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**DRAFT**

**Competence or performance?**  
A Bernsteinian analysis of Basic Competency Assessment in Hong Kong

Charlene Tan

**Abstract**

This article analyses an assessment initiative known as the Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) in Hong Kong using Bernstein’s performance and competence models of pedagogic practice. On the one hand, BCA is aligned with a competence model through its official projection as a low-stakes, student-focused and formative assessment. However, an examination of the public perception of and context for BCA reveals its high-stakes, disciplines-centred and summative nature; it is argued that BCA reflects a performance model with strong classification, strong framing and visible pedagogies. The example of Hong Kong illustrates the usefulness of Bernstein’s theory and extends the existing research on the interactions between local culture and pedagogic practices.

*Keywords: assessment; competence; Bernstein; Hong Kong; performance*

1. **INTRODUCTION**

Education jurisdictions across the globe have put into effect various learner-centred modes of assessment for the purpose of improving the processes and outcomes of teaching and learning (Birenbaum, et al, 2015). Beyond conventional assessment, policymakers and educators are exploring and experimenting with formative assessment or ‘assessment for learning’ (AfL). The desired outcome is no longer just strong performance in standardised exams but also the acquisition of generic and holistic competencies for work and life (Jones and Moore, 1995; Tsatsaroni and Evans, 2014). A high-performing education system that has embarked on an ambitious reform to advocate AfL for over a decade is Hong Kong. (Klenowski, 2009; Berry, 2011; Mok and Chan, 2002; Marsh and Lee, 2014). A primary motivation for the Hong Kong authority is that a predominantly exam-oriented, AoL assessment system has resulted in a culture fixated with test scores, textual transmission and drilling (Lee & Coniam, 2013; Yu, 2015; Tam and Chan, 2016; Author, 2017). It is important to note that new AfL measures do not replace but rather supplement the existing ‘assessment of learning’ (AoL) policies in Hong Kong (Carless, 2012; Lam, 2013). It is therefore pertinent to examine the promotion of AfL, its relationships with AoL and its impact on pedagogic practices in Hong Kong.

This research is guided by Basil Bernstein’s concepts of performance and competence models of pedagogic practice. His theory is relevant to our study as it enables us to not only identify key polarities in pedagogic practice but also bring an
array of related assessment issues, concerns and tensions into relations (Moss, 2002). Specifically, the rationale of the paper is to examine the following two questions: How successful is the promotion of AfL in Hong Kong that has traditionally relied on and privileged AoL? How do prevailing pedagogic practices and social logics interact with and affect the enactment of AfL initiatives in the cultural context of Hong Kong? This article explores the above questions by focusing on an assessment initiative known as Basic Competency Assessment in Hong Kong. The article proceeds as follows: an introduction of Bernstein’s pedagogic models and associated concepts; a discussion of Basic Competency Assessment in terms of its background, objectives, design and public reception through Bernsteinian lens; and key educational implications for Bernstein’s theory and pedagogic practices across cultural contexts.

3. BERNSTEIN’S PEDAGOGIC MODELS

Bernstein’s (2000) two models of pedagogic practice – performance and competence – provide a useful theoretical framework for our understanding of the assessment reform in Hong Kong. According to Bernstein (2000), a pedagogic practice is “a fundamental social context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place” (3). By ‘competence’, Bernstein (2000) has in mind “procedures for engaging with, and constructing, the world” (42). Tacitly acquired in informal interactions and manifested in a person’s practical accomplishments, competence goes beyond performance output and is not subject to public regulation. The two models differ primarily in terms of classification, framing, pedagogic orientation to evaluation and pedagogical discourses.

