

Report of  
the Impact Study on the Implementation of  
the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle of the School Development and Accountability Framework  
on Enhancing School Development in Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

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Over the life of the second cycle of the School Development and Accountability (SDA) framework, schools have demonstrated a progressive, deepening understanding of the nature and processes of school self-evaluation (SSE) and their relationship to External School Review (ESR). Schools are making much greater use of SSE protocols and instruments and employing a variety of strategies and approaches to embed SSE in day-to-day practice. One of the most promising findings of this study is a movement from a teacher-centred to a more learner-centred pedagogy, which is owed to a continuing focus on the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom and the priority given to creating a learning-centred environment. Leadership is coming to be understood as a shared activity, and its vitality holds the key to the successful embedding of SSE and a welcome for external forms of review. The Education Bureau (EDB) has provided schools with an expanding repertoire of tools and support, and has been receptive to feedback, continuously willing to modify practice, adjusting demands on schools and bringing a sharper focus to the key issues of concern.

The embedding of SSE and exploiting the potential of ESR continue to be a learning process for all involved and, as such, necessarily encounter setbacks as well as progress. Hong Kong is arguably the most advanced of any country or region in its embedding of quality assurance in school practice and must continue to build on its highly significant achievements. To take the SDA framework forward in the coming years, consideration needs to be given on how to further refine ESR and other types of school inspection and review, continue to enhance schools' accountability and transparency, and strengthen support for continuous school development.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

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1. The purpose of the Impact Study on the Implementation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cycle of the School Development and Accountability Framework on Enhancing School Improvement in Hong Kong (Impact Study), an independent study led by Professor John MacBeath of the University of Cambridge, was to evaluate:
  - the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework from 2008/09 to 2013/14; and
  - the impact of ESR and SSE in sustaining school development.
2. The Impact Study has followed the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework since 2008/09, collecting data from five successive school years. Data collection from different stakeholders over the course of the study has been comprehensive and detailed.
3. Feedback was collected from case studies conducted in 10 schools, 19 focus group sessions with different stakeholders, and various questionnaires to over 20 300 teachers, specialists and principals in 502 schools (including primary, secondary and special schools) and 253 School Improvement Teams (SITs). The overall response rate was 85%.

### The SDA Framework in its Second Cycle of Implementation

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4. The most salient feature of the data gathered from 2008/09 to 2012/13 has shown a high degree of consensus among the key stakeholders in schools on the contribution and strengths of the SDA framework and the challenges of working within it. As shown in measures of satisfaction with ESR under the SDA framework, there has been almost no variation in the endorsement by schools of the clarity of objectives, procedures and scope. The overall satisfaction with the process is credited to its openness and transparency. Evidence from case studies and focus groups shows that ESR conducted in the second cycle of the SDA framework has been a marked improvement over that of the first cycle.

5. Of the different forms of inspection and review conducted under the SDA framework, the preponderance of evidence was clearly in favour of ESR. Advocacy for focus inspection came from school personnel who argued for the more differentiated approach that it was able to offer.

## The Impact of SSE and ESR in Sustaining School Development

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### **Forging professional partnership**

6. EDB personnel and school staff share a common interest in making schools better places for students. Both parties work towards a common goal of capacity building and school improvement through the process of SSE and ESR. What is clear from the study is an appreciation of ESR teams' professionalism. ESR team members' encouraging and helpful comments have proved to be much appreciated, helping teachers in self-reflection and making improvement.
7. External reviewers (ER) have proved to bring added value to ESR teams' credibility and impact and have received a very strong endorsement from ESR team members. From the ERs' point of view, the review process was a good and meaningful experience, boosting confidence, promoting personal and professional growth and exposing them to practices of other schools.

### **Embedding SSE in day-to-day school practice**

8. The ultimate goal of the SDA framework is for schools to embed SSE in their routine work and develop a culture of reflective practice. While embedding SSE and exploiting the potential of ESR continue to be a learning process for all involved, there is very clear evidence that schools are now making much greater use of SSE protocols and instruments and employing a variety of strategies to embed SSE in day-to-day practice.

### **Strengthening school-based professional development**

9. Well-conceived and well-led school-based professional development provides the basis and impetus for school development planning. A number of schools reported making use of a staff development day to discuss and review the school development plan with all teachers.

10. Interactive classroom methodologies were a recurring theme in ESR reports. This proved to be most pertinent in relation to the use of questioning. Classroom observation with a focus on questioning skills was frequently cited as a post-ESR initiative, and questioning was one of the key issues addressed through peer lesson observation, collaborative lesson planning sessions and through measures taken to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching.

### **Enhancing schools' internal accountability**

11. One of the patent strengths of the educational system in Hong Kong is the priority given to lesson observation, collaborative lesson planning and other measures which have been shown to strengthen internal accountability and enhance professional development. Evidence shows that, following ESR, schools seek to enhance internal accountability through peer lesson observation.

### **Building schools' capacity for meeting the challenges of change and curriculum reforms**

12. ESR acts as a catalyst for change at both classroom and school levels. Evidence from focus groups and case studies shows that, following ESR, specific changes have taken place in enhancing pedagogy with more engaging and effective classroom strategies.

### **Developing a culture of reflective practice**

13. There is evidence that a reflective culture is taking shape in some schools. Self-evaluation is, in many instances, tied closely to the school development planning cycle.

## **Recommendations**

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### **Further refining ESR and other types of school inspection/review**

14. School personnel's advocacy for different forms of quality assurance provides the opportunity for policy makers to reshape external evaluation of schools in the next phase of intervention, providing a more flexible and differentiated approach while maintaining the best of what has already been achieved.

### **Continuing to enhance schools' accountability and transparency**

15. Hong Kong is arguably the most advanced of any country or region in its embedding of quality assurance in school practice and must continue to build on its highly significant achievements.
16. There is considerable scope for the relationship between SSE and school development planning to be understood as integrally related and ongoing processes. Planning, implementation and evaluation should be seen as reiterative cycles for self-improvement rather than linear and one-off events.
17. Appraisal is an integral part of a holistic approach to quality assurance and school improvement. Lessons can be taken from the examples of different schools on how to marry top-down and bottom-up approaches to appraisal.

### **Strengthening support for continuous school development**

18. Pleas by some schools for wider involvement of frontline teachers in ESR face some logistic issues but can widen the representation and provide more exposure for teachers.
19. There is still a great deal of untapped potential and much to learn from the most proactive schools at the leading edge, through networking and inter-school professional development opportunities.
20. The frequent reference by school personnel to the need for longer term embedding of change is a message worthy of policy makers' consideration in supporting school development.

## INTRODUCTION

### Building on the previous Impact Study

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The SDA framework introduced in 2003 emphasises SSE in recognition of schools' central role in its own development. SSE is complemented by ESR to give schools the benefit of feedback and suggestions for improvement from a team of reviewers with perspectives across schools.

The Impact Study on the implementation of the first cycle of the SDA framework was conducted from 2003/04 to 2007/08 to gauge the effectiveness of ESR in enhancing school improvement through SSE. The 2008 report summarised the progress and achievements of SSE and ESR since its measured introduction to schools. In preparation for the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework (2008/09–2013/14), the EDB had made reference to the findings and introduced measures to streamline the procedures and address the main areas of concern, such as revising the Performance Indicators (PI) framework, collecting data through e-means, embedding school self-evaluation, conducting school-specific and focused ESR and sharing effective practice. The Impact Study on the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework looked into the effectiveness of these measures in enhancing school improvement.

### The structure of the report

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This evaluation report on the Impact Study on the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework is structured around the key research questions defined by the EDB. The thematic sections correspond to the research questions. Each section brings together quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from write-in comments on questionnaires, together with interview and focus group data from a wide range of stakeholders. Wherever it is deemed useful and informative, data from successive years are compared. Sometimes this includes all five iterations of the study, sometimes specific years are compared. Structured in this way, it offers the reader the opportunity to enter at any point as relevant to the research question under review.

The first section describes the methodological approach of the Impact Study, which ran from 2008/09 until 2012/13. The section on international perspectives offers comparisons with other country regimes. The final section brings together inter-related conclusions and recommendations.

## THE RESEARCH APPROACH

### Issues of purpose

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The purpose of the Impact Study was to provide an independent and external review of:

1. The SDA framework in its second cycle of implementation –from 2008/09 to 2013/14
2. The quality and effectiveness of SDA with reference to international developments in school evaluation
3. The nature and rigour of the relationship between school-specific and focused ESR and other types of inspection/review
4. The contribution of SSE/ESR in forging a professional partnership between the EDB and schools
5. The use and adaptation of self-evaluation tools and uses made of the Online Interactive Resource (OIR)
6. The impact of ESR with specific reference to:
  - the embedding of SSE in day-to-day school practice
  - sustaining school development
  - enhancing schools' internal accountability and confidence with external accountability
  - building schools' capacity for meeting the challenges of change and curriculum reforms
  - developing a culture of reflective practice in schools
7. The way forward

### Methodology and the nature of the data

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The Impact Study has followed the implementation of the second cycle of the SDA framework since 2008/09, collecting data from five successive cohorts of schools. Data collection over the course of the study has been comprehensive and detailed, including a range of qualitative and quantitative information from different stakeholders.

