

Consultancy Study on the Effectiveness of the Pilot Scheme on Promoting Interflows between Sister Schools in Hong Kong and the Mainland

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.1 The Sister School Scheme was launched in 2004 to provide a platform for professional interflows and cooperation between schools in Hong Kong and the Mainland. Schools participating in the Scheme have organised various exchange activities based on their development needs, such as school visits, cultural exchange, lesson observation, evaluation and demonstration, variety shows, parent seminars, student pen pal schemes, etc. Through exchange and collaboration, sister schools have expanded their network, enhanced understanding and communication, strengthened cultural and academic interflows, enhanced teacher professionalism and broadened students' horizons.
- 1.2 To further promote Hong Kong-Mainland sister school exchanges, the Chief Executive announced in the 2015 Policy Address the launch of a three-year Pilot Scheme, providing financial and professional support to public sector¹ and Direct Subsidy Scheme schools upon formation of sister schools with their counterparts in the Mainland to support the multi-faceted development of sister school activities. A fixed grant of HK\$120,000 per annum within the three-year implementation period of the Pilot Scheme was provided to each successful applicant school to enhance both the breadth and depth of cooperation between the sister schools.

Objectives

- 1.3 This Consultancy Study (Study), covering schools participating in the Pilot Scheme, was conducted in the 2017/18 school year, with the objectives as follows:
 - a) to examine the multi-faceted sister school activities deployed by participating schools;
 - b) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Pilot Scheme having regard to the expected outcomes;
 - c) to identify and consolidate good practices pertaining to sister school exchanges to facilitate continuous professional interflows; and
 - d) to make recommendations in respect of the financial and professional support provided by the Government.

¹ Public sector schools comprise government, aided and caput schools

2. Methodology

- 2.1 A mixed-method approach had been adopted for the Study, by collecting both qualitative information through literature review, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders and quantitative data from a representative sample of school heads, teachers, students and parents through the self-administered questionnaires.
- 2.2 By the end of July 2018, a total of 100 schools (47 primary schools, 43 secondary schools and 10 special schools), among 525 schools with sister school arrangement, had participated in this Study. Among these participating schools, a total of 13,671 respondents had completed the questionnaires, including 90 principals, 1,209 teachers, 6,568 students and 5,804 parents.
- 2.3 Through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders (including school heads, teachers, students, parents, representatives of school sponsoring bodies and associations of school heads, and scholars of related topics/issues), their qualitative views on the Pilot Scheme had been collected and analysed.
- 2.4 For gathering qualitative information, a total of 24 focus group discussions, comprising 7 groups with parents and 17 groups with students, were successfully conducted with 141 participants (including 109 students and 32 parents) who came from different districts in Hong Kong. Apart from those focus group discussions, a total of 40 in-depth interviews with different groups of stakeholders were also successfully conducted, including 30 interviews with school heads and teachers, 3 interviews with the representatives of school sponsoring bodies, 4 interviews with the representatives of associations of school heads and 3 interviews with the scholars of related topics/issues.

3. Findings

Effects of sister school activities on school heads and the management team

- 3.1 In regard to the exchange activities for the school management, most of the principals agreed that the sister school activities enhanced their knowledge on school administration and management, expanded the school's network, broadened their horizons, enhanced their understanding about the Mainland and enhanced the sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity, especially for the effect on broadening their horizons (strongly agree: 40.7% and agree: 55.6%) and enhancing understanding about the Mainland (strongly agree: 40.7% and agree: 54.3%). However, 28.4% of principals disagreed that the activities had an effect on improving the school's ability in school administration and management.

Effects of sister school activities on teachers

- 3.2 In regard to the sister school activities arranged for teachers, most of the teachers agreed that the exchange activities had the effects of broadening their horizons, enhancing their understanding about the Mainland, building learning communities, enabling them to know about the education system in the Mainland, building teacher networks, strengthening their ability in curriculum leadership, fostering professional development, deepening their passion for teaching, enhancing their understanding about the teaching situation in the Mainland, enabling them to have more frequent communication with the Mainland, enhancing teaching effectiveness, enabling them to learn more about diversified teaching methods and enhancing their sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity, especially the effect of broadening their horizons (strongly agree: 19.9%), enhancing their understanding about the Mainland (strongly agree: 22.6%) and enhancing their understanding about the teaching situation in the Mainland (strongly agree: 22.3%). However, 31.8% and 28.9% of teachers disagreed that the activities had an effect of strengthening their ability in curriculum leadership and enhancing their sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity respectively.