First, the two models differ in terms of classification and framing. According to Bernstein (1971), classification refers to the nature of and the differentiation between curricular contents as evident in the degree of boundary maintenance between contents. Strong classification is demonstrated by explicit and clearly defined boundaries between contents that are well-insulated from each other. Weak classification, on the other hand, is marked by weak or blurred boundaries and a greater integration of contents. Closely related to classification is framing that refers to the context for the transmission of contents within the specific pedagogic relationship of the teacher and students (Bernstein, 1971, 2000). He defines framing as “the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship” (Bernstein, 1975, 88). Like classification, framing can be strong or weak, depending on the specific characteristics of the boundary. In the case of strong framing, the boundary between what may or may not be transmitted is strong; the teacher is the one controlling the selection, organisation, pacing, position, evaluation, posture and dress (Bernstein, 1981). Weak framing, in contrast, has a weak or blurred boundary in the sense that it is the student or acquirer who has more control over the organisation, sequence, speed, assessment and other related manifestations. The essential quality of the framing therefore determines the “communicative practices of the social relations within the reproduction of discursive resources, that is, between transmitters and acquirers” (Bernstein, 1981, 345).

Combining classification and framing enables us to understand both the spatial and temporal dimensions of boundary. Bernstein posits that the “framing of the pedagogic relations regulate in what way and if the boundary (classificatory relations) is acquired” (cited in Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, 272, italics in the original).
Performance models are strongly classified and framed in terms of time, space and discourse. The learner or acquirer within such models experiences strong boundaries between contents and has little control over the ‘what’, ‘where’ and ‘when’ of learning. In contrast, competence models are weakly classified and framed as the boundaries between contents are less distinct. The acquirer has relatively greater control over the selection, sequence and pace of learning, pedagogic sites and timing. It should be added that a mixture of the performance and competence models as well as strong and weak classification and framing may exist in a particular curriculum, system or institution (Webb, 1981; Walford, 1986; Morais, 2002; Bourne, 2004, 2006). Bourne (2006) points out either pedagogic model can be more influential in official pedagogical discourse, depending on the context, circumstances and timing. In addition, classification and framing – whether strong or weak – are not fossilised but interact with each other and evolve over time (Walford, 1981).

The second difference between the performance and competence models lies in their pedagogic orientation to evaluation. Performance models focuses on what is absent or deficient in the learner’s output whereas competence models spotlight on what is present in the acquirer’s product. A performance model “places the emphasis upon a specific output of the acquirer, upon a particular text the acquirer is expected to construct and upon the specialised skills necessary to the production of this specific output, text or product” (Bernstein, 2000, 44). The acquirer’s performance is measured through grading that “gives rise to a potential repair service and its diagnostic theory, practice and distribution of blame” (Bernstein, 2000, 48). Performance models therefore underscore knowledge transmission and accountability through the ‘objectivity’ of the performance and measurement of outputs. Competence models, on the other hand, value what is present in the acquirer’s product based on the assumption that the acquirer already possesses the desired competences. In contradistinction to an accent on grades obtained in performance models, competence models highlight each individual acquirer’s competence development. Such an approach presupposes the “universal democracy of acquisition” that holds that all acquirers are inherently competent and capable of constructing their own valid worlds of meanings and practice (Bernstein, 2000, 43).

The final difference between the two models is what Bernstein (1975, 2003) calls ‘visible pedagogy’ and ‘invisible pedagogy’. According to Bernstein (2003), visible pedagogy “will always place the emphasis on the performance of the child, upon the text the child is creating and the extent to which the text is meeting the criteria” (201). Invisible pedagogy is so-named as the pedagogy is invisible to the acquirer who is the one occupying the pedagogic space (Bernstein, 2003). Invisible pedagogies, rather than underscoring an external text, underline “the procedures/competences which all acquirers bring to the pedagogic context” (202). Bernstein (1975) avers that “the weak classification and frames of the invisible pedagogy emphasise the importance of ways of knowing, of constructing problems, whereas the strong classification and frames of visible pedagogies emphasise states of knowledge and received problems (33, italics in the original). It follows that a teacher who subscribes to a performance model is likely to adopt visible pedagogies with the aim of transmitting disciplinary knowledge to students, identifying gaps in learning and assessing the latter based on external performance standards. Another teacher who holds to a competence model, in contrast, will be more inclined towards invisible pedagogies that serve to showcase the students’ capabilities and products, helping them to grow through diverse formal and informal learning opportunities, and encouraging them to create their own meanings and values.
3. **BASIC COMPETENCY ASSESSMENT (BCA) IN HONG KONG**

