Developing curriculum leadership in a primary school: a Hong Kong case study

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the theory and practice of curriculum leadership within the tradition of school-based curriculum development. A case study methodology was used to evaluate the extent that teacher engagement in curriculum decision making processes within a school based structure of curriculum development had led to professional development. Evidence revealed positively that participating teachers had developed themselves professionally through the process of planning, implementing and reflecting curriculum practice and innovation. However, the complexity of the structures and processes that were established for the implementation of the concept of teacher curriculum leadership needs further empirical and theoretical work.

Keywords: curriculum leadership, school-based curriculum development, curriculum change.

Context of curriculum change in Hong Kong

The call for involving school teachers in curriculum development in its broadest sense of the approach as part of a decentralizing process has a long history in a highly centralized system of education in Hong Kong (Llewellyn, 1982; Board of Education, 1997; Education Commission, 2000; Curriculum Development Council, 2001; Law, 2003). Until 2002, the degree of teachers’ participation, the role and the types of teacher decision-making in curriculum planning and design activities outlined in various policy documents have been vague and much has been left to the deliberation of the heads of schools, their heads of subject departments or in many cases to the teachers’ personal initiatives and commitments, though in general terms teacher participation has received some form of consensus among policy makers and school educators (Lee & Dimmock, 1999; Law & Galton, 2004). The year of 2002 was a year of turning point. The Government has taken a policy initiative of “institutionalizing” curriculum decision making processes as one of the core professional activities within the school-based curriculum development. A senior post with key responsibilities of planning, reviewing, designing and evaluating curriculum decisions and practices has been established for over eight hundred primary schools, though the actual interplay between the curriculum coordinator and various situational factors varies from school to school (Education Department, 2002). The project that this paper has based is part of the curriculum initiatives of the curriculum coordinator who had attended a training course commissioned by the Government and was taught by the first author of this paper.

Curriculum leadership: an international perspective

The forms and contents of developing teachers’ professional knowledge and skills have been much debated. The traditional forms of training teachers started in the university faculties and colleges of education. This
course-based pattern has received less criticism for pre-service education of teachers. However, in the 1970s, after the centralized curriculum projects had failed to impact upon classroom teachers and teaching, the place where the training should take place was hotly debated. This has been particularly so when training took the typical pattern of offering classroom teachers workshops given by an expert during which they learned new skills or information which they were expected to implement in their classroom or school. This approach has not produced the desired results because such courses tend to be too theoretical and are not related to classroom practice. Besides, they have little reference to school and teacher needs. Therefore, new methods and approaches are needed (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Sparks, 1994).

There has been evidence that the location where teacher development should be placed, has been moved from central agencies to the periphery where schools became the focal point of the professional development of teachers (Skilbeck, 1984; Bell & Gilbert, 1994). This movement of including schools as partners in the training of teachers, in particular in developing school teachers professionally to meet the needs of the contemporary educational and curriculum reforms, has been accompanied by the theoretical arguments that there is no curriculum development without teacher development. This line of argument has gone further that teachers should take up the role of being researchers in order to develop their professional abilities to embark on an enquiry based or evidence based profession (Stenhouse, 1975). Professional development of teachers has therefore taken a different perspective, from a model which assumes teachers to take presumably a passive and inferior position underlying the processes of their university based training programmes and development activities towards another model which assumes teachers to take an active role in action based activities in various phases of developmental stages which are characterized by their features of being self critical and reflective in nature within the new tradition of restructuring schools (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Schon, 1983; Elliott, 1991; Day, 1993;Fullan, 1993). This conception of teacher development within a school based curriculum development environment has developed further and it has been often argued in recent years that teachers should take up an even more central and leading role in making curriculum decisions in schools – curriculum leadership. Curriculum leadership is a loose term to characterize the above changing conception of the role of teachers in curriculum decision making and its practical implications, encompassing a wide range of decision making processes and activities in schools and classrooms (Loucks-Horsley, 1996). The following quotation from a group of Australian curriculum scholars shows the current thinking of many researchers in this new tradition.

“From our perspective, curriculum leadership is a shared phenomenon at a teaching/learning site, and acknowledges the teacher as a curriculum maker, located within a context charged with possibilities for engagement.” (Macpherson & Brooker, 1999, p. 1)

In essence, it could be equated with the concept of the changing role of teachers from curriculum users relying heavily upon the production of teacher proof textbooks to autonomous curriculum developers, taking initiatives in reviewing, planning and designing curriculum practices. This re-conceptualization of “leadership”, placing and engaging teachers in the center of school based curriculum decision making processes, has been in contrast with the conventional perspectives to confine the leadership actions and activities only to those who are charged with official leadership positions within the school hierarchy.
Traditionally, both local and international studies of leadership in education have confined to the investigation about the positional roles of key personnel in the organizational structures of the schools such as school heads, deputy heads, and heads of subject departments, and the ways that these leaders are able to set the directions for the organizations and exercise influences on the colleagues and student learning (Telford, 1996; Marsh, 1997; MacBeath, 1998; Lee & Dimmock, 1999; Glatthorn, 2000; Leung, 2002; Fullan, 2002; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). The word “leaders” has been used almost interchangeably as an equivalent terminology with administrators and personnel who have formally designated positions in the school structures. They are therefore logically expected to play various types of leadership functions such as transactional or transformational in the management of the schools. But these studies and development programmes on role based leadership, however important, have neglected the essential role of the teachers in making curriculum decisions in relation to teaching and learning within a learning centered community, and have implicitly subjugated teachers to an inferior role in curriculum decision making processes, i.e., teachers are being treated either as mere implementers of the official curriculum guidelines in a centralized model of curriculum decision making in some countries or as the enactors or followers of the decisions of the school principal and heads of subject departments in a pseudo-decentralized system of curriculum responsibility. In many empirical studies, the high expectations of the “superhero images of leadership do not work” and the effects of the headteacher are often indirect and minimal (Sergiovanni, 2001, p.55; Hallinger and Heck, 1996; Evers & Lakomski, 1996).