(a) Data from schools

Feedback was collected from various questionnaires to teachers and principals in 502 schools (including primary, secondary and special) with over 20 300 teachers/specialists/principals and 253 SITs. The overall response rate was 85%.

- The Post-ESR Questionnaire on SSE/ESR (Q1) was administered to all teachers, specialists and principals in schools which had undergone ESR during the period, with a response rate of about 85%. The fact that all responses were anonymised ensures that teachers could feel free to express their views about the actual situation of the schools.
- The Post-ESR Review Questionnaire (Q3) was issued to all teachers, specialists and principals in the year following ESR and after the School Development Plan of the next cycle had been prepared to collect views about the impact of ESR on school development and self-evaluation. Feedback was received from respondents of 262 schools, with a response rate of about 83%.
- The Questionnaire for SDA framework (Q4) was designed to collect views from the SITs of schools which had undergone ESR and after the School Development Plan of the next cycle had been prepared, on how they perceived their role and the impact of ESR on SSE and school development. Feedback was collected from 253 SITs of schools, with a response rate of about 83%.
- Case studies were conducted in 10 schools which had undergone ESR in 2008/09-2010/11.
- 19 focus group sessions were held in 2012 with different stakeholders, such as school personnel, students, parents and members of School Sponsoring Bodies (SSB), School Management Committees (SMC), Incorporated Management Committees (IMC) and the Advisory Group on SDA.

(b) Data from review/inspection teams

- The Questionnaire for SDA framework (Q2) was administered to ESR team members and external reviewers (ER). 1 532 and 196 responses were received respectively with corresponding response rates of 68% and 36%.

A key feature of the Impact Study has been the comparison of views on the same issue, illustrating the differing perceptions depending on one's place within the system and within the school hierarchy. In-depth case studies have provided the opportunity to interrogate respondents, crucially including students in primary, secondary and special schools. This has been further complemented by focus groups at every level within the system.

Cross referencing among data sources allows a validity and reliability check. The large sample of respondents and the consistency of responses across numerous iterations help to ensure reliability while survey data have also served as a ‘tin opener’, opening up to scrutiny statements made on questionnaires.

The consistency of the quantitative data can, however, conceal stories of change that can only be accessed through face-to-face discussions, school visits, illustrations and anecdotes and individual accounts of impact. As experience has shown, extended conversations with students and parents allow clarification and provide insights into misapprehensions.

Discussions with EDB officers have been important in helping to review and select the items, shape the language, advise on selection of schools and respondents and, crucially, helping with translations and interpretations in interviews and focus groups. Measures have been taken to ensure the independence and objectivity of the research and within the EDB findings have not been subjected to political moderation. They have provided the basis for refinement of policies, responding to the evidence and, on a continuing basis, working to make ESR and SSE more accessible, meaningful and growth promoting.

## SECTION 1 – THE SDA FRAMEWORK IN ITS SECOND CYCLE OF IMPLEMENTATION

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In this section, the SDA framework is seen through the eyes of those charged with using it to inform their practice, to offer their views on purposes, procedures and impact. As comparisons of responses over successive years are shown here, these have to be understood as contained not only within major shifts in policy but also within changing social pressures over the five-year compass of the evaluation. Evidence from different stakeholders is shown, illustrating aspects of policy which have been very positively endorsed and aspects that remain a concern.

### 1.1 Response to the SDA framework: a continuing consensus

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From 2008/09 to 2012/13, the impact study on the second cycle on the implementation of the SDA framework included five data gathering episodes. The most salient feature of the data over that time span has been a high degree of consensus as to the contribution and strengths of the SDA framework and the challenges of working within it.

This is shown in measures of satisfaction with ESR under the SDA framework, as tested through the Q1 Questionnaire. Administered to key stakeholders in schools over that five-year period, there has been a marked continuity in responses.

In order of year from 2008/09 to 2012/13, there has been almost no variation in the endorsement by schools, with agreement (*‘Strongly agree’* and *‘Agree’*) on:

- The clarity of objectives: 94.9%, 93.8%, 94.1%, 95.2%, 94.3% respectively
- Procedures: 93.0%, 91.5%, 93.1%, 94.7%, 93.2%
- Scope: 90.4% 88.5%, 90.0%, 92.3%, 89.6%

These may be taken not only as a measure of satisfaction but also as an index of the reliability of the questionnaire instrument.

The satisfaction index is also shown in Table 1.1, showing responses to the perceived openness and transparency of the process together with perceptions of pressure experienced as a consequence. If less concern over pressure might have been expected by 2012/13, it has to be borne in mind that phasing in the programme began with the schools judged to be most receptive to SSE/ESR and then moved over time to more challenging and less receptive contexts. There is also evidence from write-in comments and interviews to suggest that where

there is still perceived pressure, some of that seen as coming from senior managers or from the school head himself/herself.

**Table 1.1 A satisfaction index: comparison of responses from 2008/09 to 2012/13**

School Personnel's Agreement to the following items:	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
	('Strongly agree' and 'Agree' Percentage)				
The entire process was open and transparent	80.1%	75.1%	75.1%	79.2%	75.8%
On the whole I am satisfied with the ESR process	76.7%	72.6%	71.7%	74.8%	73.6%
Pressure resulting from ESR was reasonable	57.7%	57.0%	55.1%	56.7%	56.1%

Despite the nature of schools included and despite changes in policy, satisfaction with the process has remained more or less constant over the five successive iterations of the surveys. As the data show, the pre-ESR briefing has been positively welcomed although with some continuing attendant concerns about preparation and some expressions of anxiety, perhaps inevitable for any individual or body being 'judged'. The overall satisfaction with the process, as confirmed through interviews in case studies and focus groups, is credited to its openness and transparency.

Evidence from case studies and focus group sessions reaches one unambiguous finding across all schools – that ESR conducted in the second cycle of the SDA framework has been a marked improvement on what had gone before. Senior and middle managers and teachers particularly welcomed:

- The reduced amount of pre-ESR preparation
- The reduction of documentation
- The reduced stress and anxiety associated with ESR
- The removal of the requirement to upload the ESR report
- The opportunity for reflection and sharing following lesson observation

While the comment that ESR was 'just another week' or 'business as usual' may be taken as a positive indicator of what external review has been aiming to achieve, it may also be interpreted in a number of different ways – as 'denial' or gloss as to what was actually involved, or as complacency, devaluing the impact of ESR on professional practice, or perhaps not challenging enough of inadequate practice.

Reservations about ESR most cited were in relation to:

- Selective post-lesson observation sharing (POS) – to some but not all teachers
- Non-disclosure of where the excellent, or ineffective, practice lay
- The interval between two ESRs needing to be longer
- Schools needing to be given sufficient time to improve

- More elaboration and follow-up by the EDB after ESR
- Opinions given by the ESR team, however good, seen as too broad needing specific examples
- Need for a closer focus on learning and teaching
- Subsequent to ESR need for a follow-up on school's weaknesses

Pressure did remain an enduring concern. While efforts were made by the Quality Assurance and School-based Support Division (QASBSD) of the EDB to continuously attenuate the apprehension preceding an ESR visit, it is perhaps inevitable that anxiety levels will rise to some extent before such a potentially high-profile review.

## 1.2 Questions of purpose and comparability

This key purpose of ESR – to help schools' self-knowledge and enhance their own internal self-evaluation – appears not only to have been more deeply understood but genuinely appreciated. As the Q1 questionnaire responses over the years reveal, the perceived value and impact of SSE has remained remarkably stable. As Table 1.2 reveals, heightened understanding, professional development and school effectiveness have all been seen as of benefit.

**Table 1.2 Responses to Q1 questionnaires on ESR for all schools (2011/12-2012/13)**

School Personnel's Agreement	2011/12	2012/13
	('Strongly agree' and 'Agree' Percentage)	
The information provided by the Key Performance Measures helps us to conduct SSE in our school	87.0%	82.7%
My involvement in the 'holistic review of the school' has given me a better understanding of our school's overall performance	88.3%	83.5%
SSE has enhanced professional exchange among staff on how to make continuous school improvement	85.8%	79.8%
I take an active part in evaluating the performance of our school	87.2%	80.5%
ESR helps me reflect on the effectiveness of our school work	85.2%	81.2%

While the EDB has made continued and strenuous efforts to communicate the nature and benefits of SSE and ESR, nonetheless there has remained some uncertainty among some school staff as to both the purposes and scope of these two complementary processes. In the 2012 round of interviews in case studies and focus groups, together with comments on questionnaires, issues of purpose were aired, and there was some debate as to whether SSE/ESR was seen as for improvement, for accountability or with a needs-based focus. As one teacher's comment illustrates:

*Inspection should be conducted on need basis, whether it is to check territory-wide performance or for school-based issues. It is not desirable to come to a school for both purposes at the same time.*

In focus groups with school heads, questions were raised about the objectives of ESR. Some doubts or suspicions remained as to what use ESR reports would be put to, and the question was posed, ‘Is the ESR report to serve as a reference for an individual school or is it to be used to compare the effectiveness among different schools?’ If used for comparison, there was some concern that issues of fairness might arise, and some anxiety was expressed about ESR reports being interpreted differently by different stakeholders. There were some worries expressed by primary school heads that ESR reports might provide information for parents in selecting the ‘right’ schools for their children, so affecting the survival of schools in a more challenging district.