Before discussing the *Basic Competency Assessment*, a quick overview of the school assessment system in Hong Kong is in order. Up till 1990s, the main functions of assessment in Hong Kong were to provide data to select students in the HKCE (Hong Kong Certificate of Education) at the end of Secondary 5 and HKAL (Hong Kong Advanced Level) at the end of Secondary 7 for tertiary selection, as well as to provide the data to band primary school children in the Secondary School Places Allocation exercise (Cheng, 1997). The year 2001 marked a milestone in education reform with the publication of an official document titled *Learning for Life, Learning through Life*. Declaring that “tests and examinations have become the baton directing learning and teaching”, the education authority calls upon teachers, students, parents and the society in general to “shake off their traditional concept of assessment and embrace the new assessment culture” to advance student learning and progress (Education Commission, 2000, 70).

The ‘new assessment culture’ entails a paradigm shift from AoL towards AfL by minimising the use of quantitative assessment, avoiding excessive dictations, mechanical drillings, tests and exams, and introducing different modes of broad-based assessments. In concert with the goal to discourage drilling and exam techniques, the education authority has reduced the number of high-stakes public exams. Instead of solely relying on external assessment mechanism in the form of high-stakes summative exams, the authority underlines the importance of AfL through the internal assessment mechanism. The authority states that the major objective of internal assessment is to “facilitate learning and teaching and help teachers understand the learning progress and needs of their students” (Education Commission, 2000, 10). Rather than certifying and selecting students which are the functions of public exams, internal assessment enables schools to conceptualise the curriculum, select appropriate pedagogies and guide individual students so as to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching.

A major internal assessment mechanism to promote AfL is *Basic Competency Assessment* (hereinafter BCA). The Education Bureau (2016) describes BCA as “carrying out the concept of ‘assessment for learning’ in everyday teaching” (13). BCA seeks to enable teachers and parents to help students by taking cognisance of the latter’s learning needs and problems. In addition, BCA provides “the Government and school management with information on schools’ standards in key learning areas so that the Government will be able to provide support to those schools in need of assistance, and to monitor the effectiveness of education policies” (Education Commission, 2000, 67). BCA comprises three components: Student Assessment Repository (STAR) (formerly Student Assessment (SA)), Web-based Learning and Teaching Support (WLTS) and Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA). STAR is an online assessment repository that evaluates the performance of participating students and disseminates the assessment outcomes through instant reports for schools (Education Bureau, 2017a). The information from STAR will guide teachers to plan lessons that allow “more room for students to develop, so that whilst achieving basic standards, they are able to maximise their potentials” (Education Commission, 2000, 16). WLTS is also an online platform like STAR but it concentrates on providing useful learning activities and materials for teachers (Education Bureau, 2017a).

The last component is TKA that assesses the students’ basic competencies in Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics upon completion of the three
key learning stages (i.e. Primary 3, Primary 6 and Secondary 3 levels) (Education Bureau, 2017a). The importance of TKA is seen in the statement from the Education Bureau (2017a) that “[s]tudents are expected to acquire the basic competencies in the three subjects in order to proceed effectively to the next key learning stage” (1). The education authority stresses that TSA is low-stakes and is “part of the concept of ‘assessment for learning’ with a view to enhancing quality education” (Education Bureau, 2016, 3). The TSA for primary 3 students was revised in 2016 to make the test questions more manageable and provide more reports and information to schools. Overall, the refinements to TSA strive to “reflect the ‘low stakes, no drilling’ design of TSA and the original purpose of providing feedback on learning and teaching” (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017, para 7).