Effects of sister school activities on students

Perspectives of school heads and teachers

- 3.3 In regard to the sister school activities arranged for the students, most of the principals agreed that the exchange activities for students had the effects of enabling them to meet new friends, broadening their horizons, understanding the national situation, enhancing their sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity, enhancing cultural experience, learning to accept others, learning to be independent, developing their potential, boosting self-confidence, improving self-concept and enhancing proficiency in speaking Putonghua, amongst which the effects of broadening their horizons (strongly agree: 47.6%), enhancing cultural experience (strongly agree: 36.6%) and enhancing proficiency in speaking Putonghua (strongly agree: 34.1%) were particularly significant. However, 40.2% of principals disagreed that the sister school activities had an effect of enabling students to pursue their ideal.
- 3.4 Most of the teachers who had participated in the sister school activities agreed that the sister school activities for students had the effects of enabling them to meet new friends, broadening their horizons, understanding the national situation, enhancing their sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity, enhancing cultural experience, learning to accept others, learning to be independent, developing their potential, boosting self-confidence, improving self-concept and enhancing proficiency in speaking Putonghua, amongst which the effects of broadening their horizons (strongly agree: 25.5%) and enhancing cultural experience (strongly agree: 24.1%) were particularly significant. However, 40.4% of teachers disagreed that the sister school activities had an effect of enabling students to pursue their ideal.

Perspectives of parents

- 3.5 In regard to the sister school activities that their child had participated, most of the parents agreed that their child had paid more attention to the national situation in the Mainland, had more discussion topics about the Mainland, expressed more frequently their opinions about the national situation in the Mainland, participated more proactively in the exchange activities related to the Mainland, and the exchange activities helped enhance their child's sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity.

Perspectives of students

- 3.6 Most of the students who had participated in the sister school activities agreed that the sister school activities had benefited them in meeting new friends, broadening their horizons, understanding the national situation, enhancing their sense of belonging to the country/ sense of national identity, enhancing cultural experience, learning to accept others, learning to be independent, developing their potential, boosting self-confidence, improving self-concept and enhancing proficiency in speaking Putonghua, amongst which the effects of broadening their horizons (strongly agree: 43.5%), enhancing cultural experience (strongly agree: 38.4%), learning to be independent (strongly agree: 40.6%) and enhancing proficiency in speaking Putonghua (strongly agree: 38.5%) were particularly significant. While 47.8% of students agreed that the sister school activities had an effect of enabling them to pursue their ideal, over 20% of them disagreed on this.

Problems encountered when organising exchange activities with the sister schools

- 3.7 In general, different schools were facing different types of problems when organising sister school exchange activities for their teachers, students and parents, such as insufficient technical support, insufficient professional support, cultural differences and communication problems, insufficient time allowed for the activities, insufficient manpower support, location of the sister schools, incompatible work schedule (e.g. public holidays and school examination timetables) and unclear/ lack of flexibility guidelines from the Education Bureau (EDB). Among these difficulties, insufficient professional support, insufficient manpower support and unclear/ lack of flexibility guidelines from the EDB were more prominent for the schools when organising exchange activities for their teachers, students and parents with the sister schools in the Mainland².

Views on the grant provided by the Pilot Scheme

- 3.8 Regarding the grant for the Pilot Scheme, most of the principals in general agreed that the defined financial support was sufficient (strongly agree: 10.1% and agree: 59.6%), the grant was sufficient to support the activities to be organised in terms of frequency (strongly agree: 7.9% and agree: 58.4%), the

² Please see paragraphs 4.19 to 4.25 for details

grant was sufficient to cover the expenses incurred for organising different kinds of activities (strongly agree: 6.7% and agree: 49.4%), the ambit of grant covered the necessary expenses needed for organising related activities (strongly agree: 5.6% and agree: 51.7%) and the grant was sufficient for the schools to reach the intended goals (strongly agree: 6.7% and agree: 68.5%). However, over 40% of the principals disagreed that the grant was sufficient to allow the participation by different school stakeholders ³ (strongly disagree: 10.1% and disagree: 32.6%).

Future development

- 3.9 82% of the principals of all the schools surveyed indicated that they would continue organising the exchange activities with their sister schools in the Mainland annually upon completion of the Pilot Scheme, while 16.9% of them were not sure about this.
- 3.10 In general, over three quarters of the principals of all the schools surveyed wished to pair up with more Mainland sister schools in the future (strongly wish: 13.5% and wish: 64.0%).

