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Building a Professional Spirit for the Teaching Force Amidst Reform Initiatives

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Introduction

“ I was on a boat trip to go fishing with a group of friends. The team worked hard to get a boat and equipment sorted out, but we only found ourselves lingering in a crowded harbour. Soon someone caught a big garoupa, and then another caught another garoupa, and ... One by one we threw them all back to the sea because the water was all polluted. Why did we bother to catch them? ”

Is our educational reform a dream to come true, or an ongoing nightmare? What are our goals? What processes are we going through? What changes are we experiencing? In what context are we engaged in teamwork? The metaphors implied in this scenario may invite intriguing discourse about our journey ahead.

For educational reform to sustain its life as a long-term and dynamic movement, a mediation between reform initiators and frontline teachers is necessary. This paper is concerned with the synergy of different forces in the educational reform movement, with a particular focus on teachers' everyday experience where opportunities for professional learning can be harnessed. Teachers' professional learning was examined from a focus group of 16 experienced teachers who were granted fellowship by the Education Quality Fund for a three-month period (April – June 2002) to join a mentoring programme organised in the University of Hong Kong, as part of the Unified Professional Development Project. Data drawn from this selected sample of dedicated professionals carry significant implications for understanding teachers' school life, which may shed light on the nature of professional learning in a reform climate. The paper highlights teachers' authority and values from within, and asserts that the building of a professional spirit comprises a commitment to personal growth and active learning in difficult circumstances.