4. COMPETENCE OR PERFORMANCE?

Towards a competence model

This section analyses the nature of and reception to BCA based on Bernstein’s concepts. On the one hand, there is evidence to suggest that the aim of BCA is aligned with the competence model. Given that the site of assessment reform is the formal school system and that terminal exams test the students’ mastery of school subjects, there is no change to the strong classification of curricular contents in Hong Kong. But what has changed is a discernible shift from strong to weak framing, and complementing visible pedagogies with invisible pedagogies. A distinctive feature of the competence model is its focus on learners and the progress they make as they learn, rather than on a specific output (Moss, 2002). Instead of being fixated with test scores and external evaluation through public exams, BCA is projected as a low-stakes internal assessment that enriches student learning. By predicing BCA on AoL, the authority is signaling its aspiration to repudiate the prevailing AoL, exam-driven culture. Black and colleagues (2003) posit that AoL “differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competence” (2). AoL is learner-centred as it requires the learning and assessment activities to be tailored to suit the learners’ level of knowledge and prior learning (Jones, 2010; Lee and Coniam, 2013). Through STARS and WLTS as well relevant data such as school reports and a questionnaire survey, the objective is to assist teachers to better understand the students’ needs so as to design student-centred lessons.

The endorsement and enactment of AoL implies a need for teachers to reconsider their authoritative control over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. Instead, teachers, in supporting AoL, should practise weak framing by giving their students the autonomy to select and organise their topics, learn at their own pace, and be assessed using multiple, alternative and authentic modes that foster their learning. BCA also signals the addition of invisible pedagogies to the existing visible pedagogies. The latter has been the dominant pedagogic discourse in Hong Kong due to the necessity to prepare students for high-stakes exams. The design of BCA as a low-stakes, AoL mechanism implies that teachers should transcend visible pedagogies to invisible pedagogies. This requires teachers to go beyond visible pedagogies, be it assessing the pupils based on external performance standards, emphasising differences between pupils or stratifying practices of transmission (Bernstein, 2003).
Teachers need to focus on the pupils’ prior competences and enact learning processes that empower the latter to explore ways of knowing, solving problems and constructing personal meanings.

It is also necessary, in understanding the pedagogic model of BCA, to situate it within the larger education reform context in Hong Kong. The education commission states the following desired outcome of education for the 21st Century:

To enable every person to attain all-round development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics according to his/her own attributes so that he/she is capable of life-long learning, critical and exploratory thinking, innovating and adapting to change; filled with self-confidence and a team spirit; willing to put forward continuing effort for the prosperity, progress, freedom and democracy of their society, and contribute to the future well-being of the nation and the world at large (Education Commission 2000, 4).

It is evident that a learner-centred education – one that goes beyond performance in high-stakes exams to the acquirers’ competencies that equip them to engage with and construct the world – is propounded. The education reform places the learner and process rather than the teacher and results at the heart of teaching and learning. Championing a belief in “a universal democracy of acquisition” (Bernstein, 2000, 43), the education authority states, “‘Lifelong Learning and All-round Development’ is our expectation of everyone in this era” and that “[a]daptability, creativity and abilities for communication, self-learning and cooperation are now the prerequisites for anyone to succeed” (Education Commission, 2000, 3, italics added). Students should also possess the “internal motivation for learning”, take an “interest in learning so that they will derive pleasure, satisfaction and a sense of achievement from learning”, and “take the initiative to learn and pursue excellence” (Education Commission 2000, 76). Alluding to the presupposition of the learner as “active and creative in the construction of a valid world of meanings and practice” (Bernstein, 2000, 43), the education authority upholds a ‘student-focused’ principle where “students’ needs and interests must be the foremost consideration” (Education Commission, 2000). The education authority announces that the desired outcome is “independent learners” who “enjoy learning, to communicate effectively, to have creativity and a sense of commitment” (Education Commission, 2000, 36). There is a discernible shift from strong to weak framing in the reform message and measures, particularly in the pacing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. Rather than subjecting students to incessant accountability and control, the authority envisages self-regulating learners who “organise and take charge of their own learning” (Education Commission, 2000, 36). Invisible pedagogies are propagated as the attention is not merely on the performance of students based on external criteria but also on the acquirers’ capabilities and learning dispositions. The authority also introduces a ‘no-loser’ principle in an endeavour to develop and celebrate the competencies the student possesses or is capable of possessing. This principle is targeted at removing obstacles and creating opportunities for students to “show their initiative and to develop their potential in various domains” (Education Commission, 2000, 36). The students’ efforts to seek self-advancement and become lifelong learners should be duly acknowledged and encouraged. The ‘no-loser’ principle exemplifies the competence model’s pedagogic orientation to evaluation that emphasises the ‘presences’ rather than ‘absences’ in the acquirer’s product (Education Commission, 2000).
Towards a performance model

