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Information Policy for Hong Kong Schools: The Case of the Missing Chopsticks

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A project to develop a research instrument to study information policy in schools was conducted. Part of that study, a literature review and a Hong Kong-based study, was completed to benchmark information policy practice in schools in Hong Kong. The authors found that information policy at a macro level was well addressed in the literature as governments addressed a quagmire of intellectual property, intellectual freedom, security, privacy, and administrative issues. Information policy at the micro level—in schools—was lacking. The purpose of this study was to investigate how the micro-level set of information policies is handled in schools. An online questionnaire administered to in-service teachers in Hong Kong provided findings that reinforced the authors' initial feeling that information policy is a topic more talked about than understood. It is worth pursuing comparisons using the instrument with information policy development in other countries.

Purpose and Background of the Study

The purpose of this study was threefold. First was to identify the literature, and in particular research literature, pertinent to a study of information policy for schools. Second was to develop and pilot an instrument that could be used as the base for a comparative international study. Third was to benchmark information policy practice in Hong Kong government schools.

Selected Literature Relating to the Information Policy Landscape

The study of information policy development in Hong Kong was informed by a literature review intended to determine the extent of research into information policy generally, with the goal of focusing on information policy in schools. In the initial stage, discussion about the concepts underlining information policy was abundant. In the literature on information policy, a

broader treatment tends to dominate. For example, there was debate on defining the term *information* (Buckland, 1991; Stenmark, 2002).

The next theme addressed in much of the literature about information policy relates to defining the concept. Indeed, information has always been a part of individual and collective life. Governments have shaped public policy, and organizations have written policy. This is not a new concept, but we argue that it indeed has new context, conflicts, and implications for policy development because of the proliferation of information on the Internet. Weingarten (1989) defined information policy as the set of all public laws, regulations, and policies that encourage, discourage, or regulate the creation, use, storage, and communication of information. Burger (1993) observes that there is "disarray of approaches, circular definitions, and quasi-analyses" (p. 90). Overman and Cahill (1990), in their examination of government information and its management in the United States, approached the information policy discussion at this macro level in the context of values.

Rowlands (1997), who is widely cited on the topic of information policy, stated, "while progress in the field of information policy was being made, it was widely agreed that the subject was at an early stage of intellectual maturity, with little consensus or agreement on what precisely the field comprises" (pp. 6-7). Rowlands concluded that although the roots of information policy studies are planted firmly in the library and information science tradition, the research into information policy design lacks the necessary tools and methodology that would enable rigorous analysis.

Browne (1997) supports the position argued by Rowlands (1997) view, noting that progress in understanding information policy may be hampered by the lack of a sustained and robust interdisciplinary approach to its analysis and evaluation.

Also worth noting is a major area in information policy research: policies governing the control of government information. Braman (1989), presenting an interdisciplinary approach to information policy of equal interest to those in library and media studies, states: "Because modes of information creation, processing, flows and use are shaped by socioeconomic and political class division and in turn reproduce them, policy-making, too, must take into account qualitative differences in phenomena at different levels of the social structure" (p. 233).

Thus the more general topics of information policy, and certainly at a macro level, are covered well by the literature. However, scant research is devoted to information policy at the micro level, particularly in schools.

In this project, the first study group involved Hong Kong schools. A literature review of information policy and schools in Hong Kong specifically yielded the same results. Various organizations are informing the process of information policy development for Hong Kong, for example, the Hong Kong Information Service Providers Association. The discussion and debate touches on issues of intellectual property and freedom of informa-

tion. Because these issues are relevant and important to society, they matter to educators. The debate is evident and the importance acknowledged as educators address these issues generally in education reform, conference themes, and from general anecdotal evidence. However, no studies have been completed in the area of information policies in the context of schools in Hong Kong.