While QASBSD has made continuing and significant investment in getting the message across, the stakeholder data suggest that there remains a need for greater alignment in clarity of purpose among the agencies who carry the message in to schools – the frontline ESR teams and Regional Education Office officers, the SMC/IMC and SSB as well as the internal stakeholders – senior leaders, SITs and teachers.

### 1.3 Issues of time and timing

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The overwhelming preference for the frequency of ESR was for a visit every six years. Generally, little rationale was offered for this but one suggestion was that ESR could operate in a cycle of six to nine years so as to be in sync with a school’s three-year development cycles.

There were arguments from school staff in favour of time and timing of inspection being decided together with the school. There was also a plea for ESR visits not to be conducted towards the end of September or in June, too close to the term examinations. A further suggestion was that the school itself should be able to choose the focus and the date of the ESR visit on the basis of development stage or need.

The amount of time invested in preparing for an ESR visit had not apparently lessened in the second cycle of the SDA framework but was generally less of an issue than in the first cycle and did appear to depend on pressures exerted by senior management, some school heads raising the anxiety stakes while others exerting a more calming influence. Treating ESR as routine and ‘taking us as they find us’ was a view expressed by the most self-confident of schools or those with a most embedded and ongoing approach to self-evaluation.

The amount of time spent by the ESR team in the school is also a continuing issue. There were comments from various focus groups of there being inadequate time for an ESR team to get an authentic view of the school. This raises the questions of differential review, aired again by SMC/IMC members who suggested alternative inspection modes to suit schools in different stages of development. This might include differing forms and

lengths of ESR visits as well as forms of focused inspections. This does open the possibility of hybrid models of ‘inspection/review’.

## 1.4 Issues of criteria and context

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*The staff are very reflective but not very good at setting success criteria for their targets. They should learn more about how to measure attitudes and use of quantitative data.*

This honest admission from a school head reveals an issue which lies at the heart of SSE and ESR. For many teachers, particularly the longest serving ones, it is obviously challenging to have to reframe current practice and adjust to a new way of thinking and acting, not only in the classroom but in relation to external demands.

The PI set is the framework adopted to assess all schools in Hong Kong, but for some individuals and groups interviewed it was seen as ‘unfair’ to apply the same criteria across all schools. A common argument was for measures to be school and context-sensitive, some focus group participants arguing that to judge all schools in very different socio-economic circumstances by the same criteria is both unfair and unjust.

That ESR failed to take account of the school’s unique context was a theme in a few of the schools in more disadvantaged areas. The School Development Team in one school, for example, expressed concern that ESR team members did not make allowances for teachers or for schools with differing backgrounds. Teachers also argued that the EDB rated the lessons observed against a pre-set standard, which could be unfair across schools, expressing a worry that the EDB judged teaching against the gold standard of the ‘perfect’ lesson.

In one special school, while ESR was said to be well received and seen as a major advance on what went before, there were some concerns that in a special school it is easy to miss or misinterpret what is seen and what remains unseen. In this school, the staff claimed that they had not done much preparation and as a consequence the ESR report had not been good and was ‘demoralising’ for some staff. ‘We Chinese are not accustomed to face-to-face criticism,’ said one member of the SIT. Yet they welcomed ESR in the second cycle of the SDA framework, and although it made them uneasy, they acknowledged that the job of the ESR team was to spot things that they themselves hadn’t been aware of. They agreed that outsiders were able to see things that they had tended to overlook. The feeling of unfairness was, however, exacerbated by losing key staff at significant junctures.

## 1.5 Issues of feedback

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In response to pleas from school leaders for more feedback about individual staff, QASBSD has argued that this

is not the purpose of ESR. It is, nonetheless, understandable that a school would wish to be able to identify and to celebrate its excellent teachers as well as knowing where the really problematic staff were. It may also be argued that this kind of knowledge should be available and put to use by an effective leadership and/or middle management team as it reflects on the quality and impact of SSE.

A problematic aspect of schools visited as part of the case studies was the percentage of lessons observed deemed to be simply ‘satisfactory’. It is a term that was seen by some as implicitly suggesting ‘less than satisfactory’ in that it does not reach the standard of ‘good’.

## 1.6 SITs’ views on the SDA framework

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As the body charged with working within and communicating the framework to colleagues, SITs’ views are particularly salient. In 2008/09–2012/13, SITs were asked to respond to questionnaire items gauging their satisfaction with the SDA framework. Across all items, there was a very high level of agreement, with 90% plus agreement to the following:

- Our school can collect SSE data at suitable intervals in response to the needs of school development
- Members of the team in charge of school self-evaluation/development represent a range of experience and expertise among the school staff
- SSE and ESR have together made a positive impact on the quality of learning and teaching in our school
- Our school’s follow-up on the ESR findings has resulted in improvements
- Performance Indicators for Hong Kong Schools 2008 facilitates a focused evaluation of the major areas of work of our school
- As a team we play a key role in helping our colleagues understand the essential purpose of SSE and ESR

## 1.7 Headteachers, middle managers and teachers

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A more nuanced picture emerges when headteachers, middle managers and teachers respond to similar items with regard to the SDA framework. Using the ‘*Strongly agree*’ category to illustrate where confidence levels differ by status, a number of features are worth considering:

- As with other data, there is a consistent trend for headteachers to be significantly more positive than middle managers and for middle managers to be more positive than teachers.

- The responses from middle managers and teachers have remained fairly consistent over the five iterations whereas the responses of headteachers have shown some fluctuations, probably owing to the nature of smaller sample of headteachers surveyed.

## 1.8 The role and contribution of SSB and SMC/IMC

The familiarity and understanding of SSE/ESR by SSB and SMC/IMC members interviewed varied considerably. Some SSB members described playing an active role in reviewing and commenting on quantitative and qualitative data from the school-based questionnaires, while some had little knowledge of the content or the process of data gathering. Their contact with, involvement in, and contribution to, school life was also highly varied. At one extreme, members confessed to little or no contact with schools beyond SSB meetings, and at the other extreme, there were SSB and SMC/IMC members who were fairly regular visitors, shadowing classes or meeting with senior leaders and teachers.

Some of the SSB members interviewed saw their role as offering support to schools while being careful not to be seen as ‘interfering’. As many SSB members have little educational background beyond their own school education, they confessed to being unable to make evaluative comments on the quality of learning and teaching observed and professed a reluctance to infringe on teachers’ professional domain.

When it came to submission of ESR reports to the SSB, interviewees described a more active involvement. This activity not only served the purpose of accountability, but also provided an opportunity for the SSB to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing schools, together with priority areas for improvement. Based on schools’ needs, the SSB would provide financial resources and, if required, solicit external support, such as manpower from schools under the same SSB. One SSB had set up a Key Learning Area (KLA) Coordinator Committee with responsibility for organising sharing sessions to disseminate good practices.

It was further advocated that as, in the second cycle of the SDA framework, the threatening feeling brought about by ESR had lessened and amount of preparation had reduced, the SSB was able to compare ESR reports of different schools so as to recognise areas for improvement. Moreover, through comparing performance of schools with similar intake, SSB were able to identify schools with outstanding performance, these in turn being invited to share the good practices with other schools within the SSB’s purview.

Familiarity with the day-to-day operations of the school and the nature of the partnership varied widely among those interviewed in case studies and focus groups. In one case, principals under the same SSB would meet six times a year to share their experience of ESR, discuss and report issues related to the major concerns of their schools. They would also have interflow programmes with schools in mainland China, with which reciprocal visits would be arranged so as to learn from one another.

Concerns expressed by staff in special schools as to the understanding and contextualisation of ESR were reiterated by SMC/IMC and SSB members. ESR, it was suggested, provides a valuable opportunity for systematic parental participation not only in providing insights for the ESR team but also benefiting parents by acquainting them with school affairs, a critical aspect in particular for special schools.

## 1.9 Recommendations from SSB and SMC/IMC

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Among recommendations made by SMC/IMC and SSB members, there was a plea for ESR teams to avoid any practices that could create a sense of mistrust, such as ‘testing’ different staff or students with the same question, interrupting classroom teaching when making appointment for post-observation sharing, requesting for extra documents or photocopying school documents without obtaining prior school consent.

Other recommendations from SSB and SMC/IMC members included:

- More post-ESR support to facilitate school improvement
- Capitalising on the ERs’ experience in order to enhance the capacity building of school personnel
- Inviting representatives of the SSB or SMC/IMC to the oral feedback session
- Improving the ESR team composition by including more members with a background in special education and/or academics from the Hong Kong Institute of Education so as to gain a better understanding of the context of special schools
- ESR reports to provide issues for reflection by the SSB so as to enhance school improvement
- Empowering schools to work in partnership with ESR teams in school review
- If there were to be a strong emphasis on focus inspection (FI), giving attention to the frequency and planning of FI with clear notification of the key issues to be inspected

## 1.10 Parents as partners

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Over the last decade, greater attention has been paid by schools to parental views, parents’ involvement in SSE and improvement, together with a heightened recognition of schools’ accountability to parents individually and as a body.

Based on the views gathered from the focus group session with parents, it appears that despite concerted efforts at policy level and at school level, parents’ knowledge of, and involvement in, ESR varied widely. In the main, ESR remained a mystery and was at best seen somewhat cursorily. Given that parents attending focus groups are likely to be the most informed or engaged, it points to a deeper lying issue. Parental knowledge is an issue

that becomes more acute in secondary schools as much of the contact that occurs in primary schools diminishes as children move up to the ‘big school’. Parent involvement could easily become more tokenistic:

While not having great involvement in SSE/ESR, parents commented that, in their limited acquaintance with procedures and protocols, both aspects of the quality assurance equation were deemed to be ‘beneficial’ or ‘good’.