The British scholars on leadership studies have shared a similar view with their Australian counterparts that “re-conceptualizing” curriculum leadership is a necessary step to take the studies a step further.

“…leadership is reconceptualized as a set of behaviours and practices that are undertaken collectively. It is suggested that leadership for school improvement is not as a role or function assigned to those only with leadership responsibilities but as a dynamic between individuals within an organization. In this sense, leadership encompasses a broad group of people that contribute to the school’s distinctive culture and community.” (Harris, 2003, p.75)

The broad and inclusive understanding of curriculum leadership as a form of “distributed leadership”, which has been outlined briefly in the previous paragraphs, has received recognition from a number of researchers in many developed countries including Australia, USA and England, whose mission is to place the teachers in the centrality of curriculum decision making processes in schools in recent years. They have also realized that every teacher must take responsibility for providing curriculum leadership (Wallace, Nesbit & Miller, 1999; Macpherson, Aspland, Brooker & Elliott, 1999; Ovens, 1999; Frost & Durrant, 2002, 2003; Australian Education Union, 2004). The development project and its preliminary findings reported here have followed this new tradition and predicated its theoretical assumptions upon a professional definition of curriculum leadership, regarding teacher participation as necessary processes of enhancing the transformational experiences for the professional development of teachers and therefore enhancement of student learning. The following are the key characteristics of an effective leadership development programme, which form the design principles and approaches of the current project and which echo the concept of learning centered leadership within the school based curriculum development tradition (Henderson and Hawthorne, 1995; Harris, 2003, p. 75; MacBeath &
The development activities should be school based and problem solving in nature, with a focus on enhancing student learning;

- The development activities should be collaborative and the model of power hierarchy should be mediated to an extent that social interaction would emerge; each member should assume an equal but full professional status in curriculum decision making processes in the learning centered community;

- The social interaction in the development activities should be open and reflective in nature;

- The development activities should be formulated and organized in an enquiry mode of planning, implementing and reflecting upon actions which should be subjected to critical scrutiny;

- The development activities should be continuous and form a spiral and cyclical models of operation to engineer and sustain a culture of change and life long learning;

The Curriculum Leadership Development Project

Goals and aims

The project, “Accelerating School Based Curriculum Development”, has started in September 2004 and is financially supported by Hong Kong Quality Education Fund for two years to develop teachers’ leadership skills and capacities in reviewing, planning, designing, implementing and evaluating curriculum innovations within a school based curriculum development tradition. The goals of the project stated in the project proposal include:

- To develop teachers’ abilities and skills in strategic planning and development, and using evaluation for school improvement;

- To enhance the effectiveness of school self evaluation in the school;

- To develop a quality culture for school self evaluation for school improvement

The project is also a school’s response to the call that teachers need new professional development opportunities that will engage them in problem-solving, evaluating, considering new ideas, and collaboratively developing school goals (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). As it is said in the original proposal for funding, this project was in response to the Government’s initiative to embark on two new quality assurance mechanisms to monitor the provision of education in Hong Kong – school self evaluation and external school review conducted by a panel of professionals and inspectors to be appointed by the Education and Manpower Bureau in 2003.

Broadly speaking, the development activities in the project include training of a selected group of teachers to provide professional leadership and support for teachers to bring about pedagogical innovations in the school so as to cultivate among all teachers ultimately a quality and professional culture(s) of a learning community within the school context, and to develop performance indicators for each school subject for self evaluation. This report will focus on the activities and preliminary findings in the first year of the project in its first action cycle of developing teacher leadership in curriculum theory and practice in the period September to December 2004.

It would be necessary at this early stage to give a brief account of the school context and its parameters, in
which the project has been operated.

School aims and recent challenges

The school was established in 1975, and belongs to a religious missionary in Hong Kong. The total number of teachers is forty two, eight of them with a master’s degree in education and other school subjects. The school has around seven hundred primary pupils from the local Shatin community. To respond to the challenges from the decreasing number of children in the district area, and the demands from the curriculum reforms endorsed by the Government in 2001, the school authority has been purposely mounting an increasingly number of curriculum innovations in order to gain good reputation among parents in the community, and to prepare for the external school review. The school head has initiated a number of changes in recent years and provided strong leadership in administration and other aspects of improvement policies and measures. These measures include partnership schemes with the Education and Manpower Bureau, peer observation of teaching, teacher appraisal scheme, collaborative lesson preparations, school self-evaluation exercises and application for external funding for development projects such as the one reported here.

Design and organization of the development activities

Development work has been planned in accordance with the underlying principles derived from the above discussion of the constituent theories and traditions in the theoretical and empirical studies of school based development models of curriculum leadership activities. Workshops on key professional curriculum knowledge and skills such as how to plan a school based innovation activity and how to conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis to identify strengths and weaknesses for potential innovations were organized for participating teachers. These activities aimed at preparing the participating teachers professionally in particular as well as all school teachers in general to understand what was going on with their colleagues in school. Strategically, involving all teachers in the school in these activities could disseminate knowledge about the intentions, the procedures and the possible outcomes of the planned curriculum innovations, and would establish some foundations for the second action cycle of development work. This aimed at creating a social interaction model of dissemination (Kelly, 1999, p.110). The following is a selection of a small portion of a SWOT analysis conducted by the Curriculum Development Team of Chinese language teachers to illustrate the kind of discussions that was created in the reviewing and planning stages of the curriculum development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils</td>
<td>take initiatives to express themselves in public</td>
<td>difference in abilities is great</td>
<td>conducive environment in learning Putonghua</td>
<td>Popular culture runs counter to the language development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in classes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>teachers take initiative to design materials; peer observation of teaching is popular for</td>
<td>surface learning; some teachers lack experience, not much subject knowledge;</td>
<td>some teachers with higher degrees; many workshops for professional development;</td>
<td>too much clerical work; too many meetings; not much time to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
<pre><code>                                                      |                                                                     |                                    |                                                  |
</code></pre>
In the first action cycle of the development work, three core school subjects teachers, Chinese language, English language and Mathematics, were chosen since they occupied a majority of the curriculum time in the school and involved more school teachers. Three subject based curriculum development teams were formed to review, plan, implement, and reflect upon curriculum practices. The team work has become a regular phenomenon of the school culture thereafter.