4. Recommendations

Regularisation of the Pilot Scheme

- 4.1 Over 95% of schools strongly wished (61.8%) and wished (33.7%) that the EDB could regularise the grant for the Pilot Scheme.
- 4.2 For the three different school types, most principals of the primary, secondary and special schools were alike in that they strongly wished the EDB to regularise the grant of the Pilot Scheme in the future, the percentage of which was highest for special schools (strongly wish: 66.7%).

Good practices pertaining to sister school exchanges to facilitate continuous professional interflows

- 4.3 Overall, the Study has identified many good practices to further promote the exchange activities and professional interflows between sister schools through the literature review and also the activities organised by the schools surveyed with their Mainland counterparts. These good practices could be categorised into four levels of target groups, namely school heads and management teams, teachers, students and parents.

School heads and management teams

- 4.4 A school representative pointed out that through the exchange and interaction between the management teams in both places, the school was impressed by

³ Means parents here

the management styles of the sister schools which achieved a diversified and collaborative relationship with the society. For example, one of the sister schools with old trees in the campus attempted to open up the school premises to public in cooperation with an overseas company. This also saved the school some of the cost of beautifying the campus. The management team was not only impressed by these exemplars and showed appreciation, but also reflected and considered the practicality of these kinds of management styles in Hong Kong.

Teachers

- 4.5 A secondary school representative mentioned that they had launched a session on “teaching the same topic, using different approaches” (「同題異構」) for teachers in both places to exchange their teaching ideas. Teachers were invited to design the curriculum, task sheet and teaching content for students of the sister schools, using their original teaching methods. Then, teachers in both places conducted a post-lesson discussion and exchanged their views and the learning points. This helped deepen the professional exchange among teachers and inspire new teaching ideas for teachers of both sides.
- 4.6 Based on some overseas experience through the literature review, willingness and enthusiasm of the educators who were participating in the Sister School Scheme were one of the key aspects contributing to the success of the sister school exchanges. Effective communication between teachers was essential to foster the development of the Sister School Scheme. For instance, there were several platforms for partnerships launched for schools in the UK to facilitate teachers’ communication between the sister schools, including Professional Partnerships, eTwinning Partnerships and Strategic Partnerships. These platforms aim to serve the purpose of building up a worldwide network for teachers’ communication, and to provide teachers with opportunities to exchange expertise and experience and to share and develop partnership programmes.

Students

Primary schools

- 4.7 For primary schools, a school representative thought that schools in Hong Kong could launch an online platform to facilitate the exchanges with their sister schools. The online platform could be used to store and share the classroom live recordings and other teaching materials. Hence, schools could have more interaction with their sister schools in the long run.
- 4.8 Another school representative also stated that they had organised some art activities to let the students from both places make ceramics together. Such kind of activities could enhance the friendship of the students between two places.

Secondary schools

- 4.9 A school representative had tried to organise live remote classrooms for local students and mainland students so as to provide a channel for students to communicate and learn together.
- 4.10 Another school representative had arranged exchange activities including co-organising Athletic Meet with the sister school in the Mainland. Students could learn more about their abilities by participating in the competitions.
- 4.11 From some overseas experiences, as previously mentioned, schools in Taiwan had adopted online chatting and face-to-face chatting platforms with their sister schools. Students could use “CyberTutor”, “E-Class”, and “Live@edu” as a platform to discuss local culture, festival, school life, etc. Moreover, students could present some related news to their sister school counterparts. As a result, students could learn a variety of up-to-date customs and cultures worldwide.

Special schools

- 4.12 A school representative indicated that the training about Home Economics and the catering industry had been provided by the sister school. The students were given the opportunities to learn how to do latte art and make their products, such as mosquito repellent, for donation and to have their achievements recognised through the activities.
- 4.13 Schools also indicated that they were more inclined to exchange with their sister school through organising non-academic activities. For instance, a school representative stated that they would organise an art festival for students in both places to demonstrate their talents.
- 4.14 Another school representative stated that the school would invite students from the sister school to participate in a drama performance to celebrate the school’s annual English Day together. Apart from drama performance, the school also organised sister school exchange activities, such as debate competitions or sport competitions.
- 4.15 Another school representative also stated that the Hong Kong school brought some technologies such as Minecraft and other programming software to the sister school in order to promote STEM teaching. The school cooperated with a local university to design an application which was brought to the Mainland sister school. Therefore, the school was of the view that more scientific and technological exchange could be arranged in the future.