There are exceptions to the rule, evidenced in schools in which senior leaders make strenuous efforts to inform and involve parents, understanding their critical role as educators and partners. In one school, for example, a primary teacher reported that at least once a year, a class would be open to parents, encouraging critical observation accompanied by parents’ completion of a questionnaire.

In the focus group session and case studies of a couple of special schools, some parents of students with complex or profound learning needs commented that ESR teams did not always comprehend the nature of special education nor know how to evaluate practice over the course of a limited visit. This implies that there is room for a more careful selection of external review teams with requisite expertise and professional development for QASBSD personnel.

## SECTION 2 – THE NATURE AND RIGOUR OF ESR AND OTHER TYPES OF SCHOOL INSPECTION/REVIEW

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Differential forms of inspection, or review, are now common in many countries. In some respects, Hong Kong has led the way in working with differing approaches, such as Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) and FI under the Quality Assurance Framework implemented in 1997, and ESR and FI under the SDA framework introduced since 2003. The evaluation provided an opportunity to gauge feedback on the efficacy of, and attitudes to, the different types of inspection/review.

### 2.1 ESR and QAI/FI Parents as partners

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An ongoing debate continues as to the relative merits of ESR and QAI, or other forms of more focused inspection. While advocacy of these is often described as an either/or, it points to the potential for policy makers to revisit ‘what works’ and in what circumstances, and to reshape external evaluation so as to provide a more flexible and differentiated approach while maintaining the best of what has already been achieved.

ESR and QAI/FI were the subject of discussion among staff in focus groups, comparisons being made as to the benefits of one protocol against another. The preponderance of evidence was clearly in favour of ESR, although QASBSD staff pointed out that these approaches ought to be seen as complementary rather than antagonistic. From teachers’ and school leaders’ viewpoints, they tended to be compared favourably or unfavourably, often in respect of the relative stress, nature of documentation and ‘yardsticks’ used.

References to bureaucratic and judgmental approaches, seen as more characteristic of QAI and ESR in the first cycle of the SDA framework, have become noticeably less frequent than in the previous evaluation, but still deserve to be taken into account. The QASBSD has been receptive to feedback and has been continuously willing to modify practice, adjusting demands on schools and bringing a sharper focus to the key issues of concern. The closer collaboration with support services will bring new challenges and opportunities for a closer alignment of summative and formative purposes.

Advocacy for FI came most strongly from some members of the SMC/IMC focus group who argued for the more differentiated approach that focused inspection was able to offer. They suggested that it might not be necessary to inspect all four PI domains in the next cycle. Instead, it should focus on some areas, such as a school’s weaknesses or its development trajectory.

Those who made a stronger argument for QAI/FI placed emphasis on the following:

- One-on-one discussion of the lesson observed as providing more concrete ideas for teachers' improvement
- QAI as more in-depth, direct and critical
- Feedback being more focused and specific and offering more specific advice for curriculum/subject development
- The FI mode as preferable 'because it is shorter in time, goes deeper into the matter and involves less manpower'
- Inspectors with experience and expertise in the subject domain

Some teachers said that they looked forward to FI as the inspectors were subject specialists and were able to give them appropriate advice for improvement in their teaching and subject management.

'The EDB needs to follow up on the recommendations of the last ESR report,' suggested one secondary headteacher, adding:

*For example, focus inspection could be conducted to follow up on the areas for improvement and provide support to the school. With regard to negotiation of the review focus for ESR, the focus should be on the reported weaknesses of the schools, that's the recommendations of the ESR reports. Schools could be invited to set the focus for ESR, but the final decision should rest with the EDB.*

It was further argued that different inspection modes would be appropriate to schools in different stages of development and in relation to the school's performance in various PI domains. As one headteacher commented:

*For those schools with good performance, it might not be necessary to have a whole-school ESR for a number of years. Flexibility could be exercised. For example, schools could invite the EDB to conduct focus inspection to their schools.*

## 2.2 Reshaping external evaluation in the next phase of intervention

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The advocacy for different forms of quality assurance provides the opportunity for policy makers to reshape external evaluation of schools in the next phase of intervention, providing a more flexible and differentiated approach while maintaining the best of what has already been achieved.

## SECTION 3 – THE CONTRIBUTION OF SSE/ESR IN FORGING PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP

### 3.1 The nature of partnership

It is commonly understood that the process of school self-evaluation and external review, or inspection, should be viewed as a partnership, both parties working towards a common goal of capacity building and school improvement. A professional partnership rests on a willingness to listen, to recognize another's point of view, to accept critique and to be willing to change. In a climate where the initiative comes from the EDB's side and where there may be resistance, the onus is on the ESR team to model the partnership qualities of openness, sincerity and courtesy.

In the questionnaires, there were a number of written comments from school staff members on the professionalism, friendliness, sincerity, courtesy, understanding and concrete suggestions of the ESR team. What is clear from these comments, although comprising a relatively small minority of school staff, is an appreciation of the personal and professional qualities of team members.

Encouraging and helpful comments have proved to be much appreciated, helping teachers in self-reflection and in challenging their prior practice. ESR team members have learned to tread warily around sensitive issues of language and terminology as, it has been found, teachers can be quick to react to negative remarks or comments, especially if they see these comments as being made without sufficient observation time or local knowledge.

The range and nature of ESR teams' expertise, commented on by different focus groups, highlights the very sensitive nature of the task, requiring constant vigilance, self-restraint and empathy, often in a climate where a visit is not welcomed and seen as an excessive or bureaucratic burden. This is compounded by the need for on-site sharing, training or coaching for less experienced members of the team.

Comments from different sources and different stakeholders may be portrayed as a force field of conflicting perceptions. These tensions are virtually inevitable as people bring with them differing experiences, expectations, anxieties and levels of self-confidence. This is not, however, the only explanation, as teams and individuals within teams differ, too. Despite school personnel's generally positive views on ESR teams' professionalism (the '*Strongly agree*' and '*Agree*' percentages for the Q1 item 'The ESR team demonstrated professionalism in the review process' for 2008/09-2012/13 are 84.1%, 78.4%, 80.4%, 82.8% and 81.8% respectively), QASBSD has experience over the years of individual team members who lacked the high standards of professionalism commented on in some schools. Addressing these is an issue for professional development both pre-, and in-, service, for team leaders and for rigorous internal accountability and responsiveness to feedback. It is particularly pertinent given a high rate of turnover among QASBSD staff.

## 3.2 The contribution of External Reviewers

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ERs have proved to bring added value to ESR teams' credibility and impact and have received a very strong endorsement from ESR team members. In 2010/11, 2011/12 and 2012/13 accolades were very consistent – Over 90% of team members agreed or strongly agreed that they 'collaborated well with team members', 'communicated effectively with team members' and 'demonstrated good interpersonal skills' in interacting with members of the school. In 2010/11 there were four areas identified that left room for improvement. By 2012/13 there was marked perceived improvement in all of those areas:

- Substantiate his/her judgment with evidence (from 81.4% in 2010/11 to 88.4% in 2012/13)
- Exercise proper report writing skills, being precise, professional and logical (from 71.0% to 87.5%)
- Participate actively in the corporate judgment discussions (from 78.3% to 90.2%)
- Raise significant issues that required the attention of the team (from 79.7% to 85.8%)

From the ERs' point of view, the written responses were overwhelmingly positive in the above survey years. There were positive views expressed on the team spirit, teamwork, professionalism and experience of the ESR team as a whole, the team leader's professionalism and leadership qualities, and the overall process as a good and meaningful experience.

In the focus group discussion with the Advisory Group on SDA, it was said that the review experience proved to be an investment in competence and morale, boosting confidence, promoting personal and professional growth and exposing teachers to practices of other schools. Despite the manifest professional benefits, release of teachers to serve on an ESR team, by comparison with senior leaders, could lead to logistic issues, such as arranging supply teachers. There was a need, in addition, for careful selection and rigorous criteria for such selection, together with both training and certification. Alignment in judgement would be best achieved, it was suggested, through co-lesson observation with QASBSD officers. Release of teachers for secondment to QASBSD was proposed as a preferred option.

## 3.3 Professional partnerships

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QASBSD personnel and school staff share a common interest in making their schools better places for students. The closer they work together to achieve that aim, the more successful the process of self-evaluation and external review. In this respect, SITs play a key role in introducing, embedding and sustaining the SDA framework.

From an ESR team perspective, finding the balance between support and challenge has proved to be a continuing issue. As one team member commented, schools can be very defensive, not always co-operative, and

reluctant to accept suggestions, viewing comments as simply criticism rather than as formative critique. Where defensiveness and resistance to criticism remain, it clearly brings pressure on ESR teams. In anticipation of such a response from school personnel, it may call for the most experienced and expert of teams to be involved in those schools, and to share lessons within and between ESR teams on how such difficulties can be approached and overcome.