### Selection of seed teachers and the curriculum development teams

The combination of members of each team differed in years of experience and seniority in the occupational hierarchy, but the ultimate goal was to create a conducive, social and humanistic environment for developing collaboration and team spirit among the participating teachers. The Chinese and Mathematics subject based curriculum development teams consisted of their subject department heads with curriculum responsibilities in the innovation school, and the other two participating teachers had less practical experience but were recommended because of their commitment and enthusiasm to begin with. The English subject based curriculum development team was not joined by its panel head deliberately in order to create a social group environment without any influence of human hierarchy among colleagues. The above deliberation aimed at establishing a positive working environment for its members with as few potentially negative and constraining factors as possible in the first action cycle of the development work. Therefore, the selection principles were strategically deliberated to highlight self motivation, integrity, responsibility and commitment among participants.

Each team had to follow a simplified 3-stage model of conducting action research: (a) in the planning stage, the aim for the team is to identify an innovation goal, (b) in the implementing stage, the aim is to put the plan in action in classroom teaching, and (c) in the reflection stage, the team is to review actions and decide further innovations (see table 2). The key function of these three stages of teacher actions is to emphasize the importance of engaging teachers in a series of curriculum development activities such as reviewing the current curriculum practices, determining actions for experimentation, and reflecting on experiences for improvement and further deliberation (Elliott, 1991). In the project, teachers worked in teams for dual functions. On the one hand, the discussion and collaboration of this nature would strengthen team spirit and create opportunities for solving pedagogical problems. On the other hand, interactions would encourage teachers of various experience backgrounds to share their professional experience among themselves genuinely, and thus create professional conversations (Britt, Irwin & Ritchie, 2001, p.50). The data collected will unfold stories of much complication.
and therefore shed light on the necessary conditions for successful implementation of development work for curriculum leadership within the school.

Each stage was task oriented. At the planning stage, each team conducted a survey in accordance with the SWOT framework to deepen their reflective understanding of the current school practices and their shortcomings, so that they were able to identify a key innovation that they were interested in bringing about change to their own practice. The result of the SWOT survey was further discussed with a teacher educator who played the role of a subject consultant in the project. The purpose of having a subject consultant was to ensure that some expertise advice was offered in the process of designing the innovation for implementation, as well as to provide alternative pedagogical practices for each team. The experience and views of the consultants were expected to stimulate reflection and encourage deep thinking in learning processes evident in the professional dialogues among members of each team.
Figure 1: Re-conceptualizing School-based Models of Developing Teacher Curriculum Leadership for lifelong education

1st Cycle: Engaging teachers in curriculum decision-making

2nd Cycle: Engaging teachers in curriculum decision-making

3rd Cycle: Engaging teachers in curriculum decision-making

Development of Teacher Leadership in Curriculum in School
Each team then worked out a lesson plan for the innovation collaboratively and then implemented it in their classroom teaching.

At the implementation stage, each team had different patterns of practice though peer and consultant observation was a common feature of all team activities. The Chinese team chose the most inexperienced member to trial the innovation though. The target of the innovation was to develop the reading comprehension skills among primary two children. Every team member in the English group, however, trialled the innovation plan in their classes. The target of the innovation was for teachers to adopt a task based approach to teach children a process model of writing essays. The mathematics team adopted a different approach to include all members in the implementation of the innovation. The target of the innovation was to strengthen pupils’ understanding of the percent and percentage concepts.

The final stage of the first action cycle of the development work concluded with a reflection seminar which aimed at consolidating teacher learning from the whole process of planning, designing, implementing activities and moving towards identifying a new goal of innovation in the second stage.

The following table summarizes the teacher activities in the three stages of work in the first action cycle.

Table 2: A 3-stage model of Teacher Planning, Implementation and Reflection curriculum practices (PIR model)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Teacher Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning Stage</td>
<td>To identify a goal for innovation</td>
<td>SWOT, Whole School Conference, Action Planning Meetings, Collaborative Lesson Preparation Meetings, Production of Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation Stage</td>
<td>To put the plan in action</td>
<td>Trialling, Peer Observation and Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection Stage</td>
<td>To review actions and plan for future actions</td>
<td>Post Observation Conference, Completion of Feedback Sheets,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method

Methods of data collection at different stages in the first action cycle of the project development have purposely been varied to suit the changing focus of each stage of development work. At the planning stage, all teacher activities were video taped, including the five 3-hour action planning meetings, two SWOT analysis meetings, the presentation of SWOT results in the whole school conference, and three collaborative lesson preparation meetings. Two representatives from each curriculum team were interviewed in a big group. External consultants were invited to give written comments on lesson plans.

At the implementation stage, seven teachers tried out their plans of innovation. Data collection included teaching aids and twenty video taped lessons. Nine observation checklists were collected from peer. At the reflection stage, seven teachers completed their self evaluation forms. Data collection also included one video taped post observation conference in which consultants were invited to participate to share views and exchange comments as well as twelve written reflections by participating teachers. Two sorts of teacher interview were arranged. Group interviews aimed at providing teachers with platform for further discussion on pedagogical issues. Individual interviews aimed at eliciting feelings, views and objects of learning from participating teachers.
Pupil interview was also conducted to triangulate data from different angles and perspectives of the project experience. A sample of pupils who was taught by the participating teachers was interviewed. Each subject based curriculum development team had two interview groups which selected pupils of low and high ability together with pupils who tended to be quiet and reserved in class. The purpose of this arrangement was to create an interactive interview environment and to lower the formality of the interview for more authentic recollection of experiences from these pupils.