Despite the expressed goal of BCA to be a learner-centred, Afl initiative that reflects elements of a competence model, an examination of the content of, context for and public perception of BCA points to its affiliation with a performance model in the form of strong classification, framing and visible pedagogies. First, the strong classification of BCA is seen in its focus on and dependence on discrete disciplinary knowledge. With reference to Bernstein’s three modes of performance, the content of BCA falls under the category of singulars/disciplines in the form of three school subjects, namely Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics. Secondly, strong framing is displayed through the students having limited say on what, when and how they wish to learn. Although the word ‘competency’ is mentioned in the initiative (‘Basic Competency Assessment’), it does not refer to the Bernsteinian sense of empowering acquirers to engage with and construct the world in informal settings that are free of external regulations. Instead, the ‘basic competencies’ in BCA refers specifically to “the essential knowledge and skills acquired by students in relation to the learning targets and objectives set out in the curriculum for each key stage, in order to learn effectively at next stage” (Education Bureau, 2017a, 1). There are altogether three key stages: Stage 1 at the end of primary 3, Stage 2 at the end of primary 6, and Stage 3 at the end of secondary 3. Specific basic competencies are spelt out for each key stage. For example, the listening component of the English Language paper for Key Stage 1 stipulates that pupils should be able to discriminate between common words with a small range of vowel and consonant sounds (Education Bureau, n.d.). The basic competency for Stage 3 Mathematics expects students to “use positive numbers, negative numbers and zero to describe situations like profit and loss, floor levels relative to the ground level” (Education Bureau, n.d.). The priority is on the students’ performance in three school subjects at each key stage rather than on the learners’ creative and practical achievements in informal settings.

Preparing students for the TSA requires the teachers to exercise strong framing and visible pedagogies so as to ensure that all the topics to be tested in TSA are covered within the allocated curriculum time for all students without exception. It is therefore difficult for teachers to give control to their students, whether it is in the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship. Explicit control exists in the form of visible structures, hierarchical relations and disciplining regulation that the students, teachers and principals are subject to. The pupils consequently enjoy low pedagogic autonomy as their performance futures are dependent not on their personal interests and inclinations but on the external BCA standards. Significantly, is announced that the TSA data are employed by the authority to “monitor the effectiveness of education policies” (Education Commission, 2000, 67). TSA, until recently, was included in the ‘Key Performance Measures’ to evaluate school performance (Education Bureau, 2016). It has been reported that the TSA results were also used “as a weapon to close down some of the schools” (Berry, 2011, 208). Teachers also point out that TSA data are used by the school leaders and school management board for comparisons between subjects or between schools (Education Bureau, 2016). Students consequently are less likely to enjoy high autonomy in a schooling system that prescribes a fixed curriculum, standardised assessment, basic competencies and key stages.
Although AfL is propagated in BCA, it is tied to performance standards, i.e., the basic competencies in TSA, and used by teachers to identify what is deficient in the students. The accent is on what the teachers can and should do for and to the students rather than what the students can do for themselves and each other. In other words, students are primarily viewed as passive and disempowered subjects, an outcome that goes against the reform rhetoric for students to take ownership of own learning. Such a development also ignores a requirement of AfL to foster active participation in learners and foster critical awareness through self- and peer assessment (Jones, 2010; Lee and Coniam, 2013). The strong classification and framing in the Hong Kong school system is not an anomaly. Walford (1986) observes that classification and framing are uniformly high in educational institutions that experience the pressures of the examination syllabus and are preoccupied with examination success. Bourne (2004) also avers that school discourses are “goal focused, towards socially set ends, within which there is limited opportunity for local classroom negotiation, either for teachers or pupils” (63). But what makes the Hong Kong case worthy of note is that the strong framing and accompanying visible pedagogies contradict the policy intent of the assessment reform in general and BCA in particular to promote weak framing and invisible pedagogies.