That the literature review yielded little in the way of policy research is a concern. Clearly, information is at the core of an educator's life. The best schools are variously described as "learning schools" (Lincoln, 1987), "learning communities" (Cooper & Boyd, 1995), "information literate school communities" (Henri, 1995, 1999), "schools that learn" (Senge et al., 2000), and "knowledge producing schools" (Bigum, 2004). Although these models of school have their peculiarities, they share certain key principles of practice. One common feature is an emphasis on knowledge-building driven by a clear vision of what makes a good learner and a good "apprentice adult" (Henri, 2005). Therefore, "if information is the oxygen of learning then the development and articulation of information policies are likely to be a core issue for these schools" (Lee, Henri, & Kandelaars, 2005, p. 65).

Certainly information is central to the core business of schools. Hay (1999) went so far as to claim that schools were in "the business of information." Hay reported that teachers in Australian schools had undeveloped ideas about the nature and purpose of information policy. She concluded that Australian schools typically had few information policies in place. Notwithstanding that schools are in the information business, it seems that few schools are well attuned to information issues and generally have little policy developed to tackle these challenges. According to Hay, the key information policy issues affecting schools include the general areas of acceptable use of the Internet, copyright and intellectual property rights, technology planning, right to privacy, and access to information versus censorship. These policy areas provided a framework for building a checklist of policies to include in the research instrument. Details about these areas in relation to Hong Kong schools are discussed below.

Acceptable Use Policy

A proliferation of electronic resources, and primarily those on the Internet, has given rise to contentious issues of access to information in an information environment that cannot rigorously regulate so called adult-only materials. Ostensibly, this set of policies seeks to ensure that the whole school community uses these resources responsibly and through observing guidelines for the appropriate use of computer networks. Policy is supposed to provide answers to the concerns of all stakeholders. These guidelines are generally called an Acceptable Internet Use Policy (AUP). The Virginia Department of Education, Division of Technology has compiled a helpful handbook on AUPs. It defines an AUP as a "written

agreement in the form of guidelines, signed by students, their parents and their teachers, outlining the terms and conditions of Internet use—rules of online behavior and access privileges" (*Acceptable Internet Use Policies*, n.d.). The Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB, 1996) of Hong Kong, which formulates, develops, and reviews policies in respect to education from kindergarten to tertiary levels, has its own guidelines on the use of the Internet in schools. These include the security and conduct of surfing the Internet, which aims to regulate students' access only to those Web sites that teachers consider educational.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Schools must carefully define fair use of materials. Because educators use a variety of resources in learning and teaching, legal issues abound. Public performance of media, photocopying of print items, and Internet resources raise questions often not easily answered. However, the Hong Kong government introduced the Copyright (Amendment) Bill 2003, which narrows the scope of the end-user criminal liability as a long-term measure because the public was concerned that it would seriously undermine classroom teaching and the dissemination of information (Intellectual Property Department, 2004).

Central to copyright and intellectual property issues is the challenge of plagiarism. How can educators deal with the common application of copy-and-paste learning now exacerbated by the Internet? One approach to this might be through the development of a policy outlining information literacy standards. Another might be to develop assessment policy that facilitates authentic forms of assessment. Together these policies might lay the groundwork for improved forms of assessment so that plagiarism was no longer an issue. It could also assist teacher librarians through collaboration with teachers to develop information literacy skills, including teaching students a set of skills in the ethical use of information (*Information Literacy for the 21st Century*, 2004).

Technology Planning

Over recent years, schools have developed technology plans and guidelines about the acquisition of software and hardware. This planning, embodied in policy and linked to overall technology integration and professional development, is a component of information policy.

Modern computers and telecommunication networks alone will not be enough to improve learning. Educators and librarians must begin with a clear vision of how these tools can be linked to strong professional development strategies, new curriculum content, and enhanced services to improve schools and libraries. Careful planning and sound operational strategies will ensure that school and library investments in information technology pay off in significant education and library service advancements. (Universal Service Administrative Company, 2004, Section 2.1, The Technology Plan).

According to the *Quality Assurance Inspection Annual Report 2003/4* by the EMB (2005), the library facilities and information technology infrastructures of Hong Kong schools were generally abundant. However, the EMB's findings noted, "half of the schools did not formulate specific goals, plans and strategies in using IT to enhance teaching and learning ... resulted in fairly great disparity in effectiveness."