A whole school survey was also designed and conducted to find out to what extent the non participating teachers in the school were aware of the aims and objectives, as well as the progress of the project. This should play a dual purpose: to measure the knowledge of the non participating teachers in order to plan dissemination strategies in the second cycle of the project in the second semester, and to identify potential teachers who expressed willingness and showed interests in the innovation project.

*Table 2: Data collection at each stage in the first action cycle of each subject based curriculum development team*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning stage</th>
<th>Implementation stage</th>
<th>Reflection stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● 6 video tapes on 3 hour SWOT reviewing meetings</td>
<td>● teaching aids</td>
<td>● 7 self evaluation checklist of teaching performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 3 SWOT analysis tables</td>
<td>● video taped lessons</td>
<td>● 1 video tape on a post observation conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 1 video tape on 3 hour SWOT presentation</td>
<td>● Checklists from Peer observation and evaluation</td>
<td>● 12 written reflections by participating teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 9 Video tapes on 3 hour collaborative lesson preparation</td>
<td></td>
<td>● 3 audio tapes on pupil interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Teacher written feedback on SWOT</td>
<td>● 33 lesson plans as a result of the collaborative lesson planning</td>
<td>● 7 audio tapes on 7 individual teacher interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 1 written record of a group interview with teachers</td>
<td>● Written comments from consultants through emails</td>
<td>● 3 audio tapes on 3 group interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● 3 audio tapes on pupil interview</td>
<td></td>
<td>● 3 written group reflections on success and failure factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategically, the project has its target on disseminating professional experience of planning, reviewing, designing and evaluating curriculum innovations to the teachers who have not participated in the first action cycle of the development work. This is to prepare the second cycle of the innovation work in this project by identifying teachers who are willing to join the project and experiment some innovative practice in their subjects and classroom teaching. Twenty six teachers who had not participated in the first action cycle of the development project were invited to complete a survey on the extent that they heard, understood or were aware of the purposes of the work progress of the project.

**Findings and Analysis**

The data collected will be organized in a way to shed light upon the key characteristics of a school based effective leadership development model discussed in the previous sections. The characteristics or preconditions of effective teacher learning, which should be understood in the contexts of restructuring schools as learning communities and empowering teachers as transformative agents collectively should include: leadership style, professional and reflective conversations, educational discourse, team spirit and collaboration, professional
Leadership style

In the three stages of planning, implementation and reflection of the innovations, the data exhibits a diverse pattern of curriculum leadership on a continuum from directive and authoritarian to non directive and participatory. Different styles assert different types of influence and impact upon the process and directions of the curriculum innovations. It is important to note, however, that directive and authoritarian styles run contrary to the fundamental principles of school based curriculum development which value teacher participation and professional autonomy as the two essential conditions for teacher leadership development. We shall return to this point in our discussion section.

In the Mathematics team, the panel head demonstrated a non directive style without evidence of being power coercive. This may be due to the panel’s position in the school being of lower grade than the other two panel heads in the same team. However, the discussion was open without any clear goal of innovation. The panel head often adopted a tentative mood in her language, for example, “could we teachers contribute more to setting questions for children?” (literal translation, tape on SWOT:18.30, 27 September 04)

The panel chair of the Chinese language team was very careful in the SWOT analysis when he knew that the discussion would be video taped. In the middle of the discussion, he asked the research assistant to stop video taping for a few minutes to allow him to express something possibly very sensitive to the public. However, he was able to provide some form of leadership on the procedure of conducting analysis and to clarify its purposes.

Panel Head: theoretically, we should discuss the strengths and weaknesses, then to identify areas of concerns for improvement actions. We do not follow our instinctive feeling but we should discuss first, then to aim at the weaknesses as our priority, then we discuss which year groups start implementing, and then how we could proceed, step by step to improve weaknesses. This should be our thinking framework.

(literal translation, tape on SWOT meetings: reading 00.00-4.30, 27 September 2004)

In the focused group interview, he showed his positional power by asserting his right to have access to the teaching and learning materials prepared by the teachers.

The panel chair of the English language team was not involved in the subject based curriculum team because she was the positional leader of the whole project and had the leadership responsibility of the whole school curriculum development work. Therefore, one of the members of the team was assigned to chair this team. The teachers worked together but there was little dialogue and no intention to engage in conversations of the kind like the Chinese team though division of labour was clear. For example, as shown on the tape, there was no intention for the teachers to collaborate to work together to produce the SWOT analysis. The style of leadership was loose.

Role of consultants

The role performance of the consultants varied according to the personality and style of individual
consultants. The consultant for the Chinese team was one from a local institute of education. He showed a dominating and didactic style in working with the Chinese team. In the three hour collaborative lesson preparation meeting, he occupied the majority of the time by “talking down” to the teachers. His tone was authoritarian. For example, he “taught” the participating teachers that in junior primary, the focus of language learning should be “the Chinese characters and the combinations of characters”, in middle primary, the focus should be on application of the language items, and in the senior primary, the focus should be on learning the themes of texts. He commented that the teachers should not use three learning sessions to teach individual words but only one session on text reading strategies.

In the collaborative lesson preparation meeting, he said, “In the process of thinking, you have to concentrate, then, you will succeed…” (literal translation, tape on collaboration lesson preparation: 11:43, 30 September 2004).

