



Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)



Critical Friend Review

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Introduction

The Aims and Focus

1. The establishment of the Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) for both sections at the beginning of the school session, 2013-2014, was considered an opportune moment to commission a Critical Friend Review (CFR) of the Primary and Secondary Sections. Following a series of meetings with the Supervisors and senior leadership of the sections, agreement was reached on the following:
 - A set of aims to evaluate the overall performance of both Sections through exploration of the answers to questions such as: how good is our school, how do we know how good it is, are we meeting our aims, where is the school going, where the school should be going, and does it possess the capability to get there?
 - Questions to stimulate discussion on some issues for consideration, such as: what are Maryknoll values; and, what are the characteristics of a Maryknoll girl?
 - To build on the answers to the questions and issues to stimulate an informed professional debate within the IMC and the Maryknoll community, supported by a report identifying the main strengths, main points for reflection leading to an agenda for action
 - Main focus to be on learning and teaching, complemented by an evaluation of leadership and organisation, school ethos and student support, and school self-evaluation.
2. This report focuses on the **Secondary Section** (the report on the Primary Section was presented in October 2013). The CFR in-school review took place during the period from 12 to 20 February, 2014. The in-school review coincided with one of the coldest spells in recent times in Hong Kong with the result that the girls (and some teachers) were wrapped up with two or three layers of clothing during the observation and evaluation of the twenty seven lessons. Nevertheless, they remained focused in the classroom and laboratories.
3. It is important to note that a CFR is not a comprehensive review of every activity of a school. It is not restricted by a pre-determined agenda set by an external body as is the case with an External School Review conducted by the Education Bureau. This review is based on the desires of the IMC, as discussed in the series of planning meetings, and focuses primarily on reporting on the school's major strengths and major points for reflection and action.

Methodology

4. Pre- review timetable:

- At the pre-CFR visit on 2 December, 2013, I had separate meetings with: the members of the IMC, including the Supervisor; Principal/Vice Principals; and, a sharing session about the review with the teaching staff.

5. The in-school review began on 12 February and was completed on 20 February. I met with the Supervisor, Principal and Vice Principals on 3 March to share a summary of my initial findings on major strengths and major points for action/reflection. During the in-school review the following activities took place:

- observation of twenty seven lessons, covering the full range of subjects and year groups (apart from Form 6), followed by one to one post-observation interviews with the twenty seven teachers observed
- group meetings with students representing: Form 1 (separate meetings with students of MCS Primary, and student arrivals from other primary schools); Form 4; and Form 6
- two meetings with Prefects, one with Head Prefect/Deputy Head Prefects, and one with twelve other Prefects selected at random
- meeting with officials of the Student Association
- meeting and greeting on a daily basis the welcoming administrative and support staff (who also ensured that I learned the geography of the school building).
- meeting with teachers (five years or less in school)
- two meetings covering all subject panel heads
- meeting with members of Pastoral Care Team
- meeting with Homeroom teachers
- meetings with members of: the Curriculum and Academic Affairs Team/Curriculum Development Committee; the School Annual Report Team; the School Development Team; and General Resources Management Team
- meeting with the School Advisory Committee (minus the Supervisor and Principal/Vice Principals), including representatives of General Staff Assembly
- meeting with representatives of administrative and support staff
- meetings with parental (office bearers) representatives of PTA and parents generally
- meeting with representatives of Alumnae
- leading a staff development workshop post-review on the theme *learning meets teaching* which provided me with further insights into the school

6. In addition, I met with the Principal and two Vice Principals as a group on two or more occasions, and also interviewed each of them on at least two occasions, in addition to informal discussion in and about the school office. Overall, I met **directly** with approximately **sixty members of the teaching staff**, including those observed in the classroom. **Seventy seven** students were **directly** involved in meetings with me, while I enjoyed many informal exchanges with students in and around the playground and coming to the school in the morning. My base was located next to the office which allowed me to enjoy informal exchanges culture and morale.

What are the Major Strengths?

Number 1: *The 'Maryknoll Ethos and Culture'*

7. Mingling and interacting with Maryknollers brings to mind the saying *you can light many lamps from the same source*. There is, in my view, a feeling of belonging in the school, a sense of being part of a living community with shared values and aspirations. It is a bond that embraces the past and present, while looking towards the future. There are smiling faces around the school. The message is that staff and students enjoy being part of the school and its way of working. While there is pressure, at times intense, on both staff and students that comes from being part of the Hong Kong culture with the emphasis on academic success, there is a pleasing awareness that life and work are about balance. The awareness is evident in the way Maryknoll girls express themselves in discussion about their school life, displaying appreciation of the freedom to express their views and the flexibility of the school approach to their concerns. The sense of belonging, referred to many times in exchanges with the girls (and staff) seems to find expression in many and varied ways, some of which I venture to list below, and which testify to the enduring nature of the inspirational values pursued by the Founding Sisters:

- the iconic building, linking both Primary and Secondary Sections, is more than something physical. The girls of today, just like the alumnae I met during the review, sense that the building has been created with feeling and love, fostering a deeper understanding of the Christian culture in which the school is rooted. The girls of today feel this bond as they seek to bear witness to the Maryknoll philosophy of education which emphasises mutual co-operation and trust and respect for the value and dignity of every *person* based on the underlining Christian way of life
- awareness among staff and students that they are the inheritors of rich tradition which permeates the life and work of the school in a quite natural, not contrived, way
- energy and togetherness of the Maryknoll Community enhanced by: the Alumnae Association in general; the Former Students' Association; the Parents; the School Foundation; the Management Committee; the Educational Trust; and, all coming together in support of the students and staff. The Parents are very happy with the education provided and the supportive culture of the school. They are drawn to work with the school when needed as in the way they volunteer to monitor body temperature of students at the school entrance in the morning. The Alumnae expressed a strong sense of commitment to their school, an example of which is their commitment to the *mentorship scheme* where they share their life experience and core values with current students.