Privacy

Another area to which Hong Kong schools have paid close attention is privacy. School records and sensitive information are protected clearly under Hong Kong ordinances. The Personal Data Privacy Ordinance (Chapter 486 of the Laws of Hong Kong) guides the storage and access for both student and personnel data in schools. How this set of laws and policies are communicated is an area to be studied. However, the Office of the Privacy Commissioner for Personal Data (2005) in April 2004 began to teach primary students about the importance of protecting and respecting privacy rights by organizing a live show that integrates music, games, and drama. They re-launched the show in March 2005.

Access to Information

The Internet adds a new level to the debate about intellectual freedom. However, even classic debates on censorship and the right of access to sensitive materials in library collections needs to be addressed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that few schools have collection development policies that outline rationales for selection or provide procedures for challenged materials. This would indicate that access is not regulated; however, the *Guidelines on Using Internet Resources in Schools* (EMB, 1996) include some rules for restricting access and use of the Internet as a means for seeking information.

Moore (1997) argues that information policy is developed to a large extent through lobbying efforts of individuals at the micro level in organizations where critical issues arise and shape macro policy. It can be argued that educators are best able to identify, explain context and background, and communicate information policy needs to government. It is at the school or district level that information policy needs greater development. An example can be seen in Hong Kong, where the EMB has attempted to raise issues with respect to information use in schools. This government department has no set policy, but has guided education reform in the context of pedagogical change and in the wider context of increasing use of electronic information. The report on the Hong Kong government's review of the five-year strategy for information technology in education, Information *Technology in Education—Way Forward,* outlines recommendations on the use of IT in education with a focus on information literacy. But more recently, *Empowering Learning and Teaching with Information Technology* (EMB, 2004) aims to set strategic goals to enhance school leadership and promote community-wide support using IT.

Methodology

This study had two objectives: (a) to investigate the status of information policies in Hong Kong; and (b) to develop an evaluation instrument for use in other countries. The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. Were teachers aware of the existence of policy?
2. Were policies written or unwritten?
3. Were schools implementing decisions about information issues according to written statements, policies, or guidelines?
4. Was attention being paid to policy development across a wide range of information issues?

A convenience sample group was formed of 103 (63 primary and 40 secondary) respondents comprising teacher librarians and information technology coordinators from government schools in Hong Kong. This sample represented 12% of government schools. All respondents were experienced teachers enrolled in master's programs (MSc [ITE] and MSc [LIM]) in the Faculty of Education in the University of Hong Kong. The respondents were screened to ensure that they had been in their present school for at least three years. This was believed essential to exclude new arrivals who would be unfamiliar with their schools. Given their position and their participation in these programs, it could be expected that respondents would be familiar with information policy in their schools. The curriculum in primary and secondary schools is delivered by subject teachers, and the structure of schools is similar. With this in mind, we were not concerned to draw specific distinctions between policy in primary and secondary schools, as the main objective was benchmarking.

The study gathered both quantitative and qualitative data through an online questionnaire. The instrument was developed using a Delphi process where invited experts identified specific policies. Consensus was reached in the project team as to which policies should be included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was presented as a checklist of policies grouped under general headings such as *Access to the Internet and Library policies*. The questionnaire can be seen at http://ip.cite.hku.hk/survey.asp.

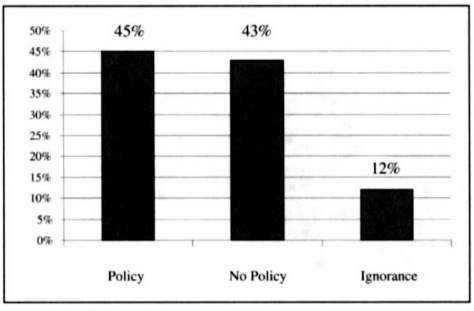
In addition to the checklist, where respondents indicated the existence or absence of a policy, they were also asked to classify the characteristics of the policy. This additional information allowed respondents flexibility in describing the state of the policy. Indeed, in any organization, some policy is documented and formal. Some is less formal and more akin to sets of guidelines, and some policy is understood or more oral rather than written in policy manuals. Respondents were requested to select an appropriate description of the policy. Descriptions were presented in a range as follows: (a) formal written documents; (b) less formal policies that were more like written guidelines; or (c) policies that were not written in documents but more aptly described as verbal policies. Explanatory notes for each description were included so that respondents would be clear in choosing policy characteristics that best fitted the specific identified information policy.