The style of the consultant for the English team was also didactic and tended to talk down to teachers about language learning. She occupied the majority of the meeting time and the topics in her monologue included personal experience of learning and studying, general problems with teachers, rather than focusing the discussion on the innovation and plan of actions.

The consultant for the Mathematics team, however, tended to be open, participatory, inquisitive, exploratory and liberal and adopted a non directive style in his consultation meeting with the team. He asked for views and from the views he extended their dialogue to the future proposal from the perspectives of the participating teachers. He said, “What do you suggest to do for the other classes?” (literal translation, tape on collaborative lesson preparation: 36.39, 8 December 2004)

**Professional conversations: reflective and action oriented**

One key feature of the professional development of teachers is the importance of engaging inexperienced and experienced teachers in reflective conversations about pedagogical issues (Britt, Irwin & Ritchie, 2001). The processes should be stimulating to enhance deep learning among teachers (Schon,1989; Biggs,1991). In all planning, implementation and reflection stages of the first action cycle, the data show evidence that the participating teachers were engaged in professional dialogues and conversations on practical issues about teaching and learning.

The SWOT activities in the planning stage created situations in which members of each subject based curriculum development team were using their observations and past experience to identify strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning environments. For example, the focus of the discussion of the Chinese team was on how the teachers could design a curriculum to accommodate the challenges imposed by the pupils’ motivational problems. The team suggested one solution to build up connections between school learning with daily life experiences of the pupils. The discussion topics focused on design issues of extending the life experience of pupils and at times, different views on pupils’ abilities and meanings were negotiated between different parties.

*Teacher 2:* “To follow the official syllabus, we do not teach children to write sentences until primary 3 and 4. But our primary two children proved they were able to construct sentences meaningfully.”
Panel Head: “I think we can teach junior primary paragraphs, and we do not have to follow exactly the official curriculum.”
(evidence: tape on focused group meeting: 9.55-11.00, 21 December 2004)

SWOT analysis meetings and presentations in the whole school conference provided the English team with good opportunities to identify problems with the teaching and learning situations with the English language. Teachers wrote on SWOT feedback that they benefited from the discussion which mirrored the problem solving approach to the pedagogical issues in language teaching and learning. The following are some written comments and feedback by the participating teachers when asked what they had learned in the first cycle.

Teacher 1- “learn the SWOT analysis; how to plan and organize a unit of learning”;

Teacher 4- “how to use SWOT to analyze the school and English language teaching weakness and strengths”;
(Written reflections by participating teachers (Reflection Sheet on 27 September 2004)

The combined interview, under the chair of the project leader, was another opportunity to engage teachers in working together and reflecting what they did in the SWOT exercises. Its purpose was to consolidate their reflective thinking and emphasized the importance of problem solving approaches in planning what to teach and how to teach well. The following are some illustrations from the interview.

Chinese Team:
Teacher 1: In our first tryout, P2 pupils are not good enough to draw (pictures) on their own and it affected that they could not complete the task. So we will use the compositions created by the senior primary pupils in order to let them learn the narrative form of an article.
(literal translation, combined interview written record, 25 October, 2004)

English Team:
Teacher 1: “After SWOT analysis, we decided to do a task-based learning unit plan in order to focus our teaching on grammar to the pupils more effectively through the process of writing.”
(literal translation, combined interview written record, 25 October 2004)

Mathematics Team:
Teacher 1: “We identified the learning problem of the pupils is in the aspect of problem-solving skills and it is our focus of the action plan. We would like to learn more about action research which helps lead us to the right track on what we are doing”.
(literal translation, combined interview written record, 25 October 2004)
A post observation conference was organized with participation of the consultants. Its purpose was to provide opportunities for focused discussions among the practitioners, consultants and panel heads in order to cultivate reflective dialogues among team members in the school. The conservational topics in the conference among members of the Chinese team included considerations of pupil needs at different stages of their development in planning a curriculum, language learning needs of pupils and identification of future goals of curriculum experimentation.

The following are some selected written teacher reflections to illustrate the features of reflective discourse from the survey conducted on 4 January 2005 after they had finished the first action cycle of the innovation. When the three teams were asked about what they had learned in the first action cycle, the Chinese team said they had learned to understand their own teaching methods and problems, the learning characteristics of the children. The Mathematics team said they had understood that different teachers implemented differently and the impact was different. The team found the consultant useful to integrate theory and practice. When the three teams were asked about what they wanted to learn in the second action cycle, the Chinese team said they wanted to learn how to use various types of teaching strategies to teach senior primary children and how to organize interactive learning activities. They also wanted to learn how to enhance pupils’ creativity. The English team wanted to learn how to evaluate teaching effectiveness and how to conduct action research to improve teaching. The Mathematics team wanted to learn how to lead group discussion and how to enhance pupils’ problem solving ability.

The above descriptions have shown that teachers had been actively engaged in various types of professional activities which aimed at encouraging reflective thinking approaches with a view to solve pedagogical problems. This is a necessary condition for the advancement of the professionalism among teachers and teacher leaders (Day, 1993).

**Educational terminologies in discourse**

The participating teachers in various meetings in the three different stages demonstrated frequent uses of the educational terminologies which were the key concepts in the current curriculum reforms. The use of these jargons also indicated to a certain extent that the key reform concepts had become part of the consciousness of these teachers or at least they had become an active language repertoire in the professional conversations of these teachers. These jargons include research methodology used to collect data and evidence of student learning.

“We designed some questionnaires and we have plenty of questionnaires”

(literal translation, tape on collaborative lesson planning: reading 10.00, Chinese team, 9 October 2004)

In the reflection stage, the project leader had three focused group interviews for the three teams to elicit more data on how participating teachers were reflecting upon their experience of trialling their innovations. Teachers in the Chinese team demonstrated in their verbal discourse the frequent use of educational jargons such as “action plan” and “creativity” (literal translation, tape on group interview: reading 17, Chinese team, 21 December 2004).