8. The emphasis today on every girl is an individual and nurtured to be responsible citizens, in an increasingly global world resonates closely with the words of Sister Janice McLaughlin:

*Maryknollers will continue to cross borders, not only geographic,
but religious and spiritual as well,
building bridges of mutual respect, friendship and understanding
with the people we encounter wherever we go.*

Number 2: ***Sound and Effective Organisation and Management***

9. The school plans, policies and procedures are supported by comprehensive documentation, set out clearly in user-friendly English. The Staff Manual, in particular, is quite exemplary in the way in which everyday matters are explained in a step by step manner. The School Development Plans and Annual Reports, drawing together activities across the whole school at school level, department/panel level, functional committee level (including the work of the four major committees), provide a range of insights and monitoring tools to support overall evaluation by IMC and school leaders. All documents are set out in line with the recommendations of the Education Bureau. There is good linkage between the overall school plans and the plans of the subject panels and committees, such as Committees like e-Instructional Support Services and AV Equipment and Panels, for example, the English Panel which starts by addressing the major concerns of the school for the school year before going on to add its own objectives, followed by an evaluation report. Some committees, including Library, and School Buildings, Furniture and Equipment made good use of the SWOTS (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Challenges) to evaluate progress (it is also commendable to note that the committees prefer to use *areas for improvement* rather than *weaknesses* which has a negative meaning in English).
10. The school committee structure covers the key domains of education, providing opportunities for a wide range of staff to contribute to school well-being and policies. The four main committees feed in to the School Advisory Committee (SAC), and it is encouraging to note that there are representatives of the General Staff Assembly along with elected members on the committee. The SAC rotation of membership policy also provides good opportunities for staff development in aspects such as planning and evaluation as well as leadership. The four committees provide good opportunities for on-the-job leadership development and succession planning and, along with SAC, make a major input to: curriculum planning and development, student support and school ethos, student development, general school resourcing, and school evaluation.
11. The School Supervisor is a dedicated Maryknoller, providing an effective and harmonious working relationship between IMC and the school leadership. She is approachable and devotes a significant part of her time to the work of the school. The senior leadership team of the Principal and her two Vice Principals bring a wealth of experience, together with complementary skills and knowledge, which combine to enhance the overall quality of school management. The recent appointment of a second Vice Principal has added a further dimension which has strengthened the work of the team. They are

very accessible to staff and students on a daily basis and are dedicated to the harmony of staff and students. The Principal is very visible in and around the school, and also is to be commended, along with her two Vice Principals, for taking on a *teaching* timetable (a rare occurrence these days in Hong Kong), something which doesn't go unnoticed by staff and students. In my one to one interviews, all three demonstrated an applaudable readiness to self-reflect on their strengths and aspects requiring further thought and improvement.

12. Early signs suggest that the newly-formed IMC will further strengthen management and public relations, while the support of the MCS Educational Trust is much appreciated by staff, students and parents. The strong support of the Supervisory Body and IMC in fostering quality education in the school is a huge boost to morale.

Number 3: *The Maryknoll Girls and Their Achievements*

Overall Strength

13. The girls excel in the use of the English language in all aspects, a fact which is unsurprising given that the vast majority are graduates of the Primary Section (In my CFR report on the Primary Section I concluded: *students' command of the English language is a jewel in the crown*). My discussions in and out of lessons with girls who have arrived from other primary schools show that they too enjoy a very good command of English. The girls are fluent in English when engaging with teachers, and their oral skills are matched by the clarity and sharpness of their written work. There are many instances of the girls using the *Maryknoll Script* but its use is not as widespread as in the Primary Section. In my meetings with various student groups, the discussion flowed easily around the group with the girls demonstrating a firm hold on *multi-tasking* by writing up (and sometimes drawing) the salient points of the interchanges while continuing to engage with group members. My observations show that almost all girls possess satisfactory inter-personal skills, working sensibly when given opportunities for group activities in lessons. It was enlightening to watch them coming together in pairs and in groups, without fuss and with a minimum of instruction, to draft their views and ideas on the issues which I posed for them during their brief meetings with me (usually around 30 to 40 minutes). They are confident and articulate when presenting their ideas, displaying a talent for marshalling their thoughts when given an occasion in lessons, and also when summarising responses to the issues posed by me in the sharing sessions.
14. In and out of the classroom, they go about their business in a good-natured and respectful manner, and smiles are the norm, rather than the exception. There are no signs of arrogance. There is a very joyful atmosphere around the courtyard at recess and lunch time. The lunch time activities and competitions, for example, the singing of Chinese songs during the Chinese week, are characterised by a free and easy

manner. They are ready to support one another in a variety of ways and, it is praiseworthy that so many girls are taking part in the mentoring initiative whereby older girls support their younger schoolmates. Girls speak warmly about their teachers, showing appreciation of the care and dedication which they say is a mark of a Maryknoll teacher. They are attentive in class and for most of the time are on task. In the lessons in which they are given opportunities to become involved, their creative talents are evident, demonstrating that they are more than capable of working independently and exploring new challenges. Even when they are passive listeners in some lessons, the girls continue to show respect and try to remain focused.