Parents

- 4.16 One school which involved parents in their sister school exchange activities stated that those parents participated in a theme talk about parenting and they

could also make use of the opportunity to communicate with the parents in the Mainland and discussed their different ways of taking care of their children.

Areas of professional support that the EDB should strengthen

- 4.17 For the professional support provided by the EDB, in general, very few responded principals thought that the professional support was very insufficient or very sufficient. A slightly higher proportion of principals thought that the professional support was sufficient (51.7%).
- 4.18 For the three different school types, the percentage of principals who considered that the professional support provided by the EDB was sufficient was very close to that of being insufficient in both primary schools (insufficient: 42.2% and sufficient: 48.9%) and secondary schools (insufficient: 42.9% and sufficient: 51.4%), while 66.7% of the principals of special schools considered that the professional support provided by the EDB was sufficient, and 33.3% considered it insufficient.
- 4.19 For the areas of professional support, 74.2% of the overall principals considered that the ambit of the grant should be relaxed. Nearly half of the principals considered that assisting schools in arranging exchange activities (46.1%) and collecting and promoting good practices (44.9%) should be strengthened. A proportion of principals also considered that the areas of support, including schools matching (25.8%), organising sharing sessions (13.5%) and providing comments on the arrangements of the exchange activities (20.2%) should also be strengthened.
- 4.20 As gathered in the Phase II Study viz. the collection of qualitative information, there were different areas of professional support that the EDB should strengthen, such as pairing of schools, organising sharing sessions, manpower support and providing advice on the arrangements of the exchange activities.
- 4.21 With respect to the pairing of schools, most school heads, especially for the schools which formed sister schools through the coordination of the EDB and the newcomers having participated in the Pilot Scheme after 2015, stated that the EDB should provide more administrative support on school pairing. For instance, some school heads and representatives from the association of school heads mentioned that the EDB could review the situation of different types of schools and provide a list of different types of schools in the Mainland available for matching, preferably with a brief introduction of these available schools. Moreover, an interviewed school also indicated that the EDB could set out the points to note while choosing the schools in the Mainland to form the sister schools. In this way, schools in Hong Kong which preferred to form sister schools with their Mainland counterparts through the coordination of the EDB could have an initial understanding about the Mainland schools available, and choose their sister schools more appropriately according to the school characteristics.

- 4.22 Furthermore, the EDB could also organise more sharing sessions for schools. By organising more sharing sessions, it is possible to facilitate further exchanges between schools which are participating in the Pilot Scheme. They could share their different experiences and views on organising different activities with the sister schools in the Mainland. Moreover, through the sharing sessions, the schools can learn about the difficulties encountered, and hence the ways to handle/resolve the issue adopted by other schools, as well as the good practices in organising their sister school exchanges and acquire the experiences from other schools, which would enable the school organisers be more aware of how to use the grant effectively. This would help the schools better plan and conduct the sister school activities in the future and also enhance the quality of the activities.
- 4.23 As previously mentioned, the ambit of grant at present is confined to some essential items and imposed certain restrictions on the use of grant. For example, there were instances which schools had to buy souvenirs to express gratitude towards their sister schools for offering hospitality. However, such kinds of expenses are not allowed in the use of grant. As a result, schools had to pay by themselves, and that may contradict the purpose of the Sister School Scheme which is to establish a good and long-term sister school relationship.
- 4.24 For the area of manpower resources, most school heads stated that the most needed improvement in the Pilot Scheme for the EDB was the support for the staffing arrangements in schools. Although schools are allowed to use the grant to hire additional personnel responsible for organising the sister related activities, it is relatively difficult to hire a dedicated staff member to take charge of the sister school exchange activities because of the limited amount of funding. Moreover, newly recruited personnel may not be familiar with the genuine needs of the students in the school. They also need time to adjust and adapt. Therefore, the preparatory work is mainly taken up by the teachers of the schools. Since the teachers need to spend extra time to do the preparatory work in addition to their teaching duties, their workload would become heavier. Thus, the EDB should have corresponding measures in the staff arrangements to reduce the daily workload of the responsible teachers in the future.
- 4.25 For the feedback on the arrangements of the exchange activities, some school heads believed that the EDB should allow schools to have more flexibilities in arranging their own exchange activities with the sister school in the Mainland. Yet, some school heads and teachers thought that the EDB could provide some suggested activity schedules or lists of contractors specializing in organising exchange activities. By doing so, schools could make reference to it and simplify the work to be taken up by the teachers.