In some cases, the focus of an extended discourse was about action research such as the issue of identifying
problems with pedagogy and student learning, and the proposed solutions. The following is an excerpt from the group interview with the Chinese team.

Teacher 1: *according to evaluation of the student learning last year, the problem with reading habit is comparatively small, but the problem is lack of initiative. And therefore our theme for this year is to motivate the reading habit among pupils.*

(literal translation, tape on group interview with the Chinese team on 21 December 2004: reading 0.03)

In the SWOT analysis, the discussion focused on the use of appropriate pedagogical strategies to cater for individual differences. Teachers indicated they had little experience of using “action research” and it was their first time to design a curriculum plan for the Mathematics subject, though they had some experience of planning a creative lesson. (literal translation, tape on SWOT meeting: 1.31, 27 September 2004)

For the English team, a teacher said, “we use SWOT to sharpen our understanding, more systematic approaches, more focused work.” (literal translation, tape on group interview: reading: 0.00-15.00, 21 January 2005)

For the Mathematics team, the following dialogue demonstrates the use of current educational terms in the discussion.

Teacher 1: “…We did not know what the aims of a lesson were. We thought it was like a lesson study, finding a theme to investigate, and hope the pupils would learn better and more effective. We wonder if we achieve the aims of the project.” (01.55)

Teacher 3: “how do you feel now?”

Teacher 1: “… because we aimed at taking student centered approaches, we think we can help pupils to learn to solve problems, and learn some life skills in society.”

Teacher 2: “yes, we were not clear about the focus and the theme. We took it as a lesson study. We wonder whether what we did was the aim of the project, in the project, we focused on problem solving and the application work for pupils, but whether this is what the project aimed is still unknown to us.” (02.46)

(literal translation, tape on group interview: reading 1.55-2.46, 21 January 2005)

In responses to the questions about what they had learned in the first action cycle and what they expected to learn in the second action cycle, they used terminologies such as “shared mission”, “SWOT analysis”, “interactive learning strategies”, “teaching effectiveness”, “action research” and “collective lesson preparation”.

Team spirit and collaboration
Building team spirit and collaboration is one of the key development areas for teacher leadership. In the all three stages of the first action cycle, teams were formed and opportunities for team building were created. However, the patterns of collaboration in each team varied.

The Chinese team demonstrated a stronger sense of division of labour, and each teacher had a clear role to play in the SWOT discussion, one playing the role of being the secretary, one leader, one typist and the other without specific duty in the group. The English team did not seem to find home with video taping and when they conducted the SWOT analysis, they lined up face to face with the computers, without bothering about communication and discussion with each other. The Mathematics team did not show much collaboration spirit either.

Teacher 1: “we used different methods in our discussion about deciding a theme, …we were looking for a method we feel comfortable with, in other words, we consider others’ perspectives and methods, and then you learned how to use diverse methods and alternatives to solve problems.”
(literal translation, tape on group interview: 10.05, 21 January 2005)

Another example to illustrate the team spirit is from the written reflections by the teachers in the Chinese team and the Mathematics team after the first action cycle of the innovation on 3 January 2005.

Chinese Teacher 1: “we learned from the consultant that the participating teachers should share common mission which helps efficient implementation. Participating teachers should be from the same year group, and in this way teachers could offer mutual support to each other.”

Chinese Teacher 2: “we deepened the understanding of our pedagogical approaches and the ways to improve. We learned from the consultant about the current curriculum reforms, and the specific features of the children at each year group.”

Mathematics Teacher 1: “The teachers from the same year group focused their discussion on the same topic, shared ideas, and we learned much from this activity. The same learning topic, the same teaching method, but the interpretation by different teachers was totally different. The effects on student learning were different, and therefore I learned more pedagogical alternatives to teach the same topic in future.”

Mathematics Teacher 2: “Collaborative lesson preparation, curriculum design and improvement, are very useful activities to enhance teaching effectiveness. In addition, the consultants help to integrate theory and practice.”

Professional attitude and curriculum decision making

Teacher commitment to student learning is essential and should be part of the professional development of teachers. Professional attitude also includes teacher’s willingness to take risk to trial new initiatives in bringing
about effective learning in schools.

The English team showed that they wanted to experiment a new task based learning approach to teaching of the English language in order to enhance pupils’ creativity. The Mathematics team shared their experience of participating in some professional development activities, and their discussion in the collaborative lesson preparation focused on pedagogical issues such as individual differences and the selection of appropriate learning topics from the textbooks.

Consultant: “How do we understand the issues with designing a lesson plan?”
Teacher 1: “...because I do not understand much. Let's focus on teaching and learning, and let us try it out and let us experience it, and therefore we can help our pupils to enhance their learning. ...about high level thinking, I do not have any experience of action research, therefore I do not know much about SWOT, how we can do it?”
Teacher 2: “basically, we can choose; topics on percentage or calculating circumference, problem solving is problem solving but what do we give them to learn?”
(literal translation, tape on collaborative lesson preparation: 8.02, 30 September 2004)

In the implementation stage, the teachers in the English team were using multimedia resources to support teaching and learning in addition to the interactive games and group work as the adopted major teaching approaches. Teachers were also willing to design learning materials and became less dependent on textbooks and syllabus.

Teacher 1: “we have planned many activities, urgently, difficult to pass the resources to another class for teaching, we normally use group work, Teacher A and I teach more classes, have more groups, if one more teacher shares the work, teachers give more attention to pupils, we can monitor pupil progress, we have to be a photographer as well, will distract our work, our work will be less focused, now pupils' reactions are very good, they are committed. ...we want to teach them verb tenses, they are interested, the activities on grammar are interesting.”