The questionnaire was pilot-administered to attempt to identify terminology that might be ambiguous or confusing. The pilot group consisted of 12 teachers who were not included in the final sample. Minor adjustments were made to the instrument as a result of this pilot test.

Findings

In compiling baseline data, we grouped explicit written policy with written guidelines, identifying this composite as schools that had developed policy. Similarly, the data for no policy combined the explicit response of *no written or verbal policy or guidelines* with the response of *verbal policy.* We took the view that if a policy was not explicitly written down, a consistent standard was unlikely to be communicated across the school. Hence, for the purposes of this study, verbal policy is not considered a proper policy per se. Responses indicating that the participant did not know if policy existed form the third category, which can be labeled the *ignorance* category. If the respondent did not know whether a policy existed (and could not discover its existence so as to respond more accurately to the survey), then even if a policy did exist, it was a paper policy only and neither active nor sufficiently enforced by the school. In contrast with the *policy* and *no-policy* categories (which are roughly equal), the *ignorance* category is relatively small, which reflects the fact that the respondents were informed of whether a genuine (i.e., written) policy existed or not (see Figure 1).

We wished to investigate the level of policy development. Owing to the nature of a rapidly changing world and the need for just-in-time procedures, some schools and organizations have oral understandings of how to



Questionnaire Category Label	*Clustered data in Figure 1*
1. Written policy	Policy
2. Written guidelines	
3. Verbal policy	No policy
4. No written or verbal policy or guidelines	
5. Do not know	Ignorance

Figure 1. Overall percentage of policy, no policy, and ignorance.

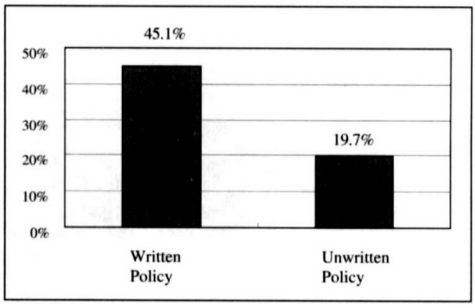
handle situations and may even label this as *verbal policy.* In this context, the verbal policy is being reclassified as *unwritten policy* for the purpose of comparing it with development levels of those written policies and written guidelines that are combined as an overall *written policy.* Respondents thus were asked to characterize the type of policy they had by addressing various information policy areas. Were school and staff addressing issues, but with policy that had not been formally documented or codified? Policy development based on the data collected indicates that overall, there is significantly more written than unwritten policy (see Figure 2).

In clustering the data, it was noted that the areas addressed by policy (including written policy and written guidelines) are characterized by administrative areas. We noted that a mission statement for technology planning was present in many schools.

Table 1 indicates generally where policy development is addressing information issues in formal policy or at least through written guidelines.

Verbal policy also indicates a level of awareness and addressing of issues often through meetings or discussions among colleagues. It can indicate that people seek some consistent approach or group-sanctioned support or guidance in areas of decision-making. In clustering this data, it is interesting to note here that verbal policies on two contentious issues dominated: Internet filtering and plagiarism (see Table 3).

Despite the wide acceptance of information literacy as being a current priority for schools, clustering data about areas with no policy indicate this is an area to be developed (see Table 4). Other areas lacking policy include various Internet activities such as e-mail policies.



Questionnaire Category Label	*Clustered data in Figure 2*
1. Written policy	Written policy
2. Written guidelines	
3. Verbal policy	Unwritten policy

Note. The other 35.2% missing from Figure 2 is made up of *no written or verbal policy or guidelines* and *do not know* questionnaire category labels.

Figure 2. Overall percentage of written and unwritten policy.