15. I invited Homeroom teachers, using my *carousel* learning method, to work individually, followed by small group discussion, and, finally as a whole group, to consider *the strengths and characteristics* of Maryknoll girls. The teachers' responses listed below are an accurate reflection of the outcomes of the sharing:

*They are flexible and responsive; quick learners; free-spirited; outspoken; talkative;
caring and compassionate; confident, creative and hard-working;
supported by parents;
and, they set high standards for themselves and are ready to be challenged.*

My evaluation, of the many sharing sessions with both students and teachers, points to relationships that are grounded in mutual trust and support which bodes well for the life and work of the school. The girls' commitment to the mission and vision of the school can be seen in the work of the **Audio Visual Team**. More than fifty girls, drawn from Form 2 to Form 6, take on an impressive range of duties, working closely with an AV technician and two teachers who are in overall charge. The volunteers carry out tasks such as: daily operation of the audio and visual equipment in different areas of the school (for example, the hall, covered playground, courtyard, dance room); shoot and edit videos during internal school functions such as talks and assemblies, and external events such as swimming gala, athletics meet; and maintenance of the AV equipment. The girls undergo training so as to ensure team members can operate the equipment well. Observing lessons, I noticed that the girls are also quick to aid teachers in making use of AV equipment to support learning.

16. The varied, challenging extra-curricular activities (ECA) and clubs, and their popularity, show that the girls are multi-talented and aware that education is far more than success in academic examinations. The school Annual Report outlines many successes in Hong Kong events and competitions. The school is to be commended for giving the girls freedom to organise and facilitate many of the clubs. The bonus is that the *freedom to organise* is a real practical way of encouraging and developing leadership skills, an outcome which is highlighted by the maturity shown by Prefects, Student Association Officers and Form 6, in discussion with me. The girls' outstanding academic results also send a message that a quality, holistic education, central to the Maryknoll mission, is about an all-round

education embracing both academic results and extra-curricular fulfilment. The analyses of examination performance in the first two years of HKDSE shows that the school has achieved outstanding results much higher than the average of Day School Candidates in Hong Kong. While the above average performance is to be expected given the quality of MCS student intake (almost all Band 1), the size of the gap is impressive. However, even more impressive is the school's performance compared to schools of similar intake. EDB's sophisticated Value Added indicator allows schools to compare performance in DSE with schools with similar S1 intake. The EDB figures show that the school adds value in the 4 Core subjects (Chinese, English, Liberal Studies and Mathematics) as well as in the best 5 subjects.

The 'New' Maryknollers

17. The transition from primary to secondary, always a challenge for the young student, could be considered even more challenging for the relatively small number of students who join Form I from primary schools, other than MCS (Primary Section). It is a major strength of the school that the new Maryknollers are made to feel very welcome from day one with the result that they quickly feel part of the Maryknoll tradition. In my discussion with the newcomers, I invited them to discuss the question *what surprised you about the school?* Here are some of the responses which show that the girls are very happy at MCS Secondary Section:

*All of us can easily be friends here;
At first I thought the students here are just clever but impolite ...
but right now I have changed my mind as I think students here are nice, polite and clever;
I make a lot of friends and there is Mass at school;
We have a lot of freedom in this school, we have lots of different activities,
and I like the Homeroom teacher;
There are so many athletes in the school;
my Homeroom teacher is from the Philippines;
the beautiful learning environment and trees but the courtyard is small;
girls here are talkative and quite crazy;
my first seat-mate loves K-Pop;
someone vomited in the home room on the first day!*

18. Discussion with girls in Forms beyond Form 1 provide further evidence of the strength of the welcoming as the girls feel that the distinction fades quite quickly. Several of the alumnae, who joined the Secondary Section from an outside primary school, also said that they were Maryknollers from the first weeks and never experienced discrimination in any way.

The School Prefects

19. My meetings with the Prefects (and Student Association) were, arguably, among the most enriching and illuminating of the whole review. The girls showed true leadership and organisational skills in the way they quickly set to work to prepare their written responses and oral presentations to the challenging questions I set for them. They embraced my two learning methods ó *the carousel and place mat* ó in an open and enterprising style, demonstrating flexibility in identifying and analysing the issues, as well as an impressive awareness of the value of team working. Their response underlined the very characteristics identified by Homeroom teachers (see 15 above): *quick learners; creative; and, free-spirited.*
20. The first group, Head Prefect and Deputy Head Prefects, were not put out by my question: *what would the school miss if there are no prefects?* Their summary argued that the following would be lost to the school community:

*Student role models; student ambassadors;
self-discipline in the sense of an example to follow;
help and advice from older students and peer guidance from the prefects;
bridge between teachers and students; good standard of students' conduct;
a helping hand for class monitors; pressure on students to behave and be ladies;
more students using foul and vulgar language casually*

In a lighter and perhaps humorous way, the Prefects also said:

The joy and anticipation of uniform checks; and nagging nannies

21. The second and much larger group of Prefects, selected at random, were invited to tackle three issues: *What are the strengths of learning and teaching and what would you improve; what would you change in the school to improve it: and, what should I write in the final paragraph of my CFR report.* Using the *carousel* method, they all took the opportunity to comment on the three questions. The combined result was quite remarkable with many and varied suggestions. They also displayed good time management, making space for three presentations to stimulate an overall discussion which argued that MCS is special and successful but must be aware of the implications of changes in society which are impacting on the needs of young girls in the 21st century.