## SECTION 4 – THE USE AND ADAPTATION OF SELF-EVALUATION TOOLS IN EMBEDDING SSE

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As SSE has developed over the course of nearly a decade, schools have been provided with an expanding repertoire of tools and strategies for their own internal quality assurance. The OIR has been developed as a source of support, illustrating the range of tools available and how they have been put to use in schools with testimonies from headteachers, teachers, parents and students.

### 4.1 The use and adaptation of self-evaluation tools

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In general, school personnel were appreciative of the range of tools at their disposal through the EDB website. Some schools were able to use the tools flexibly and adapt them to their own needs and circumstances. As one senior management team member wrote: ‘There are templates for writing school reports, the electronic school development and accountability platform, stakeholder survey and APASO (Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes). The APASO does not fully fit our school type. We develop our own set.’ Other comments on how schools used or adapted self-evaluation tools included:

*The social network platform on the Internet is a popular tool to gather student voice, such as collecting student opinions on school policies by Facebook.*

*We have strengthened our moral education after analysing the data from the APASO.*

*APASO is used selectively, referring to aspects which fit with the school’s mission and values.*

*Comparison of students’ academic performance across classes is used to inform the strategic manpower deployment. Comparison of school examination papers with those of other schools was undertaken as necessary.*

*SWOT analysis is conducted by middle managers to identify areas for improvement. The analysis is then reported to the staff at the staff meeting and discussed till we reach a consensus, so providing the key issues for the school development plan.*

The regular use of self-evaluation tools appears to vary widely from school to school and even within schools, often at the initiative of the individual teacher. These internal variations occur when there is little evidence of a whole school strategy or proactive leadership, or attributable to an influential SIT.

## 4.2 Questionnaires

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Among the tools of self-evaluation, questionnaires have become widely adopted in school practice. Schools' approaches to the design and use of questionnaires differ widely. Some schools adopt exemplars from the EDB website. 'We always browse the EDB website,' said a teacher of one school. 'We frequently use the templates for planning and the questionnaires on the E-platform for School Development and Accountability.'

In some cases, schools design their own. Some use subject-based formats to gauge learning and teaching in different areas of the curriculum. Some schools regard it as a matter of principle to treat questionnaires as confidential while in other cases senior or middle managers have access to students' evaluations of named teachers.

## 4.3 Incorporating and honouring student voice

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Over a decade, there has been a major shift in attitudes to 'student voice' and what students have to say about their school and classroom experience. From a time when it was rare, and often unwelcome, for students to express their views about teaching, learning or school life in general, Hong Kong has gone further than most other countries or regions in the world in incorporating and honouring student voice.

In many schools, the nature of 'student voice' has gone well beyond a tokenistic gesture to one in which students are more centrally involved in the evaluation of their schools and in relation to classroom practice, offering greater scope territory-wide for student agency and leadership. Encouragement for schools to be more adventurous has, in many places, produced dividends in terms of student engagement, ownership and effort.

In most cases, feedback from students to individual teachers is voluntary, often informal and within an initiative known only to the teacher. In some cases, it has been made more systemic, with specific times in the year when students may complete a questionnaire or give oral feedback on learning and teaching.

In recent years, it had become more common, towards the end of the school year, for staff to ask for students' opinions on how they could improve their pedagogy. In some schools, students' views are engaged with more formally and scrutinised by senior management. Questioned in interview as to whether finding yourself below the norm might be demoralising, teachers were either non-committal or claimed that such feedback was helpful and formative. Basic rank teachers commented that, based on the feedback, they were able to make a comparison of their own performance across successive years as well as with other teachers, as an average rating for the performance of teachers in the same level is provided. With this knowledge, teachers could, it was said, make adjustments to their teaching strategies accordingly.

Self-evaluation was also characterised as the quality of dialogue which takes place at teachers' meetings in which students' needs, progress and all-round development are examined and celebrated – an ongoing and embedded feature of how teachers share and discuss their work. In response to student feedback, teachers adjust the schemes of work annually instead of simply adopting the same approach year after year.

#### 4.4 The use made of the Online Interactive Resource (OIR)

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While some teachers had, on their own initiative, used the OIR, it was said that there were always other pressing priorities and that time had to be found at home or at weekends to engage with what was a rich resource requiring dedicated time rather than occasional 'surfing'. In only one or two primary schools was there evidence of OIR being used systematically on a whole school basis.

## SECTION 5 – THE IMPACT OF SSE/ESR: EMBEDDING SSE IN DAY-TO-DAY SCHOOL PRACTICE

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The ultimate purpose of ESR is to become less and less necessary as SSE becomes more widely understood and more deeply embedded in routine practice. It is unlikely that ESR would ever become redundant but, over time and with heightened self-confidence within schools, the nature of external monitoring will inevitably change in character and focus.

### 5.1 Embedding, sustaining and enhancing: confidence, capacity and accountability

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Questionnaire data show SIT members' conviction that self-evaluation is embedded in the thinking and practice of the staff of their schools. On the other hand, some principals, when questioned about the embedding and routines of SSE in the interviews, suggested that it varied because some teachers were more obedient and compliant, whereas others needed more persuasion to conduct SSE. Various strategies were outlined by principals, encouraging their staff to engage in SSE. Starting small and from a group of core members allowed the promotion of good SSE practices to their colleagues. It was also suggested that schools which share a sponsoring body could encourage junior and senior teachers to share their good practices widely among themselves.

The frequent reference by school personnel to the need for longer term embedding of change is reminder to policy, at every level, of the dangers of pressing for the 'quick fix'. It is an alert to the importance of clear agendas and to expectations as to what is possible in the short and longer term, and the point at which mandate and consultation meet.

The embedding of SSE and exploiting the potential of ESR continues to be a learning process for all involved and, as such, necessarily encounters setbacks as well as progress. There are vital lessons to be learned from places in which impatient politicians and policy makers have got cold feet, continually changing course and abandoning reform in face of resistance. Hong Kong is arguably the most advanced of any country or region in its embedding of quality assurance in school practice, and in its receptivity to independent evaluation. It must continue to build on its highly significant achievements.

### 5.2 Who contribute most to the embedding of SSE/ESR?

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As the ultimate purpose of SSE is to embed its purposes and protocols into the ongoing life of classrooms and

schools, who are seen as making the most useful contribution to that process? On the basis of mentions in open-ended questionnaire comments over the data collection period, it was middle managers who were seen to be most helpful. This may, in part, be explained by their subject remit and their key role in monitoring and development in their disciplinary area. Teachers are also seen as playing an instrumental role. The trans-disciplinary/whole school focus of the SSE/ESR team, in third place, is possibly seen as having less immediate subject relevance while the influence of principals is perhaps at a further remove from the day-to-day concerns of teachers.

### 5.3 SSE: What it means and what it requires

While there is very clear evidence that schools are now making much greater use of SSE protocols and instruments, the degree to which it is embedded in teachers' thinking, practice and priorities remains open to question.

What self-evaluation means to a school staff has continued to be seen as an issue. There may be differences of perception between SSE and self-evaluation, the former characterised by an event or process that the school engages in from time to time, a reference to data (qualitative and quantitative), questionnaires or other tools employed, as against an approach to teaching and learning which is marked by reflection and discussion and by a constant search for evidence of impact and the possibilities of change.

Interviews in schools revealed a wide variety of approaches:

- Annual school plans are evaluated by the School Management Team at the end of the school year
- Every department/committee carries out the evaluation at the end of each school year
- Views of different stakeholders are solicited through EDB-initiated questionnaires
- The school administers the school-based questionnaire survey on classroom learning and teaching yearly to collect students' views on their teachers' performance
- Students offer individual feedback to their teachers at the end of the academic year, such as filling out a 10-item questionnaire
- A suggestion box on the ground floor corridor allows students to post anonymous comments addressed to individual teachers
- Teachers' meetings at which they discuss students' needs and students' all-round development, not simply their academic progress
- Teachers talk together and try to find out what they are less good at and what they would do better, taking into account the opinions of parents, social workers and students themselves
- Parents of all levels are able to express their views on the school in the monthly parent gathering

A consistent finding over successive iterations of the questionnaire reveals a systemic issue – the difference between primary and secondary schools, one which is characteristic of responses to a whole range of statements, such as *‘My involvement in the holistic review of the school has given me a better understanding of our school’s overall performance’*, *‘I take an active part in evaluating the performance of our school’* and *‘SSE has enhanced professional exchange among staff on how to make continuous school improvement’*. It points to secondary teachers in particular feeling less a part of the process and with a lesser sense of agency in affecting the outcome. The greater difficulties of communication across a secondary school are also revealed in responses to the statement *‘SSE has enhanced professional exchange among staff on how to make continuous school improvement’*. This is clearly a reflection of the size, structure and more differentiated nature of secondary schools as well as secondary school cultures which often struggle to achieve the more inclusive ethos of primary or special schools.

In summary, while these data provide no surprises and simply reflect what we know about the relative structures, timetabling, staffing, ethos and leadership between primary and secondary schools, there is, nonetheless a challenge to be met. As the data show, not all secondary schools perform less well in embedding SSE than all primary schools. From a policy perspective, therefore, it may be salutary to examine where that primary/secondary overlap occurs and what may be learned from leading-edge secondary schools.

## SECTION 6 – THE IMPACT OF SSE/ESR: SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Professional development is a prerequisite to, and concomitant of, self-evaluation and is a determining factor in the embedding of self-evaluation and in receptivity to ESR. It appeared to depend very significantly on the quality of leadership, either at senior management level and/or through the SITs. There is considerable evidence to show that when well-conceived and well-led, school-based professional development can be the most empowering strategy at both individual and organisational levels. It also provides the basis and impetus for school development planning.