Teacher 2: “we used activities to teach preposition, my class worked smoothly, the schedule in the first week was tight, but no problem in the class. Their PowerPoint work was unpredictable, excellent.”
(literal translation, tape on group interview: Reading: 0.00-15.00, 21 January 2005)

One argument for school based curriculum development is to allow teachers to exercise their judgment in making curriculum decisions. The opportunities for teachers to make curriculum decisions are considered a key development component in the innovation project. At various stages of its development, teachers were given freedom and autonomy to make judgments and decisions on curriculum.

For example, in collaborative lesson preparation meetings in the Chinese language team, the teachers decided not to stick to the original plan of integrating reading with picture drawing activities, which is derived from Bruner’s theoretical assumption about the benefits to pupil learning when children are engaged in transforming one representation of experience to another, for example, from symbolic representation (language) to iconic representation (pictures and images) (Bruner 1960, 1966). The teachers abandoned the original plan of using picture drawing activities because they found children were not able to draw pictures effectively! They regressed to using “story telling” strategies, a symbolic representation in verbal form. This team also
demonstrated making evidence based judgment when they used the questionnaire data from the parents to show how they had considered what focus of learning should be in teaching reading.

The teachers in the Chinese Team attempted to adapt the curriculum with the experience from the project.

Teacher 1: “can we adopt a similar approach in other classes or other year groups?”
Teacher 2: “there could be problems with learning materials, in the beginning we thought about teaching pupils how to write descriptive accounts of an experience of going to the beach, shopping in a supermarket, .. we may not be able to find suitable materials, then we invited senior primary pupils to write about their experience, and we used them as learning materials for the junior primary pupils. This worked well.”
Teacher 3: “ …if we use this in senior primary pupils, we have to adjust, especially there could be more varieties in characters, about their personalities, feelings, these are much complicated already and belong to high level, events could also be interwoven to create a strong sense of suspense and the plot could be complicated for senior primary pupils. They could manage this.”
(literal translation, tape on group interview (part one): reading14.10, 21 December 2004 )

On the selection of materials, teachers would consider some underlying principles about pupils’ needs and abilities, forms of presentations and levels of cognitive demands. The following is an excerpt from the same group interview as the above.

Teacher 1: “ difficult to develop learning materials, extremely difficult,…because they have to align with the learning goals of the chapter, but you cannot have a new one because of the comprehension ability of the pupils, which means my teaching is not smooth, if the text types are different, it is difficult to find some graphs or pictures, and the text must be narratives, and it must be about a visit,…”
(literal translation, tape on group interview (part one): reading14.10, 21 December 2004 )

The teachers in the Mathematics team also showed their search for appropriate methods in the selection of teaching approaches.

Teacher 1: “… we conducted a test and found that the performance of the current pupils was far better than the previous groups. In other words, classes of different abilities showed that the pupils were clearer about the concepts( about percentage), …”
Teacher 2: “ it was useful, we spent much time on discussion and revised the teaching plan many times, in fact, it was very useful to the pupils.”
(literal translation, tape on group interview: reading5.56, 21 January 2005 )

Teacher 1: “… like this time, we think, we found the ability of analysis, for example, this time, their problem solving ability is low, this means their ability to sort out application questions, this time, we may have different methods, the effects are different, possibly the results in post tests are higher, this means our solutions and methods proposed for the problems we identified in the SWOT are appropriate.
(literal translation, tape on group interview: reading16.30-17.00, 21 January 2005 )
The English team demonstrated that in the collaborative lesson preparation meetings, they engaged in a series of curriculum development activities: determining learning objectives, selecting learning activities and teaching strategies, and assessment modes.

Pupil Interview

One group of selected pupils from the classes where innovations were implemented by the participating teachers was interviewed to elicit more data about the implementation of the innovations for triangulation purposes. Mixed group interview techniques were used. In other words, each interview group had six pupils, one active, one quiet, two with high achievement and the other two with low achievement in their academic subjects. This technique was to ensure that a wider representation of the pupil backgrounds was available in the interviews to stimulate views and reactions from different pupil groups in the innovation classes.

The pupils from the Chinese class expressed some confusion when the teacher had changed her teaching style and patterns.

Pupil 1: “we do more work than the normal time.”
Pupil 2: “we like the lessons more.”
Teacher 1: “do you feel you have learned something? Any? ..?”
Pupil 2: “I do not know.”
(literal translation, tape on group interview with P2 pupils: reading0.30-15.00, 5 January 2005)

They were positive in general terms about the innovation. They said they were happier and learned the communication skills and problem solving skills in the innovation lesson.

The primary five pupils taught by the English teachers told the research assistant that their English teachers were more lenient, relaxed, and allowed them to express in classes when the innovation was implemented. But the feelings were very mixed about the innovation. The primary six pupils felt the teachers allowed them to explore and give them freedom. They thought that the innovation encouraged pupils to learn communication skills and the ability to express in public. Allowing them to express had given them confidence in public speech.

Discussion

The first action cycle of the project has created at the three stages of teacher actions, i.e., planning, implementation and reflection, quite a number of places and spaces for teacher leadership development. The experiences collected in the first action cycle of the project so far are rich and enlightening in the way that they provide researchers and school educators with some ideas about the preconditions to make teacher curriculum leadership a viable concept to be adopted by schools across cultures and contexts. The following discussion shall be organized around the major themes of arguments for a “distributed” style of teacher leadership, that teacher participation in curriculum decision making should become central and shared activities in teaching and learning sites.

Which type of leadership is more effective?