The Student Association

22. The Office Bearers are lively, enthusiastic, and articulate. The leaders are dedicated to making education enjoyable for all the girls. They clearly love being part of the Association which is to be congratulated for promoting the voice of the student in the school with, for example, the ðSpeak Up and

“Step Up” initiatives. The *Circus* magazine for 2013 is eye-catching and colourful, giving a snappy and humorous account of the activities throughout the year. It is pleasing to report on the importance attached to the class representative workshop with the emphasis on improving communication and organisation skills. It is especially gratifying to note the emphasis given to collecting and sharing of opinions through the class representatives on ways of improving school life (and also the positive response of the school to many of the suggestions). Telling inputs by the Association which enliven school life can be seen in the *Walkathon* (which raised almost HK\$200,000 for charity, and expenses for various student activities), the *Thanksgiving Programme*, and, the prominence given to the promotion of *Cirque de la Lumiere*, school theme in 2013 for the School Fun Fair.

23. Students are the most important people in a school, so the Association is to be supported and encouraged in the way it provides varied opportunities for girls to share their opinions which the Office Bearers can take to the school leadership. In discussion, the energetic Association leaders expressed the desire to have more inter-school competitions, aided by additional resources for various competitions and improved promotion within the school. The officers would like the school to give more publicity to students' successes in HKDSE examinations, citing: *the competition between schools has heightened due to extensive exposure to social media sites*. This point was also raised by Form 6 students. The value of serving as an Office Bearer was highlighted in my meeting with Form 6 students who valued the experience as illustrated by quotes from two students:

*One of the highlights I've come across in the school is definitely about
being an officer of the Student Association.*

*Not only can I know the school more,
but also help organise different activities for our schoolmates.
Being involved in lots of activities has broadened my horizons,
including Sports Team members and House Officials.*

*This allowed me to have great achievements
in both academic subjects and non-academic pursuits.*

24. When asked to consider the challenges ahead for Maryknoll, it was refreshing to watch the Association leaders move to the high ground, for example, issues of recruiting and retaining quality teachers, ensuring a suitable mix of experience and inexperience. They underlined the importance of student-teacher relationships as central to school success.

Number 4: The Maryknoll Staff

25. My discussions, supplemented by my observations, show that the staff is committed to the success of the school, and they appear to enjoy *coming through the school gate* every day. Support and administrative staff are friendly and knowledgeable with a good sense of the history of Maryknoll tradition. They feel

very much part of the school. There is a strong desire among teaching staff to enhance the success of their students in an all-round way. My observations show that they are on hand to assist the girls, not just in lessons but in providing additional support at different times of the school day and in extra-curricular activities. Many are *passionate* and *willing to go the extra mile*, according to their students. Teachers overall are good role models for their students in the ways in which they show devotion to their work and school. My observations, for example, in my many discussion-based meetings, pointed to a high degree of co-operation among teachers in a positive way. In my post-observation interviews (with 27 teachers) I was impressed by (almost all) teachers' readiness to self-evaluate their teaching in a professional manner, making it clear that they welcomed the opportunity to share views on their learning and teaching. Very few showed any kind of complacency. They focused both on their strengths and aspects to improve. It is also pleasing to report that the staff (working) room and related facilities on the second floor are more in line with teachers' professional status than is the norm in Hong Kong. Teachers are appreciative of the learning environment which is a major contributor to the positive school ethos. It is also unusual to find that the Principal has a desk in the staff room. The *General Staff Assembly* is listened to by the leadership of the school with the Chairperson given a place on the *School Advisory Committee*.

26. Maryknoll teachers enjoy a very good to excellent command of the English language with many demonstrating outstanding pronunciation and intonation skills while delivering in a very clear *English* accent. Their English language skills enable them to convey their messages in a clear and coherent manner, including lessons in technical/specialist subjects. Teachers' and students' fluency in English promotes a strong *English language* culture across the school which is arguably, in my view, among the very best in Hong Kong. Additionally, the Chinese teachers I met with in lesson observations and meetings possess good skills in English, both orally and in writing.

Number 5: *Support to Students*

27. In my highly-participative meetings with members of the Student Development Teams, such as the *Pastoral Care Core Group* and *Homeroom Teachers' Committee*, staff responded positively to my challenge to them to justify their work and identify their successes. My evaluation of the outcomes of the interchange of ideas, coupled with a study of the teams' reports and plans, and, discussions with students, points to a committed team based on the following successes:

- *strong sense of collaborative teamwork permeating the team's activities, described in discussion as drawing on "collective wisdom"*
- *a shared vision and common goals, leading to whole-school approach to student care*
- *a respect for individuality in relating to students' needs*
- *encouraging students to understand their own strengths and issues through a "listening" culture and building up students' confidence in dealing with successes and problems*

- *encouraging and recognising the role of parents in fostering individual pastoral care suited to the needs of their daughters*
- *few disciplinary problems and an emphasis on self-correction and self-reflection (rather than a punitive approach) in align with Maryknoll Christian values*

28. The *Homeroom* initiative with its dual-teachers approach is an effective force in establishing a good rapport between students and teachers in creating a class spirit. There is evidence that the system allows teachers to *spot* individual students' needs in advance. Both teachers and students feel that the *Homeroom* time allows space for interaction and an airing of common concerns and issues. The initiative is worthy of further strengthening.