### 6.1 School development planning and staff development

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SSE and ESR are the essential sources of intelligence for school development planning and for professional development. As a necessary component of that process, it is described in one school as follows:

*We adopt a whole school approach and all teachers participate in the three-year school development plan. We focus on the recommendations in the ESR report, brainstorm for ideas and suggestions and discuss priority setting. The communication is both top-down and bottom-up. All teachers have a better understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, and the school's decision on school development.*

A number of schools reported making use of a staff development day to discuss and review the school development plan with all teachers. This was followed, as one school reported it, by the setting up of 'a special task group to look into the problem areas', some of which did not lend themselves to a 'quick fix'. In a focus group discussion, a member described the internalisation or routinisation of self-evaluation and referred to the deep-seated nature of development and change: '*We find that a number of development items may take years to improve*'.

### 6.2 Professional development in learning and teaching

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As a professional development priority, interactive classroom methodologies were a recurring theme in ESR reports. This proved to be most pertinent in relation to the use of questioning. Classroom observation with a focus on questioning skills was frequently cited as a post-ESR initiative, and questioning was one of the key issues addressed through peer lesson observation, collaborative lesson planning sessions and through measures taken to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. These initiatives are all increasingly features of schools in Hong

Kong, but require not only high levels of skill in perceiving what is salient but also in providing feedback which helps to identify areas for improvement. This underlines the need for continuing professional development for teachers, middle managers and senior leaders.

There is widespread evidence from schools of peer lesson observation and collaborative lesson planning sessions, not only in respect of planning for the next lesson but taking stock of, reflecting on and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching. With a more robust, informed and well-conceived approach to professional development, there is evidence that a number of professional benefits have accrued. For example, sessions which helped teachers to recognise and cater for learner diversity had lessened the need for remedial teaching. Not only within schools but through critical, evidence-based inter-school exchanges, pedagogy had become more varied, responsive and professionally enhancing.

In focus groups, numerous examples were offered of ways in which schools had moved to more interactive and student-centred approaches. Students commented that following ESR, the school had organised more activity-based learning; and teachers were now conducting more classroom activities, such as group discussion and reporting back. There were examples of greater emphasis being placed on higher-order thinking and collaborative activities, such as group work. Teachers, it was claimed, were attending seminars to learn new strategies in order to increase their teaching effectiveness. As the quantitative data show, personnel in most of the schools surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that good use was made of self-evaluation findings in improving classroom learning and teaching, while most SITs expressed agreement to the statement ‘SSE and ESR have together made a positive impact on the quality of learning and teaching in our school’.

### 6.3 Appraisal and school-based professional development

Appraisal refers to the evaluation of teacher performance and is an integral aspect of professional development. Appraisal takes a variety of forms and is often seen as separate or distinct from SSE. The issues and potential connections were a common focus for discussion in different stakeholder groups. These discussions revealed differing conceptions of appraisal – as integral to, complementary to, or completely separate in purpose and function from, self-evaluation. It was seen by some as a bottom-up process, by others as more top-down and by some as a mixture of both. Who is appraised and who performs the appraising was found to differ markedly across schools.

Formats for appraisal of the principal and senior teachers were, in some schools, provided by the SSB who would follow up on the analysis of the questionnaires by discussion with the principal. How SMC/IMC members saw their role ranged from playing no part in that process to having a close interest.

While appraisal was often seen as a separate process from SSE and development planning, the best of practice shows how it can be an integral part of a holistic approach to quality assurance and school improvement. One of the salient benefits of the SSE/ESR relationship has been a growing collaboration among teachers, leading to better identification of professional development needs. The Impact Study shows clear evidence of enhanced communication among teachers and a greater emphasis on team work. How different schools have been able to marry top-down and bottom-up approaches should alert policy makers to imaginative and integrated approaches to appraisal, drawing on compelling exemplars from leading-edge schools.

## SECTION 7 – THE IMPACT OF SSE/ESR: ENHANCING SCHOOLS’ INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONFIDENCE WITH EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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The interface between external and internal accountability has assumed a heightened priority in international policy studies. This is, in part, a response to upward accountability which has brought pressure on school staff, seen as diminishing, rather than empowering, and viewed as mitigating a sense of ownership. The thrust of SSE since its inception has been to encourage internal accountability through professional development and the concomitant provision by the EDB of teacher-friendly tools. At the same time, ESR has sought to help teachers to make the connections, to be welcoming and responsive to external critique, and to view lesson observation as enhancing rather than undermining a sense of internal accountability.

### 7.1 Enhancing internal accountability through peer lesson observation

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One of the patent strengths of the educational system in Hong Kong is the priority given to lesson observation, to collaborative lesson planning and to other measures which have been shown to strengthen internal accountability and enhance professional development. Research has shown such reciprocal relationships to be at the epicentre of organisational intelligence and capacity building.

There was evidence from the case study schools and focus groups showing that, following ESR, schools sought to enhance internal accountability through peer lesson observation. Here are some examples:

- Panel heads discussed lesson observation skills with panel members, and teachers were encouraged to visit and observe teachers of other schools who conducted interactive lessons and who were, generally, effective in learning and teaching.
- KLA coordinators conducted lesson observation and exercise-book inspection, discussing purposes and protocols with their colleagues before lesson observation as well as giving them feedback after the lesson.
- The Principal conducted lesson observations for new teachers, and with teachers in specific KLA chosen for appraisal purposes every year so as to provide an overview of learning and teaching across different subjects.
- Newer teachers observed the lessons of the more experienced teachers, and vice versa, once a year.

- In a special school, where at first teachers were anxious about lesson observation, lessons were video-recorded for subsequent supportive comment and critique by colleagues. With the use of the lesson observation forms, teachers were able to provide more finely tuned constructive feedback to their colleagues.

Lesson observations, do, however, bring some pressure. In this respect, teachers valued the mentoring which helps them to adapt their practice. This was described as particularly valuable for new teachers.

*We have a schedule for lesson observation. There are two kinds of lesson observation. The first kind is conducted in the first term by me and the middle managers. The second kind, conducted in the second term, is for appraisal purposes.*

(Principal of a secondary school)

## 7.2 Lesson observation in ESR and post-lesson observation sharing

Lesson observation in ESR is one of the key accountability measures. Its purpose is less about accountability to the EDB than to students' learning and welfare. This essential purpose is not always understood by school staff, and is often combined with ambivalence as to its summative or formative purpose. This uncertainty may be compounded if members of ESR teams are themselves unclear as to the key purposes of observation, the value of and nature of feedback, and the importance of clarity in communication with teachers. In the 2008 report on the Impact Study on the implementation of the first cycle of the SDA framework, it was stated that 'with regard to classroom observation, there is a need for more rigorous briefing for ESR teams, better information for teachers as to the purpose and criteria of lesson observation and what it is reasonable to expect by way of post-lesson feedback'.

Although still a bone of contention, the questionnaire data show an overall favourable rating as shown by the high agreement levels to the statements *Post lesson observation discussion with individual teachers provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on students' learning and classroom practice* and *Post lesson observation discussion with individual teachers provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on how school concerns were addressed in classroom teaching*. Secondary schools' responses to issues of feedback were less sanguine although still generally positive.

While lesson observation has now become less contentious, the longstanding issue of inconsistent post-lesson feedback during ESR has still remained. Significant progress has been made over the years but, for some, observation of lessons has remained a sensitive issue. In the written comments made by school personnel in relation to the nature and timing of observation, and the adequacy of post-lesson feedback and discussion, the issues raised have a familiar resonance in other national contexts:

- The desire for subject specialists to observe specialist subjects
- Lack of understanding of key elements of the lesson observed
- The timing of the observation and amount of time given to post-lesson observation discussion
- The timing of feedback – immediately after the lesson
- The unfairness of observing newly qualified teachers
- The need for advanced information on the observation schedule
- The number of lessons included so as to give a representative view
- The explicit communication of criteria against which teachers are judged
- Communication with teachers as to how they have been rated
- Feedback on strengths and weaknesses of lessons
- Opportunity for teachers to give their judgments on the lesson
- The dissemination/celebration of excellent and outstanding lessons

The largest number of comments was in relation to some teachers not being invited for POS, together with staff comments on oral feedback as too limited to only those invited. It was suggested by some respondents that all teachers, or anyone interested, should be included. Overall, there was a desire for greater transparency of the criteria employed by the ESR team for lesson observation, and for the criteria to be reviewed regularly. A comment from the principals' focus group suggested that the lesson observation form used by the ESR team, while familiar to many, should be made public so that teachers would know what sort of assessment criteria were employed and, it was further suggested, workshops could be organised to address these criteria. Members of a secondary school SMC/IMC commented that it would enhance transparency if the ESR team gave feedback to all teachers so preventing unnecessary disinformation from spreading around the school. As 'sometimes, not everything is put down in the written report', it would both prevent rumour and help staff to gain a more textured understanding of the school's performance in different areas.

