing programmes for developing prospective headteachers, or for those already in the role. It suggests the need for the development of programmes which begin by understanding individuals and their perceptions of the challenges they face. That really might generate achievement on something which both policy makers and professionals hold dear: pupil success at every school. In any context, then, improvement through the appreciation of the need for individualized development might well be the best way forward.

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