29. The pastoral care programme is enriched by bringing in outside agencies to work with staff and students on big issues such as Cyber Bullying and Sex Education. The MCS Educational Trust support enables the school to benefit (beyond standard provision in Hong Kong schools) from additional support in providing counselling and educational psychology services for students. The Careers Programme is well-managed, including the tracking of former students and their destinations.

30. While my remit didn't allow me to observe the wide ranging and varied programme of ECA, a study of the programme along with interchange with students point to an impressive array of opportunities. As mentioned earlier in the report (see 16 above), it is uplifting to know that students take the lead in setting up and publicising ECA. Students would like to see further developments, including additional resources, to enhance further the opportunities for all students.

31. The challenges that lie ahead, identified in discussions with both teachers and students include: (high) parental expectations; managing stress and pressure on students arising from parental and student (high) expectations and range and variety of demands on student time; the competing demands on teachers' time, including Homeroom teachers; and, need to improve students' time management skills. In addition, there are the added challenges arising from changing family and social values brought about, for example, by the exposure to social media in the 21st century age of mass communication. This will have implications for staff time, including staff training and the probability of an increased demand for professional support and back up staff, currently financed by the commitment and generosity of the MCS Educational Trust.

Number 6: ***Overall Quality of Learning and Teaching***

32. Thorough, step by step planning and development has led to a very successful transition to, and successful implementation of, the HKDSE curriculum and assessment. The Curriculum and Academic Affairs Team, and its constituent parts, have been vigilant in ensuring that the transition has been smooth in managing change in a positive way. It is clear that panels have responded to the challenges

with the result that the new diploma has been introduced in a coherent and co-ordinated manner which has contributed greatly to the success of students in achieving outstanding performances in the first years of the new diploma. It is also gracious of the school to acknowledge the extra financial support from EDB (for example, the number of enhanced capacity grants) to enable schools to prepare effectively in meeting the requirements of new DSE curriculum, assessment, and examinations.

33. The impact on learning and teaching of the high quality English-speaking culture which makes MCS (Secondary Section) stand out as a true EMI school (see paragraphs 13 and 26 above), cannot be emphasised enough. The English-speaking culture contributes greatly to bringing about effective learning and teaching in classrooms, workshops and laboratories. In discussions and exchanges with teachers and students, I was struck by the natural, uninhibited way in which they just slipped into using English like native speakers. The result is that students and teachers engage in English almost all of the time in lessons, apart from those lessons in which Chinese is the medium of instruction. My observations also confirm that English is used to a good extent out with the classroom.
34. Students, in almost all lessons, are motivated to learn and on task. Relationships within classrooms are conducive to promoting learning with little or no behavioural problems to distract teachers and students from focusing on the lesson. Teachers prepare well for their lessons which tend to be built around the standard textbook and related audio visual materials. There are many examples of humour being used to brighten up lessons and teachers generally are quick to recognise students' input through praise and encouragement.
35. Successful lessons featured imaginative and intellectually demanding tasks which encouraged the girls to be creative in solving problems and taking forward ideas discussed within the lesson. In such lessons, the emphasis is, typically, on student involvement, subtly orchestrated by the teacher, leading to independent thinking. In a Form 1 E&RE lesson, the student-centred approach to learning allowed the girls to express their thoughts and share ideas on the lesson theme, 'human emotions', giving them the freedom to contrast and compare positive and negative emotions. The end product was a board covered with the students' views leading to informed discussion. In a Form 5 BAFS lesson, the girls were motivated by learning via the *case study* approach which allowed them to consider the significance of key accounting ratios, for example, in setting prices and profit margins. The fact that the case study was based on a well-known local fast food chain added relevance to the discussion as every girl in the class is probably a customer, at one time or another, of the chain.
36. The BAFS lesson highlights the importance of making use of materials and contexts relevant to *students' experience*. For example, in a Form 2 Chinese lesson, the teachers' use of photographs of Hong Kong scenes stimulated learning via student interaction and enjoyment of the activity. In a similar way, quality teaching makes use of *practical experiences* to *demonstrate the relevance* of a topic or a subject to our everyday life, especially as consumers. This learning method was demonstrated in an exemplary

manner in a Form 5 Chemistry lesson in which the enthusiastic teacher engaged students by focusing their minds on aspects like the contents and labels on well-known drinks, and cleaning fluid. The Chemistry teacher also confirmed that quality learning is about using *a variety of learning approaches* to stimulate students' thoughts and encourage creativity. Like the *case study* learning method, *role play* can be a very effective learning method while giving students the chance to use their imagination and, in a sense, *learn by doing*. In a Putonghua lesson which focused on *student presentations*, some very inventive groups carried off role play with aplomb. Presentation was also to the fore in a music lesson in which the girls, working mainly in pairs, introduced their choice of a famous musician to the class.