### 7.3 Shadowing

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There was positive endorsement for shadowing as contributing to the judgements made of learning and teaching, as review team members are exposed to the authentic learning experience from the student's perspective. The ESR team could then formulate its judgement on the overall quality of learning and teaching with information from different perspectives. As a principal commented, 'shadowing of students is meaningful, as it helps the review team to know more about the school ethos and students' daily life on campus'.

Shadowing of students and focus group meetings being arranged together on the same day did, however, lead to long working hours for ESR teams. For instance, inspectors may have to start shadowing students from the morning assembly until late afternoon when the shadowed students take part in after-school activities.

## SECTION 8 – THE IMPACT OF SSE/ESR: BUILDING SCHOOLS’ CAPACITY FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE AND CURRICULUM REFORMS

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‘Capacity’ is a term that has entered the educational and policy discourse in recent years. While in everyday language it refers to limited volume, when referring to an organisation such as a school it implies something unlimited, something growing and expanding, pushing back preconceived boundaries and expectations.

So, capacity and change have a reciprocal relationship. Although change is a constant, it is rarely welcomed when teachers have established routines with the consequence that they are likely to defend what they have traditionally done over time, with apparent success. Adopting a rigorous approach to curriculum reform, as has been shown through each successive iteration of the Impact Study, is disturbing of ‘the way we do things round here’ and requires an openness to self-evaluation and external evidence and to potential criticism.

### 8.1 A capacity for change

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As is evident from the foregoing sections in this report, given the primary aim of capacity building, SSE and ESR challenge existing practice and encounter some resistance. At the same time, the process has contributed in major ways to changes in understanding school and classroom practice. It has been made evident in the use and adaptation of self-evaluation tools, in the heightened awareness of criteria for SSE, in classroom observation and collaboration and indicating where there has been a positive response of school staff to ESR. While ESR is not an improvement process of itself, it does act as a catalyst for change at both classroom and school levels.

A range of changes following ESR has been mentioned in case study schools and in focus groups, including:

- More frequent subject form meetings
- Changes in the organisational structure
- Enhanced collaboration among colleagues
- More transparency in sharing ideas and materials
- Greater collaboration in preparing materials and in the design of lessons
- Subject departments now conducting mid-year evaluations

As well as evidence from focus groups, virtually all of the 10 case study schools cited specific changes that had taken place in enhancing pedagogy with more engaging and effective classroom strategies. The quality and impact of new approaches were now more observable in styles of questioning, in enhanced opportunities for

students to think, discuss and reflect. As well as greater use of questioning tailored to academic ability, there was evidence of heightened attention to students with learning difficulties, more group work in some subjects and more lesson preparation by students. In most of the 10 case study schools, there was a greater focus on lesson observation.

While change is rarely welcomed by school staff, they have adapted, some more wholeheartedly than others, to the demands of a new regime. A comment from one headteacher both illustrates the slow and often challenging pace of change and perhaps speaks for many of his colleagues:

*Our school has spent eight years to adapt to the ESR mechanism. We are not prepared to adapt to great changes again in future.*

## 8.2 The locus of change

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In the questionnaire surveys, there were a number of write-in responses from school staff as to the locus of change. ‘Learning and teaching’ was cited top, with ‘school planning’ and ‘leadership and management’ in second and third places respectively.

When it is a question of embedding of SSE, the most influential staff were seen to be middle managers and coordinators with school heads most often nominated in the ‘least’ influential category. Given the consistency of data showing school heads as most optimistic about aspects of SSE/ESR, these data reinforce the notion that they tend to be most removed from the actual front line process of data gathering and face-to-face classroom practice.

## SECTION 9 – THE IMPACT OF SSE/ESR: DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS

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What do we understand by reflective practice? It may be defined as ‘the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning’.

It is through the adoption and use of self-evaluation tools that schools are able to develop that reflective capacity, to stand back critically from their day-to-day routine and consider the effectiveness and impact of their practice. When there is a culture of SSE, the dialogue within and across stakeholder groups is made possible, ultimately enhancing the quality of learning and teaching.

### 9.1 Building a culture of reflective practice

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There is evidence that a reflective culture is taking shape in some schools. Personnel in over 75% of the schools surveyed strongly agreed or agreed with the Q3 statement ‘We have developed a self-reflective culture in our school’. A reflective culture is not built overnight, though. It was agreed by focus group members that this is a long term investment and relies on a ‘buy in’ from all the staff in a climate where there is not simply pressure on teachers to ‘deliver’ results.

Self-evaluation is, in many instances, tied closely to the school development planning cycle. Many teachers and school leaders referred to ‘a culture of P-I-E’. Each of these – planning, implementation and evaluation – may be cast as a sequence of events that takes place at a given time or, as in some schools, recognised as a continuing, embedded, integral and organic process.

This is particularly relevant to schools for students with special educational needs. Testimonies from teachers and senior managers in these schools describe a process in which monitoring, reflection and evaluation are integral aspects of school life. They occur on a daily basis. They are not an occasional event. By necessity, teachers have to be clear about when and how students are learning, alert to individual needs, maintaining an ongoing dialogue about learning and teaching and continuously drawing on their colleagues’ views and expertise.

Numerous respondents expressed their appreciation of the E-platform for School Development and Accountability and the evaluation tools. These tools are so easily accessible, allowing them to compare their performance with their counterparts in other schools, ‘providing their teachers with a more holistic view towards school-based policies’. There is, manifestly, some distance still to travel in helping teachers, middle managers and senior leaders to employ and adapt these tools more integrally into their work and to use them to

best effect. There was a signal danger in the overuse of questionnaires, pointing to the need for more varied and in-depth forms of response.

## 9.2 Does ‘workload’ inhibit the development of a self-reflective culture?

‘Workload’ was a consistent theme running through the documentation, interviews in case studies and focus groups, described by one commentator as ‘the elephant in the room’, ever present, often invisible but with unmistakable effect on the energy invested in, and priority given to, self-evaluation. In answer to the query ‘Is SSE embedded in the school?’, one basic rank teacher’s reply speaks for many of her colleagues – ‘It is a good idea and we try to do our best to implement it but heavy workload means we have to put the needs of students first while also trying to meet targets and changes in curriculum and assessment.’ Members of a primary school IMC also commented on issues of workload and its direct effect on teacher morale, suggesting that the way to raise morale would be to alleviate non-teaching duties and provide teachers with more space and a more concentrated focus on learning and teaching.

## SECTION 10 – THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP: KEY TO THE EMBEDDING OF SSE AND RESPONSE TO ESR

Leadership of schools remains the key to SSE, to the preparation and reception for ESR, to development planning, to managing and alleviating teacher workload and facilitating collegial sharing of practice both within and beyond the school. There is evidence that leadership is coming to be understood as a shared (or ‘distributed’) activity, although still embryonic in many places, signalling a need for studied selection and professional development of new principals as well as many already in post. Harnessing the expertise of outstanding principals is clearly a policy priority for the present and future.

### 10.1 Senior leaders

Preparation for, and response to, external review owe much to the nature of leadership. As a member of the SMC stated, principals’ attitudes and roles are crucial in determining how ESR is perceived. Principals who take a less engaged role tend to regard ESR as ‘invaders’ while principals with a proactive role are more likely to welcome the challenge, to appreciate ESR teams’ recommendations and to consider them as professionally enhancing. Pressure, it was said, is contagious and related to the degree to which the principal or senior managers crank up the tension or, alternatively, create a positive and receptive climate, emphasising the benefits to be gained from an enlightened, friendly, external eye.

Ways in which senior leaders describe the ESR experience is a measure of their understanding and willing participation while, in a similar vein, terms used by their staff provide a telling indicator of the quality of leadership and creation of a self-evaluation culture. These are shown in Figure 10.1.

**Figure 10.1 Descriptors of ESR**

<b>Negatives</b>	<b>Positives</b>
Anxiety	Friendly
Fault-finding	Helpful
Secret police	Positive
Proof	Healthy
Busy	Improving
Pressure	Collaborative
Workload	Professional
Body check	Objective
Intimidating	Partnership
Tedious	Approachable

<b>Negatives</b>	<b>Positives</b>
Hard work	Experts
No feeling	Trust
No experience	Understanding
Overwork	School-specific
Overtime	Routine
Tiresome	Fruitful
Exhausted	United
Fear	Fun

Many of the words in the left hand column above are more likely to be found in schools in which principals and senior staff had failed to create a receptive and positive climate for ESR. Many terms in the left hand column refer specifically to the first round of ESR and are contrasted with many of the words that appear in the right hand column which refer, predominantly, to the ESR conducted in the second cycle of the SDA framework. Some terms, such as ‘fault-finding’, were cited in relation to CR as conducted in DSS schools. While it was claimed that these DSS schools considered CR as essential because of their in-depth review by an outside body, it was also suggested that CR teams ‘are nice to the principals but may not be polite to the other teaching staff’. By contrast, SMC/IMC members tended to view ESR as preferable because it was more friendly and focused mainly on the school’s own self-evaluation and on staff’s major concerns.

## 10.2 Managers in the middle

The comment that middle managers could find themselves ‘sandwiched between the school head and teachers’ is an issue to be recognised, and taken account of, in scheduling professional development programmes. The request that the EDB should organise more workshops or seminars for middle managers was seen as one way of addressing that particular issue.

It is clear from the testimonies of SIT members, for example, that they also play a vital leadership role, responding to the responsibilities given them to contribute to a positive ethos and to play a role in strong advocacy of the benefits of both SSE and ESR.