The association of BCA with the performance model, particularly its strong framing and visible pedagogies, has a direct impact on the public reception to this initiative. Rather than low-stakes, TSA is regarded as a high-stakes assessment that puts pressure on the schools to meet external performance standards (Tam & Chan, 2016). Schools therefore rely on visible pedagogies to ensure that their students’ performances, measured by the attainment of the competency levels of each key stage of BCA, will improve or are sustained.). The Hong Kong school system has been described as an “examination-driven AoL system” (Lee and Coniam, 2013, 34) and an “over-drilling culture’ (Education Bureau, 2016, 14). A recurring criticism of BCA is that it imposes pressure and anxiety on the primary 3 students (Wong, 2017; Chiu and Su, 2017). Schools have expectedly incorporated TSA-type of questions in their school assessment and arranged for make-up classes to train students for TSA (Yu, 2015, 187). The maintenance of explicit teacher control and low learner autonomy in the quest for students to ace the TSA has deprived them of the time for rest and extra-curricular activities and affected their health (Education Bureau, 2016). In response to public feedback on the high-stakes and stressful nature of TSA, the Education Bureau has recently removed TSA from ‘Key Performance Measures’ (Education Bureau, 2016). The education authority has also suspended TSA in 2016 and trialled the revised TSA in 56 public primary schools in 2016. A government spokesman announces that the revised TSA has been put back on the right track “as a ‘high effectiveness, low stakes’ assessment tool which enables students to learn effectively while enjoying learning” (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2017, para 7).

However, the view of TSA as endorsing performance, explicit control and low autonomy remains largely unchanged. It is reported that teachers and parents interpret the revised TSA as visible pedagogy that reinforces performance: TSA is “just a simplified version of TSA and there is still an incentive to drill pupils as the test will affect school rankings” (Chiu and Su, 2017). Arguing that TSA “has been designed in a way that can easily lead to comparisons between schools”, the Education sector legislator Ip Kin-yuen avers, “Drilling for this official test is common, even though the Education Bureau doesn’t want that” (Wong, 2017). It is apparent that the revised TSA is insufficient to delink it from the performance mode since there is no change to
the strong framing and visible pedagogies. Rather than a low-stakes, AfL internal assessment, the three rounds of TSA taken at the end of primary 3, primary 6 and secondary 3 have given students, parents and educators the impression that it is a high-stakes, AoL external assessment. Consequently, TSA which is designed to reduce the number of public exams has paradoxically “resulted in even more public assessments in the end” (Yu, 2015, 186). The refinements of TSA, to borrow Cheng (1997)”s words, “is likely to change the kind of exam practice, but not the fact of the examination practice” (52, italics in the original). The fact of the examination practice will remain as long as BCA is located within a predominantly performance model of pedagogic practice.