37. The value of setting *clear objectives* at the start of a lesson is appreciated by the girls who told me: *we like to know where we are going*. Exemplary examples during the review include a lesson in Home Economics with Form 3 which was characterised by a systematic approach, setting out clearly the purposes of the lesson, the intended outcomes, and how the outcomes are to be achieved. The girls responded with vigour and enthusiasm, working creatively in pairs and, at times, in groups. The importance of setting objectives, complemented by a well prepared plan, was highlighted in a Form 2 Science lesson. The well organised teacher was able to motivate and manage nine groups in a class of 34 students (in a practical subject) to the extent that the experiments with bar magnets was carried off successfully with all students involved in the lesson. This lesson also highlighted the importance of *time management* in lesson planning.
38. Two lessons in mathematics lesson were characterised by an *on task*, disciplined, step by step approach with teachers and students working effectively in tandem. A *step by step* approach is particularly important when teaching in a second/foreign language, irrespective of the subject. During the post-observation meetings, the teachers of mathematics showed an admirable willingness to self-evaluate and both said learning would be improved further by involving students to a greater extent in their lessons.
39. The *standard textbook approach* used extensively in Hong Kong can be strength in many ways but sometimes it can lead to routine learning and discourage creativity and independent thought. I observed some lessons, for example in a Form 1 English language and Form 4 History, in which the teachers skilfully introduced their own ideas and/or materials to enrich the standard approach. In the English language lesson, for example, the adaptation of the standard approach seemed to inspire students to think laterally while enjoying the interaction and exchange of different ideas.
40. I evaluated every one of the 27 lessons observed on what I call *the learning teaching continuum* with *student-centred* learning at one end, and *teacher-centred* learning at the other end of the continuum. I also invited teachers to evaluate their lesson using the continuum. The teachers' evaluation was more or less in line with my evaluation. **Nine lessons** (33%), evaluated towards the *student-centred end*, were characterised by a variety of learning opportunities for students. In student-centred lessons, led and facilitated by the teacher, students participate (actively) in different ways, for example, via interaction,

group sharing and independent learning. *Thirteen lessons* (48%), evaluated towards the *teacher-centred end* tended to be teacher-led with fewer opportunities for students to become engaged in the lesson, and sometimes with students passive listeners for a sizeable part of the lesson. *Five lessons* (19%) were evaluated in the middle with a mixture of the two approaches. Studies throughout the world suggest time and again that involving learners, the *learning by doing* approach, is the most effective approach for the vast majority of learners irrespective of age and learning place. However, it should be borne in mind that it doesn't follow that every lesson at one end of the continuum is good and at the other end less good. What really matters is balance, and how well the lesson is led, organised and facilitated by the teacher to promote and enrich learning.

41. I asked teachers to grade their lesson using the highly-publicised EDB four levels:

- Excellent: many strengths
- Good: strengths outweigh areas to improve
- Acceptable: some strengths and some areas to improve
- Unsatisfactory: many areas to improve

Omitting the 4 CMI lessons which I observed, teachers' self-evaluation of the 23 lessons worked out as below (my evaluation in parenthesis):

- Excellent 17% (26%)
- Good 61% (40%)
- Acceptable 22% (34%)
- Unsatisfactory 0% (0%)

Once again teachers' self-evaluation is very close to mine. My evaluation is higher than the teachers' in two instances, and lower in just three instances. The important thing, and what really matters, is not the grade but the overall feeling about the quality of learning and its direction, as well as a readiness to self-evaluate. Evaluation, especially self-evaluation, is not the end in itself, but a means to an end which is about improving student learning and enhancing the teachers' professional skills and knowledge.

42. In the one to one post-observation interviews, almost all teachers demonstrated a readiness to self-evaluate with many focusing on how to improve learning in their lessons. There were few signs of complacency. Teachers' quotes included:

"More warming up....and examples drawing on the students own experience"

"I can slow down a bit in giving instructions"

"Improve my time management"

"Try to get students to be more active and involved"

"Plan more group discussion"

"Teach slower and let students talk more"

The percentage (26%) of lessons in Excellent is to be commended. My experience, over the past fourteen years in Hong Kong, whether evaluating learning in a CFR by myself, or leading a team of reviewers (for example, in a Comprehensive Review of DSS schools), is that very few schools are awarded 20% and above in the Excellent grade.

(If I include the four CMI lessons the overall percentages change. All four teachers graded their lesson as good so the overall percentages are as below - my overall evaluations are in parenthesis and I have no reason to doubt the CMI teachers' grading: Excellent 15% (22%); Good 66% (48%); Acceptable 19% (30%); Unsatisfactory Both 0%)

What are the Major Aspects for Reflection and Action?

Number 1: Make Self-evaluation an Integral Part of Everyday life

43. As can be seen from the Major Strengths, there is a solid platform (planning - implementation - evaluation) on which to enhance school self-evaluation so that the desire to monitor, evaluate and improve permeates every aspect of school life and work. It should be reinforced at every opportunity in committees, panels and staff meetings so that the mind-set of evaluation is more explicit than at present. There is space to capitalise on the strength of the Maryknoll Culture to create an *ethos of improvement* at all levels to confidently embrace the opportunities (and challenges) in the new era of HKDSE.
44. The well-presented School Development Plan could focus more on the aspects already identified in the Plan as: *areas for improvement* and *follow-up action*. In the Domain of Leadership and Management, for example, the senior leadership is open in reporting that there is a need to bring about *“more direct and open communication”*. The leadership should continue to pursue ways of encouraging staff: *“to be more active in expressing their concerns and opinions at meetings”*. If, as indicated in the Plan’s *areas for improvement*, there is frustration at times as a result of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and failure of staff to voice their views, there is room to ask *why* is this happening and *how* can communication and dialogue be improved. In the Learning and Teaching Domain, *catering for Learner Diversity* has been a major concern for the past two years, and the time is opportune to systematically monitor and evaluate the progress made in identifying and responding to the girls’ individual differences, for example: *does classroom practice take account of, and respond to, individual needs?*
44. The *ethos of improvement* is about making full use of existing data to bring about a greater emphasis on *“data driven”* evaluation. Good use is already made of the Key Performance Measures (as advised by EDB), especially in analysing and comparing performance in territory-wide and external examinations, including value-added. The *ethos of improvement* should also, for example, draw to an increased extent on organised staff, student and parental feedback, and make full use of the APASO (Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes) to link with the school’s major concern (students’ sense of responsibility to self and others), including trends over time. In particular, I recommend that there should be regular opportunities for the General Staff Assembly, Prefect Board and Student Association to share views on school life and work with the Senior Leadership. In the new era, IMC should consider inviting the Head Prefect and one or two of her Board members to IMC meetings on a regular basis to present a report on their work, and also invite, separately, members of Student Association. It is clear that the student leaders are capable of making a considered input to school evaluation. My interaction with them, including some Form 6 girls, shows that the girls are perceptive in identifying