While there is a danger that SITs are too ‘top heavy’, composed of members of senior management rather than more widely constituted, providing opportunities for leadership exercised by SITs has been an important policy initiative. It has proved, in the best-led schools, to be a catalyst for change, encouraging ownership of staff beyond senior or middle management. Advice on the composition, role and professional development opportunities for SITs is, in light of the evidence, a highly worthwhile policy investment.

## SECTION 11 – INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES: A ‘DIFFERENTIATED’ APPROACH?

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In the initiation and development of self-evaluation and concomitant changes to inspection/external review, policy makers look to other countries, sometimes to ‘cherry pick’ from apparently successful systems, sometimes to gain ideas in order to construct their own approach. On occasions, it provides a lesson in what not to do. In this respect, Hong Kong has approached the issue critically, with sensitivity to the local culture and a recognition of the inherent dangers in policy borrowing.

A focus on schools’ own processes of self-evaluation has become more widely accepted as the essential purpose of external review and the rationale for differentiated, or ‘proportional’ review. In other words, if a school is manifestly knowledgeable about its own strengths and weaknesses and with well-articulated plans to play to its strengths and address its weaknesses, it should not be subject to the same process as struggling or self-deluding schools.

There is, in every jurisdiction, what may be described as a ‘trade off’ between autonomy and accountability, freedom and sanction. Flemish schools, for example, while enjoying a high degree of autonomy and freedom to develop their own policies, must meet certain conditions, including implementing minimum student learning objectives and collaborating in external evaluation conducted by the Flemish Inspectorate. This is accompanied by a ‘differentiated’ approach which recognises and celebrates high performing schools and gives greater focus to schools deemed to be most in need of inspection.

In New Zealand, the Education Review Office works with schools to agree on the protocol for review visits, adopting ‘proportional review’ which means that external validation is tailored to the school’s own confidence and rigour in its approach to evidence and use of evidence for professional development and improvement.

The Swedish Schools Inspectorate conducts thematic reviews as a complement to the regular review of individual schools, accounting for 50% of all annual inspection activities. For example, in addition to subject reviews recent thematic quality evaluations have included ‘Bullying, harassment and discrimination in schools’. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate tries to select schools, on the one hand, where there are known concerns and, on the other, schools with exemplary practices. Its purpose is to use the results of the evaluation to encourage struggling schools to learn from practices in more successful schools. This approach may be seen as not simply designed to improve individual schools but as having a systemic capacity-building purpose.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### A story of progressive development

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1. The evidence is unambiguous that over the life of SSE and ESR, there has been a progressive, deepening understanding of the nature and processes of self-evaluation and their relationship to external review.
2. The most striking aspect of the quantitative data is the systemic differential in response from senior leaders, middle leaders and classroom teachers. It has remained virtually constant over successive iterations of data collection. While open to variety of interpretations, it does suggest that changing attitudes and practice at classroom level is a long term process. There is scope for this issue together with these differential data to be discussed at school level as integral to planning and professional development.
3. SITs have been an important policy initiative, proving a catalyst for change and, in the best of practice, giving ownership to staff beyond the senior or middle management. Advice on the composition, role and professional development opportunities for SITs is, in light of the evidence, a highly worthwhile policy investment.
4. Evidence of a movement from a teacher-centred to a more learner-centred pedagogy is one of the most promising findings of this study. Where schools have made the greatest improvement, it is owed to a continuing focus on the quality of learning and teaching in the classroom and the priority given by leadership to creating a learning-centred environment.
5. Schools for students with special educational needs exemplify what embeddedness and a learning-centred environment means. They offer a model for student-centred learning, day-to-day evaluation, staff dialogue, self-scrutiny and planning as a daily, not an annual, event.
6. One of the patent strengths of the educational system in Hong Kong is the priority given to peer lesson observation and collaborative lesson planning by teachers. Research has shown such reciprocal relationships to be at the heart of professional development, organisational intelligence and capacity building. There is always scope for less confident schools to learn from their more confident peers and for SSB/IMC to encourage such interchange.
7. Reciprocal exchanges and opportunities for students and school staff to visit schools in the mainland and elsewhere is a strong feature of practice in Hong Kong, a critical piece in the capacity building jigsaw and in systemic approaches to raising standards. The reciprocity of exchanges (mainland schools learning from outstanding practice in Hong Kong and vice-versa) deserves further consideration.

8. There are outstanding examples of students being more centrally involved in evaluation of school and classroom practice, exemplifying greater scope territory-wide for student voice and leadership. Encouragement for schools to be more adventurous promises dividend returns in terms of student engagement, ownership and effort.
9. Over time, there is evidence that leadership is coming to be understood as a shared (or ‘distributed’) activity. The vitality of leadership, both in the person of the principal and as shared across a school, holds the key to the successful embedding of SSE and a welcome for external forms of review.

## Way forward

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### *Further refining ESR and other types of school inspection/review*

10. The QASBSD has been receptive to feedback, continuously willing to modify practice, adjusting demands on schools and bringing a sharper focus to the key issues of concern. The closer collaboration with support services will bring new challenges and opportunities for a closer alignment of summative and formative purposes.
11. There remains some confusion among school staff as to both the purposes and scope of ESR and of SSE. While QASBSD has made significant investment in getting the message across, there remains a need for greater alignment among the agencies who carry the message in to schools – the frontline ESR teams and regional officers, the SMC/IMC and SSB.
12. Where there is defensiveness and resistance by teachers or school leaders to criticism, it clearly brings pressure on ESR teams. In anticipation of such a response from school personnel, it calls for the most experienced and expert of teams to be involved, and for team leaders to share their experience on how such difficulties can be approached and overcome. This issue assumes greater priority with the constant turnover of QASBSD personnel.
13. The EDB has responded to continuing pleas for more consistency in post-lesson observation feedback and has promised to take this into account wherever feasible. Such responsiveness has been widely welcomed by school staff. This is unlikely to completely solve the problem as differences in practice are likely to remain and the time given to such feedback will be constrained by timetabling and other pressures. What can be said within a limited period of a few minutes that is actually helpful to teachers will stretch the skills of ESR team members and require professional development.

14. The perception that ESR teams do not always comprehend the nature of special education, or know how to evaluate practice over the course of a limited visit, implies the need for a more careful selection of external review teams with requisite expertise and professional development for QASBSD personnel, perhaps led by special school staff.
15. The knowledge and involvement of parents in SSE and ESR remains a formidable challenge but may be addressed, in part, by identifying schools in which there is exemplary practice and considering how such practice may be more successfully disseminated and supported.
16. Some school personnel are in favour of ESR while others prefer the more differential approach that FI is able to offer. The advocacy for different forms of quality assurance provides the opportunity for policy makers to reshape external evaluation of schools in the next phase of intervention, providing a more flexible and differentiated approach while maintaining the best of what has already been achieved.

### *Continuing to enhance schools' accountability and transparency*

17. An intrinsic aspect of the dialogue between policy makers and practitioners is in relation to accountability, often contentious and misunderstood. Ensuring robust internal accountability (among stakeholders) is the prelude to, and guarantor of, confident and well-conceived external accountability.
18. There is considerable scope for the relationship between SSE and school development planning to be understood as integrally related, as ongoing processes rather than simply as occasional events – which may be characterised as ‘living planning’ and embedded self-evaluation.
19. The frequent reference to P-I-E risks it being seen as a linear and one-off process, in other words, ‘single loop learning’ rather than ‘double loop learning’ which is characterised by reiterative cycles of planning, implementing and evaluating.
20. The range of tools, information and advice for schools is widely welcomed, but there is, manifestly, some distance still to travel in helping teachers, middle managers and senior leaders to employ and adapt these tools to best effect.
21. Appraisal is often seen as a separate process from SSE and development planning, but in best of practice, it is an integral part of a holistic approach to quality assurance and school improvement. How different schools have been able to marry top-down and bottom-up approaches should alert policy makers to more imaginative and integrated approaches to appraisal.

22. SSE/ESR continues to be a learning process for all involved and, as such, necessarily encounters setbacks as well as progress. There are vital lessons to be learned from places in which impatient politicians and policy makers have got cold feet, continually changing course and abandoning reform in face of resistance. Hong Kong is arguably the most advanced of any country or region in its embedding of quality assurance in school practice and must continue to build on its highly significant achievements.

### *Strengthening support for continuous school development*

23. The identification by schools of the range of expertise required of an ESR team offers an agenda for professional dialogue and development within ESR teams and support services.
24. The inclusion of school personnel in ESR teams has brought both heightened credibility and expertise to the process of external review. Pleas by some schools for wider involvement of frontline teachers face some logistic issues but may deserve some trialling of the inherent potential for wider membership as well as implications for possible new constellations of ESR teams.
25. There is evidence from SSB and SMC/IMC that they offer a significant resource for schools in quality assurance and improvement. Despite significant initiatives by the EDB, there is still a great deal of untapped potential and much to learn from the most proactive schools at the leading edge, through networking both within and beyond schools within an SSB bailiwick, as well as through inter-school professional development opportunities.
26. The frequent reference by school personnel to the need for longer term embedding of change is reminder to policy, at every level, of the dangers of pressing for the ‘quick fix’. It is an alert to the importance of clear agendas and to expectations of what is possible in the short and longer term, and the point at which mandate and consultation meet.