That the performance mode, as testified to in its strong classification, strong framing and visible pedagogies, is so entrenched in Hong Kong is primarily due to established pedagogic practices and social logics. Hong Kong, as a Confucian Heritage Culture, is strongly influenced by Confucian values, beliefs and practices (Lee and Coniam, 2013; Forestier and Crossley, 2015; Tam and Chan, 2016). A dominant belief held by the Hong Kongers is that academic credentials are superior to other qualifications, and that written exam is the preferred assessment mode (Berry, 2011; Yu, 2015). Cheng (1997) concludes from an empirical research in Hong Kong that “teachers mentioned that it ought to be their responsibility to prepare their students well for the examination” and that “they would feel guilty” if they have not put in sufficient effort to do so (49, italics added). It is noteworthy that the education authority also defends the usefulness of standardised tests and exams. Highlighting the “positive effects” of exams, the education authority claims that the public examination system in Hong Kong is “generally considered as a fair and highly creditable mechanism” and “can be an effective assurance mechanism for learning” (Education Commission, 2000, 41). Confucian culture, with its historical emphasis on mastering the Chinese classics and excelling in the civil service exam, has given rise to pedagogic practices that are associated with the performance models. Hong Kong, as a Confucian Heritage Culture, is influenced by Confucian pedagogic norms, logics and practices that privilege strong classification, strong framing and visible pedagogies.

5. KEY EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

There are two key educational implications arising from our analysis of the BCA in Hong Kong. The first implication is the potential of combining the performance and competence models through assessment reform. It is important to note that Bernstein’s theory is drawn from the experience of England in the second half of the 20th century (Barrett, 2007). His framework and conclusions therefore may not be applicable in another space and time. Conscious of the limitation of a binary description of the two models, Bernstein (2000) clarifies that the two models are not the only two possible conceptions, nor are they mutually exclusive. On the contrary, he maintains that the “models and modes may give rise to what could be called a pedagogic pallet where mixes can take place” (Bernstein, 2000, 56, italics added). Our case study demonstrates the dynamic and unpredictable interplays between the models and modes of pedagogic practice in an East Asian context through which cultural reproduction-production takes place. With respect to Bernstein’s point that = “mixes can take place” in both the models and modes of pedagogic practice (56), we see in the Hong Kong example instances where mixes do and do not take place.
First, BCA illustrates the intention and outcome of ‘mixing’ the performance model and the competence model. As discussed earlier, the aim of BCA dovetails with the pedagogic practice and assumptions of the competence model but the TSA which is an integral part of BCA is more congruent with the performance model. The disciplinary content of BCA implies that the vision of nurturing active, creative and self-regulating learners has not resulted in an abandonment or marginalisation of school subjects in Hong Kong. On the contrary, the education bureau in Hong Kong sees compatibility between the goal of cultivating critical, confident and autonomous learners and ensuring solid content mastery. The disciplinary content of BCA signifies that the Hong Kong authority supports the enactment of weak framing within a context of strong classification. Hong Kong teachers, on their part, are encouraged to utilise both strong and weak framing as well as both visible and invisible pedagogies to nurture independent learners who are also capable of excelling in the TSA. Such a mix – performance model as the means and competence model as the ends – occurs because the assessment reform, including the promotion of AfL, is principally motivated by pragmatic and economic benefits (Education Commission, 2000). The state agenda is for individuals to channel their agency, creativity and self-regulation to disciplinary knowledge and ‘useful’ skills for the new economy. In this regard, the developments in Hong Kong parallel the global phenomenon to cultivate 21st century competencies under the sponsorship of international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The ‘competencies’ mentioned in BCA do not refer to the competencies in the Bernsteinian sense where acquirers engage with and construct the world in informal settings that are free of external regulations. Instead, the competency in question is ‘new performance’ (Tsatsaroni & Evans, 2014) that is part of the ‘skills and competencies agenda’. A case can be made that the ‘competencies’ as illustrated in Hong Kong conform to the behaviourist model of competency that relies on empirically defined performance standards (Jones & Moore, 1995).

