From Looking Back to Looking Forward: Introducing Part Two of the Special Issue on 25 Years of Educational Research

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To mark its 25th anniversary, the Hong Kong Educational Research Association set up a special guest editorial board to invite researchers to review Hong Kong educational research in the past 25 years. Four members, Amy S. Ha, John C. K. Lee, Winnie W. M. So, and K. C. Tang, and I as the fifth member, serve on this editorial board. Together, we identified 19 content areas that we felt are important areas with research studies that inform practice. These content areas could be conveniently classified as falling into domains of key learning areas (e.g., Chinese language, English language, mathematics, science, physical education, moral education, and civic education), special educational needs (e.g., gifted education and learning difficulties), policy and international research (e.g., educational policy studies, PISA, and TIMSS studies), and other special topics (e.g., educational leadership, teacher education, classroom research, assessment and learning, thinking skills, ICT in education, and curriculum studies).

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With a set of review guidelines for contributors, we sent out invitations to potential authors. While potential authors who could contribute to these content areas from a primary source point of view are few in number, there is much ground to cover in each of these areas. As a result of balancing the amount of materials presented by the contributing authors and publishing requirements set forth by the journal with the publisher, we decided that the 2009 special issue would span our summer and winter publications.

Consequently, we have published in our 2009 summer publication Part One of the special issue. This first part includes five articles that review educational research in the past 25 years on English language education, mathematics education, physical education, gifted education, and curriculum studies, and one article on the special topic of classroom research. The critical acclaim we have received from members and other readers is reassuring, and therefore we are encouraged to publish the Part Two review articles with some sense of urgency.

It is understandable that considerable time and efforts have been devoted by all contributors to prepare and write these review articles, and at the time of writing this editorial, some authors are still in the process of revising the final versions of their articles. While we would like to seek your understanding of the slight delay, we can now promise you in this Part Two of the special issue another set of critical and comprehensive reviews on Chinese language education, science education, and civic education, and on special topics of PISA studies and studies on moral development. We regret that some authors, who have responded that they need more time to write or revise their contributions, have to publish their reviews in subsequent issues of the journal as regular articles.

Because of the severe page limitation that we can only publish no more than a specified number of pages each year (an agreement that we have entered with the publisher), and parallel to Part One of the special issue, I again choose to introduce this Part Two briefly and in broad generalities, and not with specific commentaries of each article. Specifically, I intend to share some of my general observations on issues or emphases that crosscut our diverse review content areas and serve to set trends that are likely to continue in the next decade of educational research. With the view to stay away from the many content-specific issues which are rightly included in each of the review articles in both the Part One and the Part Two of the special issue, I hope my forward-looking endeavor will be useful in providing a slightly different perspective on these reviews.

Three Trend-Setting Themes

With the limitations of my training, knowledge, and experience, I am going to focus only on three trend-setting themes: the evidence-based orientation, the emergence of transdisciplinary areas, and the emphasis on positivity. These themes also represent three perennial issues that have their ups and downs in the past 25 years, but they have achieved increasing ascendance in recent years. A brief description of these emergent themes is in order.

The Evidence-based Orientation

Education is an applied discipline, and there is a natural emphasis on applications and program evaluation in educational research. In general, it is recognized that educational practice needs to be evidence-based. Thus, a new teaching method or an innovative program, before its implementation, needs to be validated based on empirical evidence. Increasingly, it is accepted that admissible evidence should not be confined to quantitative data collected with the use of rigorous experimental designs based on randomized clinical trials and analyzed using sophisticated statistical procedures, but should be extended to include qualitative data that capture the less dominant or local voices based on observations and case studies and through, for example, thick descriptions or narrative analysis.

Drawing on an example in the field of counseling and psychotherapy, an area with which I am more familiar, it is now understood that both quantitative and qualitative data on the process and outcome of therapy are valued. Whether a certain specific approach of psychotherapy works or how it works need to be considered on the basis of its efficacy and effectiveness. Consequently, evidence-based practice requires that the approach is both efficacious under laboratory-like kinds of conditions, such as specific client types and manualized treatments with comparison of intervention and nonintervention or placebo-attention groups, and effective in real-life settings with heterogeneous client types and diverse treatment conditions (see Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Shadish, Matt, Navarro, & Phillips, 2000).