strengths, aspects to reflect upon, and challenges ahead.

Number 2: Improve (Further) Learning and Teaching

45. Twenty six per cent of lessons in the excellent grade can be the catalyst to raising further the overall quality of learning in the school. The lessons which inspired quality learning, in the excellent to good grades, made use of a variety of engaging activities to motivate students, and included:

- Setting clear objectives at the outset of the lesson
- Providing time towards the close of the lesson to sum up and reflect on learning outcomes
- Opportunities to be creative and independent at different times in the lesson
- Skilful paired and group work to complement whole-class question and answer
- Insightful use of audio visual aids, including video clips to stimulate discussion
- Relating the lesson to students' experience
- Judicious use of praise and an emphasis on enjoying learning

In this context, it is interesting to read in the English language panel plan that the new curriculum: *“creates an insatiable demand for more interactive pedagogy”*. The report goes to advise that teachers need: *“to broaden methodological repertoire”*. There is a very encouraging, clear awareness among teachers of the value of making greater use of the activities described above. When asked during the CFR *what are the most effective learning methods in MCS classrooms*, Panel Heads' summary focused on three aspects:

- Discussion/evaluation and reflection
- Active participation/learning by doing
- Variety of activities

46. My post-observation discussion with teachers, complemented by observation and evaluation of their lessons, indicate that there is a consensus on aspects to improve. Teachers agreed, especially given the 35 minute period, that *time management* is crucial to a successful lesson. A significant number of teachers overran the time allowed, leaving no space to sum up the learning outcomes. Teachers recognise the value in setting out the *objectives* for the lesson and the need to stay on task. In some lessons, *teacher talk* (with some whole-class question and answer) consumed a large part of the short period. While *whole-class question and answer*, a main approach in a good number of lessons, can be an effective learning method, it needs to be used sparingly in association with other methods, such as, individual learning, paired learning, group learning, student presentation and peer evaluation. There is also a need to remain vigilant to maintain the success of the English-speaking culture. In several lessons, Cantonese was used in group and paired discussion. Period changeovers present a challenge

for the school to ensure classes start on time. During the review, a majority of classes began late, with some five to ten minutes behind schedule.

47. One of the school's major concerns is to cater for learner diversity. The wide-ranging ECA activities, complemented by the MCS Educational Trust support for exchange tours, along with the work of the Educational Psychologist, are making a major contribution to helping students to achieve their full potential. It is quite challenging in classes of thirty plus (and in the single period of thirty five minutes) to introduce materials and methods to meet the diverse needs of all students. I witnessed few examples of diversity in lessons during the CFR. Apart from the quality activities already mentioned in this paragraph, the school needs to continue to work through the constituent parts of the Pastoral Care Group, especially Homeroom teachers and, also draw on subject panels' knowledge and awareness of how best to identify and support individual students.
48. An important issue in relation to the *learning teaching continuum* concerns the layout of desks and chairs in classrooms. In the vast majority of lessons observed, the room was laid out in rows. While the relatively small classrooms combined with a class size of 30 plus is a constraining factor, some teachers succeeded in rearranging furniture to facilitate group discussion and interaction. Teachers should not be afraid to arrange desks and chairs to suit their style and the topic. Many teachers, whom I have observed over the years in Hong Kong, establish a *room layout routine* which enables the class to adjust quickly to an arrangement which is conducive to face to face discussion and exchange.
49. In improving (further) learning and teaching, the school should look to the strengths identified in this report and the aspects above (paragraphs 45 to 48). The annual development plan should strengthen its focus on learning and teaching, and, for example, increase the emphasis on learning and teaching methods in the staff development programme. The good work on observing lessons, including peer observation, should be stepped up as part of the staff development programme to enrich and enhance teachers' professional skills and knowledge. The staff development programme should make room to train those who are observing and evaluation learning (including how to conduct post-observation interviews).
50. As part of its response to the CFR, and the proposed IMC visionary five year plan (see paragraph 52 below) the school should set targets to improve learning further. A starting point for discussion would be to aim for 80% of lessons in Good to Excellent (currently my evaluation is around 70%) with 30% in Excellent (attainable given my current high evaluation of 26%), and 20% in Acceptable (currently my evaluation is around 30%). I believe that the targets are achievable across the school. Almost all teachers demonstrate an eagerness to improve and self-evaluate in the post-observation interviews. And teachers responded enthusiastically to the issues raised in the discussion groups during the CFR as well as to the discussions on student-centred and teacher-centred learning in the post-review staff development workshop.