Besides illustrating the prospect of mixing the pedagogic models, BCA also provides us with an example where the two models of pedagogic practice do not mix. It is arguable that the integration of competence and performance models in BCA is superficial due to a mismatch between policy intention and policy enactment. Following this line of argument, BCA is essentially a performance model that takes the form but not the substance of the competence model. It could also be contended that the strong framing in BCA has been ‘masked’ by the overall reform message that calls for a shift from strong to weak framing. Researchers such as Morais and Neves (2001), Lubienski (2004) and Bourne (2004, 2006) have directed our attention to the masking of the authority of the teacher through weak framing. Using the example of progressive education, Bourne (2000, 2003) explains how framing appears to be weak in such classrooms as the children are ostensibly given the autonomy to choose what and how to learn. However, the framing is masked and hidden as “the children are actually positioned by the teacher who constructs the learning context, thus, indirectly but powerfully acting on the learner” (Bourne, 2000, 33). In the case of Hong Kong, the professed support for weak framing as part of a learner-centred, AfL education reform has obscured the inherent strong framing that persists in the city due to the an exam-oriented Confucian culture.

The second major implication from our analysis of BCA is that our study has extended Bernstein’s theory on pedagogic practice by highlighting the role of local culture and its relations with the performance and competence models. Bernstein has confined his discussion of local culture, categorised under the ‘populist mode’, to the
competence model. He posits that the local dominant culture seeks to recognise the existing consciousness and communicative competencies (Bernstein, 2000). The local culture may also challenge the dominating official pedagogic practice that contradicts or undermines indigenous pedagogic practices and contexts. What is under-explored by Bernstein, however, is the relationship between local cultures and the performance models/modes. The official pedagogic practice is countered by indigenous pedagogic practices and contexts, as rightly noted by Bernstein. But the cultural resistance from the educational stakeholders has not resulted in a support for the competence model as desired by the education authority. Instead, the socio-cultural norms, logics and actions of the policy actors are channelled to an entrenchment of the prevailing performance model. Put otherwise, Confucian norms and pedagogic practices in Hong Kong have accentuated and reinforced an AoL, disciplines-centred system that vitiates the AfL, student-focussed assessment reform. The experience in Hong Kong shows that indigenous practices and contexts have the potential to buttress and preserve the performance models and modes, with their attendant strong classification and framing, visible pedagogies, explicit teacher control and low learner autonomy. The historical and prevalent Confucian pedagogic practices and logic means that the performance model rather than the competence model will dominate and endure in Hong Kong.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has explored an assessment initiative in Hong Kong that is premised on AfL using Bernstein’s concepts of performance and competence models of pedagogic practice. It is argued that BCA, designed as a low-stakes, student-focussed and formative internal assessment, reflects the weak framing and invisible pedagogies of the competence model. However, the content of, context for and public perception of BCA reveal the essential features of the performance model through high-stakes, disciplines-centred and summative external assessments that justify strong framing and visible pedagogies. Returning to the first question posed at the start of the essay, i.e., how successful is the promotion of AfL in Hong Kong that has traditionally relied on and privileged AoL, our study has shown that the advancement of AfL in Hong Kong is fraught with opportunities, tensions, resistance and negotiation. The dominant exam-oriented paradigm exalts AoL by reproducing the socio-cultural expectations, norms and logics concerning the value of content mastery, drilling and academic excellence. As to the second question on how prevailing pedagogic practices and social logics interact with and affect the enactment of AfL initiatives in the cultural context of Hong Kong, this article has foregrounded the pedagogic practices and social logics that arise from and are shaped by local culture. Confucian traditional beliefs, values and practices have produced and sustained a hegemonic performance model that conflicts with the competence model. The social context in Hong Kong, together with strong classification and framing that circumscribe the extent of control and autonomy the acquirers enjoy, ensures the perpetual cultural reproduction of a performance model.
7. REFERENCES


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