Table 1
The Five Highest Areas With Policy
(Including Data With the Label *Written Policy and Written Guidelines*)

Topic	*Response %*
Using pirated copies of materials	100
Library Lending policy	86.1
Assessment procedures, forms	83.1
Creating instructional materials	73.2
Mission statement for technology planning	71.3

Areas where teachers were not aware of policy included those that are probably characterized as mainly administrative, such as the use of CCTV systems, terms of reference for a privacy coordinator, parents' access to electronic mail, a position statement about access to the Internet, and developing policy to address knowledge management. It might be argued that the respondents ought not necessarily to know about these policies and that, therefore, the findings do not accurately reveal the correct situation. Because it was not the purpose of this study to be exhaustive on a school-by-school basis, this is not a significantly telling criticism. However, triangulation of data collection methods would address this issue (see Table 5).

Limitations

We made efforts to create a checklist of information policies that was sufficiently exhaustive to provide us with a good indication of the state of policy development. The length of the list militated against an enthusiastic response. Yet the list was not exhaustive, and an obvious and important information policy, that of homework, was not included.

Table 2
The Highest Areas With Written Policy

Topic	*Response %*
Creating instructional materials	50
Using pirated copies of materials	38.9
Students' records	31.7
Library Lending policy Mission statement for technology planning Vision statement for technology planning General school incident reporting Teacher promotion information Teacher technology standards School developments involving private finance; contract management	28.7 27.7

Table 3
The Highest Areas Supported by Verbal Policy

Topic	*Response %*
Instructional use of Internet	33.7
Downloading online resources	
Data security on networks	32.7
Authorized disclosure of personal information	
Copyright	31.7
Internet filtering and blocking	30.7
Plagiarism	
General statement about intellectual property	29.7
Photocopying materials created by the school	

By its nature, this was an exploratory study and was not expected to provide an exhaustive list of policies for each school. Indeed, we were asking about the respondents' knowledge about policy. More exhaustive studies would employ site visits and document inspections as well as evidence that paper policy is indeed active policy.

It was difficult for respondents to differentiate between the types of policy that were written and those that were more a set of guidelines. Indeed, using an English-language survey where English is not the mother tongue has inherent limitations. Some questions yielded high responses of *don't know,* and it is difficult for us to determine if the respondents did not know if the policy existed or did not understand what the policy was. Follow-up interviews with selected respondents would clarify this in a more robust study.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Hong Kong has been in a maelstrom of educational reform. Recent developments involve information literacy, information communication and technology, liberal studies, enquiry learning, and

Table 4
The Five Highest Areas With No Policy
(Including *Don't know* Responses)

Topic	*Response %*
Computer network access: Parental access of electronic mail	85.1
Privacy coordinator	84.2
Downloading online resources	82.3
Information literacy definition	82.2
Access to computer resources outside of regular school instructional hours	82.1

Table 5
The Highest Areas Where Respondents Replied *Don't Know*

Topic	*Response %*
Use of CCTV systems	37.6
Privacy coordinator	30.7
Electronic mail (Parents access)	26.7
Position statement re: access to the Internet	25.7
Knowledge management	23.8

teacher librarian certification. Hong Kong has high penetration of broadband Internet connections and well-established government information policy-planning at the macro level, yet results from this study indicate that information policy-planning in schools is lacking in areas beyond administrative and traditional library policies.

The first stage of this project was a review of the literature, which reinforced our feeling that information policy is a topic more talked about than understood. Because we are interested in understanding how information policies are debated and developed, a research project to collect baseline data about types of information polices and their development in Hong Kong was completed with the intention to develop the instrument for international use and comparison.

Information policy exists at the macro or national level, but at the school level, it can be argued that it has entirely different and compelling ramifications, because schools have a particular responsibility to develop information policies because of the role of the teacher in loco parentis. Indeed, a significant amount of literature deals with school and controversial information issues such as censorship, access to adult materials on the Internet, copyright, and plagiarism. Yet it would appear from this study that information policy development in schools is a topic more understood from what has not been researched than from what has been researched. Indeed, with recent attention fixed on the practices of information literacy and knowledge management, it is time for greater understanding of policy issues. The small-scale project that we undertook is a preliminary step in a wider agenda to address the challenge of gaps in the research about information policy development in schools.

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