Number 3: *Improve Links with MCS (Primary Section)*

51. Given that the two sections share the same Maryknoll values and traditions, as described in (7) and (8) above, and the vast majority of girls in the Primary Section go on to study in the Secondary Section, steps should be taken to strengthen and improve existing links between the two sections. Some thought might be giving to, for example: secondary students becoming mentors for P6; F1 students sharing their experience of entering secondary; sometimes secondary students taking part in Primary Section school assemblies and vice versa; and showing a united front in raising money in some charity events. Parent representatives expressed the desire for improved communication between the two to strengthen the *One School* concept (see also paragraph 54 in the CFR of Primary Section).

Number 4: *A Forward-Looking Visionary Five Year Plan*

52. There is a window of opportunity for the newly-established IMC, in partnership with the school's leadership, to set out a vision for the future. The plan should draw on IMC and school leaders' insider knowledge of Maryknoll traditions, further informed by the findings of this CFR Report. Moreover, members are well-placed to set out their vision of the future taking account of the challenges and opportunities emerging as a result of the evolving changes in school education in Hong Kong.

53. *The Major Strengths and Major Aspects for Reflection and Action* can support and stimulate an informed debate and exchange of ideas. In addition, aspects which merit attention as part of *where do we want to go* question should include the following:

- Improving, updating and financing of education facilities to support quality learning in the 21st century
- Responding to the highly competitive school environment in Hong Kong
- Maximising the Maryknoll *feel good* factor in promoting and publicising the traditions and successes of the school, and raising expectations all round
- Maximising the benefits of an English-speaking culture with the need to promote and sustain quality in Chinese language, including Putonghua
- Challenging the perception that students are under-performing in Chinese language
- Making the best use of finance, especially the Capacity Enhancement Grants, to address staffing and resource issues for the years ahead
- Asking if the current management structure is the *right* one for the challenge ahead
- Planning for succession at middle management and above, and for the mix of qualifications and experience at teacher level

Concluding Remarks

54. What should I write in the conclusion of my report? I posed that question to group meetings of students and teachers during the review. Here are some of the groups' conclusions:

A unique school full of caring teachers and students, working in a happy and pleasant atmosphere,

a happy place for learning and teaching

A school that is hard to come by – we live our vision and mission

In this school we can grow strong together as one

A beautiful campus and great learning environment

MCS is a school which nurtures and prepares the future generation well

Provides an all-round education

55. Their evaluations have real feeling which, for me, captures the *togetherness with purpose* Christian ethos of MCS (Secondary Section). Arguably, the most important indicator of the sense of worth and well-being of an organisation lies in the answer to the question: *do I like coming through the gate every day?* During the review, I became aware of an almost instinctive sense of belonging and warmth around the campus. Maryknollers – students, teachers, administrative and support staff, parents, alumnae – love coming through the school gate.
56. My many discussions with a broad cross-section of the Maryknoll community confirm that it is right for the school to remain true to the mission of the Founding Sisters by providing an all-round, affordable and Christian-inspired education for girls. But the school should not be afraid of publicising the fact that it is a high performing school, with a remarkably-rich English-speaking culture, outstanding successes in public examinations, a richness of extra-curricular activities, complemented by a sense of being part of a living community with shared values and aspirations". The words of Matthew Chapter 5, verse 15 are relevant: *No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone in the house* (Good News Bible).
57. In response to my question: *what should I write in the final paragraph of my report?* A conclusion of the Panel Heads' discussions, advised me to end with the statement: *this is the best school I have found myself in.*

***My conclusion is that MCS (Secondary Section) is one of the best schools,
in and beyond Hong Kong, I have found myself in.***

Curriculum Vitae

The CFR was carried out by Archie McGlynn, Head of McGlynn-Ross Education which was set up in Hong Kong in 2004. He is also Founder-Director of the Hong Kong Schools Self-evaluation Network which celebrated its 10th Anniversary in 2013. Archie has undertaken high profile studies for EMB and EDB, helping to shape the future of external school review and school self-evaluation in Hong Kong. He has undertaken numerous reviews, including Comprehensive Reviews of DSS schools, and led critical friend reviews in Singapore, New York State and several countries in Europe. His best-selling book, co-authored with Professor John MacBeath of Cambridge University, has been translated into Italian, Sweden and Slovene. He was Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (Scotland) from 1987-2000.



Photos Taken on 14 March, 2014
Post-CFR Workshop with Teachers

Some Quotes from Students and Teachers

“Intangible bond between students and teachers” - *Student, Form 6*

“A highlight of school is that audio and visual equipment is managed by students”
- *Student, Form 6*

“Collect more opinionsand improve the ‘speak up’ session” - *Student member of SA*

“MCS (Secondary Section) is one of a kind” - *Prefect*

“We need to) provide more opportunities for students to learn to communicate through different kinds of activities” - *Panel Head*

“We can improve by) gathering the energy of panel members” - *Panel Head*

“Maryknoll girls are creative, confident, caring, good natured and intelligent”
- *Homeroom teachers*

“We) build good rapport with Homeroom class, and cater for individual needs of our students” - *Homeroom teachers*

“We need) Counselling skills for all Homeroom teachers” - *Homeroom teachers*

“There is good parental involvement” - *Pastoral Care Teachers*

“We need to be resilient, we need to drive the car and not be driven by others” -
Principal

“We have many different lessons and most of them are interesting” - *Student, Form 1*

“Going to school is enjoyable and I love my school” - *Student, Form 1*