Transdisciplinarity

With an applied orientation, education covers many areas that require interdisciplinary collaboration for understanding and putting theory into

practice. For example, in talking about character education or moral education, one necessarily has to touch on issues of moral development that is related to cognitive development, and family and cultural values. Initial collaboration may be of mutual interest to the different disciplinary partners, but this framework of interdisciplinary ties may go beyond simple collaboration to nest ideas simultaneously and catalyze new knowledge or understanding, leading to the birth of transdisciplinary research efforts with the potential to ignite a paradigm shift in areas of interdisciplinary collaboration. Thus, in transdisciplinarity, two or more fields come together to produce a closer synergy, which becomes a distinct field of its own, reinforced by the specific training, learning, and acquired expertise of participants (see Koizumi, 2001).

Admittedly, transdisciplinarity as the emergence of a new field of study out of rigorous and responsible initial interdisciplinary collaboration could be a gradual development, but it is not uncommon in education. For example, with the focus on the specific reading problems of children with learning disabilities, dyslexia has emerged as a distinct transdisciplinary area nurtured by neurology, cognitive sciences, and behavioral and social sciences. Dyslexia has evolved as a research area beyond education. It has its own professional organizations and academic journals, but the importance of helping students with dyslexia has always kept dyslexia close to education practitioners and applied researchers.

Another good example is the transdisciplinary area of creativity. Unlike dyslexia that is defined by specific learning problems of a specific population of children, creativity emerges as a transdisciplinary area not defined by a specific client group. The interest in creativity and the creative process is not restricted to the field of cognitive sciences, but extends to the fields of fine arts, design, business and industries. Creativity research has its own journals, and the breadth of knowledge and voluminous research studies are also summarized in entries of encyclopedias of creativity. One such publication is about to publish its second edition in 2010 with 35% new topics and 60% heavily revised chapters from the first edition (see Runco & Pritzker, 1999), indicating that this transdiciplinary area of creativity is ever expanding.

Positivity

In recent years, in psychology, an increasing number of researchers have started to focus their studies on the positive aspects of health and well-being

(see Snyder & Lopez, 2007). In particular, Seligman and his colleagues who spearheaded this positive psychology movement argued convincingly that traditional scientific psychology has emphasized disproportionately on human weaknesses, deficits, distress, and pathologies, and they have called for a shift of emphasis on the study of positive emotions, positive characters, and positive institutions as well as individual, community, and societal factors that contribute to a good and fulfilled life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Unlike psychology, education could be said to have a tradition of emphasizing the positives in teaching and learning and in providing a positive learning environment. However, it is always the deviations from the positives that attract a lot of research attention. Well-known examples are research studies on learning disabilities, underachievement, and teacher stress and burnout.

Again, I would like to draw on the research studies on teacher stress and burnout, an area with which I am more familiar. Three decades of research on teacher stress and burnout has undoubtedly yielded a voluminous literature on the nature and dimensions of the phenomenon of teacher stress and burnout, the articulation of the interrelationships among the different burnout components, and numerous correlates, mediators, and moderators that could shed light on the development of interventions to combat teacher stress and burnout. However, recent theorizing and the increasing number of studies from the positive psychology perspective has led to a shift to the emphasis on strength-based and positive interventions and the studies on teacher self-efficacy and teacher well-being (see Chan, in press).

In summary, I think these three emergent themes are trend-setting, and are applicable to different content domains in educational research. They have assumed greater and greater importance in recent years, and will continue to become prevalent dimensions characterizing educational research. Their impact is likely to be more strongly felt in the years to come. With these introductory comments, let me invite you to read the review articles in this Part Two of the special issue, and to appreciate traces of these themes when reading between the lines. It is the hope and intention of this editorial board that the issue (Part One and Part Two) on reviewing Hong Kong educational research in the past 25 years will eventually lead to more strategic and appropriate educational research work in Hong Kong.

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