The leadership styles in the three curriculum development teams were diverse, though panel heads in the
Chinese and Mathematics teams were given positional powers to exercise influences and assert directions. The power and its execution of the Mathematics panel head was mediated by her own perceived lower professional and academic status among members of the team and tended to allow team members to share the power of making curriculum decisions. On the other hand, we have seen a more directive style of leadership from the Chinese panel head who asserted a strong role and personality in decision making processes and the ultimate goal of experimentation. The English team proceeded without a role based leader and the innovation work of this team seemed open to more criticism. We are therefore left here without any conclusive statements to be made about the arguments for and against a role based leadership concept. It is possible that more substantive data among leadership styles and their effects could be revealed in the second action cycle when these subject based curriculum development teams have more opportunities to work collaboratively on future planned innovations on teaching and learning.

However, the evidence shows that the participating teachers did actively take up the role of being curriculum developers in a non directive style of leadership group - the Mathematics team, while the participating teachers in a more directive curriculum team would tend to be less participatory and assertive (Glickman, 2002). Therefore, a more open and non directive style of positional leadership, we call this “procedural leadership”, would be conducive to the emergence of active teacher leadership actions and activities which are re-conceptualised on the basis of a participatory model of curriculum leadership (Ritchie, 2002). For the latter concept of teacher leadership, we call it “participatory curriculum leadership”. However, one should be tentative to acknowledge the fact that the emergence of the leadership styles in this project was a function of a combination of situational variables such as personality, status, power, perception and self esteem and school ethos, rather than a deliberative planned innovation by the designated curriculum leader of this project. In other words, the proposal that one form of leadership should be adopted at the expense of other alternatives should receive caution (Harris, 2004, p. 19). It seems that schools and teachers should be encouraged to take a more eclectic approach to allow emergence of a multitude of teacher curriculum leadership patterns, be it participatory or procedural.

**What are the contributions of partnership with university faculties?**

There has been general optimism among educators that partnership with university faculties should give benefits to the schools concerned (Gordon, 2004). From the data, the participatory styles and the perceived roles of the three consultants from the university faculties were mediated by their personalities and self perception of their roles in the curriculum development process. Two had stronger and more assertive views while the third one tended to take a more facilitating and reflective position in providing academic and professional advice and support. The former two consultants could be good examples of providing “top-down leadership” in the ways they perceived appropriate. However, the third one was a good example of how he was playing a facilitative leadership role in a more subtle and professional way, allowing for diverse practices and experimentations to flourish. The latter form of partnership with university faculties should provide more spaces for a participatory model of curriculum leadership.

**Is there evidence of professional development?**

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that teacher participation in curriculum decision making processes
such as the ways the project has organized and arranged for the teachers allowed teachers to engage in reflective and professional conversations in the ways which were goal and action oriented. The participating teachers explicitly expressed their views that they had learned the professional skills and knowledge that are essential and necessary for anyone who is involved in making serious curriculum decisions about student learning – the learning objectives, the principles of selecting contents of learning, the pedagogical strategies being adjusted to the student variations in motivation and ability as well as collection of evidence about student learning. There is also strong evidence that the participating teachers had actively used the most contemporary educational terminologies in their professional conversations in problem solving their identified pedagogical difficulties. These professional conservations have demonstrated that the participating teachers were involved in a relational type of intellectual discourse, which is itself an evidence of a more sophisticated and higher order thinking learning outcomes (Biggs, 1991; Blasé & Blasé 1999, p. 367).

Is teamwork and collaboration strengthened?

Each team did work together but there is no clear evidence that the collaboration has been conducive to teacher participation and learning. This could be a feature of the beginning of some collaboration among teachers who have not been given much opportunity to work in teams. Bear also in mind the data collected were only from the first action cycle where teams have only begun to start working. Teamwork is time consuming and energy exhausting to many teachers. In the project, the Chinese group behaved like a team with some division of labour and clear role play while the Mathematics team had a less hierarchical power structure among members and therefore demonstrated another form of genuine collaboration. The English team had a very loose and open style of collaboration.

Institutionalization of structures for curriculum decision making

The project has planned for its second action cycle to be based on the basis of the experiences in the first action cycle. Key structures of the leadership development model will be retained, such as subject based curriculum development team work, action research oriented planning and design, professional nature of reflective discourses and shared power of social interaction among members of each team, as well as a more professional input from the consultants from outside. There will also be whole school seminars for sharing among all teachers the fruits and pains of teacher participation in curriculum decision making processes. These key structures will give professional autonomy for every member in the school and therefore cultivate a sense of lifelong learning within a learner centered community (Miles, Ekholm & Vanderberghe, 1987; Harris & Lambert, 2003).

Conclusion

Leadership studies in education have been focused mainly on a positional and hierarchical basis to an extent that teachers in schools were considered peripheral in making pedagogical decisions. Recent studies on curriculum leadership have moved away from this model of organizational leadership to a model which has been trying to recapture the essence of the professional role of teachers in making curriculum decisions within the tradition of
school-based curriculum development. Teacher leadership in curriculum decision making in schools is a new phenomenon in both international and local literature and its practice has been in its embryonic stage. How this concept and practice could be institutionalized within the infrastructure of the current school ethos need substantial theoretical and experimental work. The report of the first action cycle of a curriculum leadership development project here in Hong Kong has demonstrated the complexity of the key structures, i.e., the establishment of curriculum development teams and processes, i.e., the 3-stage model of teacher planning, implementation and reflection of curriculum practice that the case school has created in response to the challenges from the community. These structures and processes have yet to find their home within the traditions and the cultures of the school in the study. However, the experience has proved that engaging teachers in curriculum decision making processes does enhance development of professional knowledge and skills among teachers in general terms. But how the concept of teacher leadership in curriculum decision making could be put into practice more effectively in schools, and how the structures and processes could be institutionalized in schools on a wider scale remain important issues to be explored and investigated in both theoretical and empirical studies by the collaboration between the researchers in university faculties and the teachers in schools. The goal of teacher leadership in curriculum decision making should receive policy priority and its successful achievement needs resource and professional support from the Government and other stakeholders of the education enterprise.
References


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