

School Based Curriculum Leadership Innovation: A Case Study of a Hong Kong Primary School

WAN, Wai Yan Sally
Shatin Tsung Tsin School
WONG, Lai Mei Phoebe
Shatin Tsung Tsin School

Abstract: This study is designed to investigate the impact of a curriculum leadership project as financially supported by Quality Education Fund (QEF) on teacher professional development and pupil learning in one primary school in Hong Kong. Qualitative approach is applied in collecting the views from the participating teachers and students. Data collection methods include individual interviews with three participating teachers and two focus group interviews with two groups of students in the first cycle of Phase II of the project. The choice of such data collection methods is to evaluate the extent that teacher engagement in curriculum decision making processes within a school based structure of curriculum development has led to teacher learning, and to extend our understanding of the underlying principles in implementing curriculum changes in schools from students' perspectives. Qualitative evidence has revealed positively that participating teachers have developed themselves professionally through the process of planning, implementing and reflecting (PIR model) upon curriculum practice and innovation. However, the complexity of the structures and processes that were established for involving teachers in curriculum decision making processes needs further empirical and theoretical work in the future.

Keywords: curriculum development, curriculum leadership, teacher development, curriculum innovation, General Studies

Introduction

Improving student learning has continuously been a key performance indicator of school improvement. It has also been at the heart of recent education reforms in the worldwide. Leadership is considered as a key factor to school improvement in terms of student learning improvement. There is a huge literature on school leadership identifying what effective leaders do and describes their traits, characteristics and styles all over the world (Harris, 2004). However, it is becoming more and more obvious from research into curriculum change and development that the internal capacity for change inside the classroom is much more important than system wide reform in the territory (Harris, 2003). Educational reform failure has been commonly heard since what is proposed is not really implemented in the classroom whilst teachers are always put aside in decision making process of the reform. There is lack of consideration of developing an internal capacity for change in the change

process. However, there has been an urge for building teacher leadership whereas more attention is paid to developing an internal capacity for change of teachers who are direct implementers of change in education as they are at the frontline to teach and bring about pedagogical change and improvement in the classroom (Fullan, 2002). In this connection, all teachers are leaders leading changes to their classrooms. This paper considers teacher leadership as shared and participatory leadership. This perspective on leadership requires a shift from the traditional managerial and administrative realm to the distributed, participatory, in contrast to bureaucratic and technical-rational authority approach to leadership (Gronn, 2003; Harris, 2004). While the limitations of a single case study investigations are acknowledged, the paper aims to illuminate and describe. Its prime purpose is to explore the extent to which the curriculum leadership innovation project has created impacts on the teachers and students.

Context of Study

The focus for this paper is a local Hong Kong primary school with 42 teachers and around 700 students aged 6-12 years. The school is a subsidized whole day primary school, which provides education for children in the New Territories. Over the years, the school puts emphasis on “subject trained, subject taught” principle and encourages continuing professional development of teachers. Over 90% of the teachers possessed bachelor degree and 10 of them held master degree. The school has a young, energetic teaching workforce. Collaboration amongst teachers is commonly found as the school has started co-planning periods within the timetable for over three years.

In recent years, the school has different kinds of curriculum development projects in collaboration with tertiary institutions and the Education and Manpower Bureau, HKSAR. In line with developing school self evaluation that is one of the key areas of concern of the school, in 2003, the school successfully applied for a grant from the Quality Education Fund (QEF) to support a two-year school based curriculum leadership development project entitled as “Accelerating School Based Curriculum Development”, which commenced in 2004. Its goals stated in the project proposal are:

- 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.
- (Shatin Tsung Tsin School, 2003)

This curriculum leadership project was implemented in the four core subjects, namely, Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and General Studies. In the first year of the project, Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics were the foci of

development. General Studies was the focus of development in the second year. This paper focuses on the first cycle of General Studies in the second year of the project.

Formation of Curriculum Development Team

In General Studies Curriculum Development Team, teachers teaching the same level participated in the Project. The selection of team members was deliberately manipulated and “chosen”, based on their consent of participation and professional attitudes towards curriculum reforms and innovations. One of the teacher was chosen as the team leader. The subject panel head was not chosen as the team leader, whereas hierarchical power is not regarded as a necessary condition for the innovation. These two arrangements had two advantages. First, the subject based approach in the formation of a curriculum development team is intended to control the subject content of the interactions among members in team work activities so as to maximize the positive effects of the shared subject identity and working experiences among team members (Schon, 1983; MacBeath, 2004). The second one was to eliminate the potentially negative influence of any hierarchical structure and power relationship among team members so as to create a conducive team work environment for the emergence of professional dialogues among members and therefore to cultivate a culture of shared and distributed curriculum leadership among team members (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fullan, 1993; Black & Atkin, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Britt, Irwin & Ritchie, 2001). The latter advantage was thought to give confidence to the teachers to initiate and lead activities in pedagogical changes in schools. These two factors were essential because they allowed the development of a common but open educational language and strengthening of the shared but democratic identity among a group of professional teachers to concentrate on problem solving and identified pedagogical issue collectively (Day, 1993).

Planning, Implementation and Reflection Model of Change (PIR)

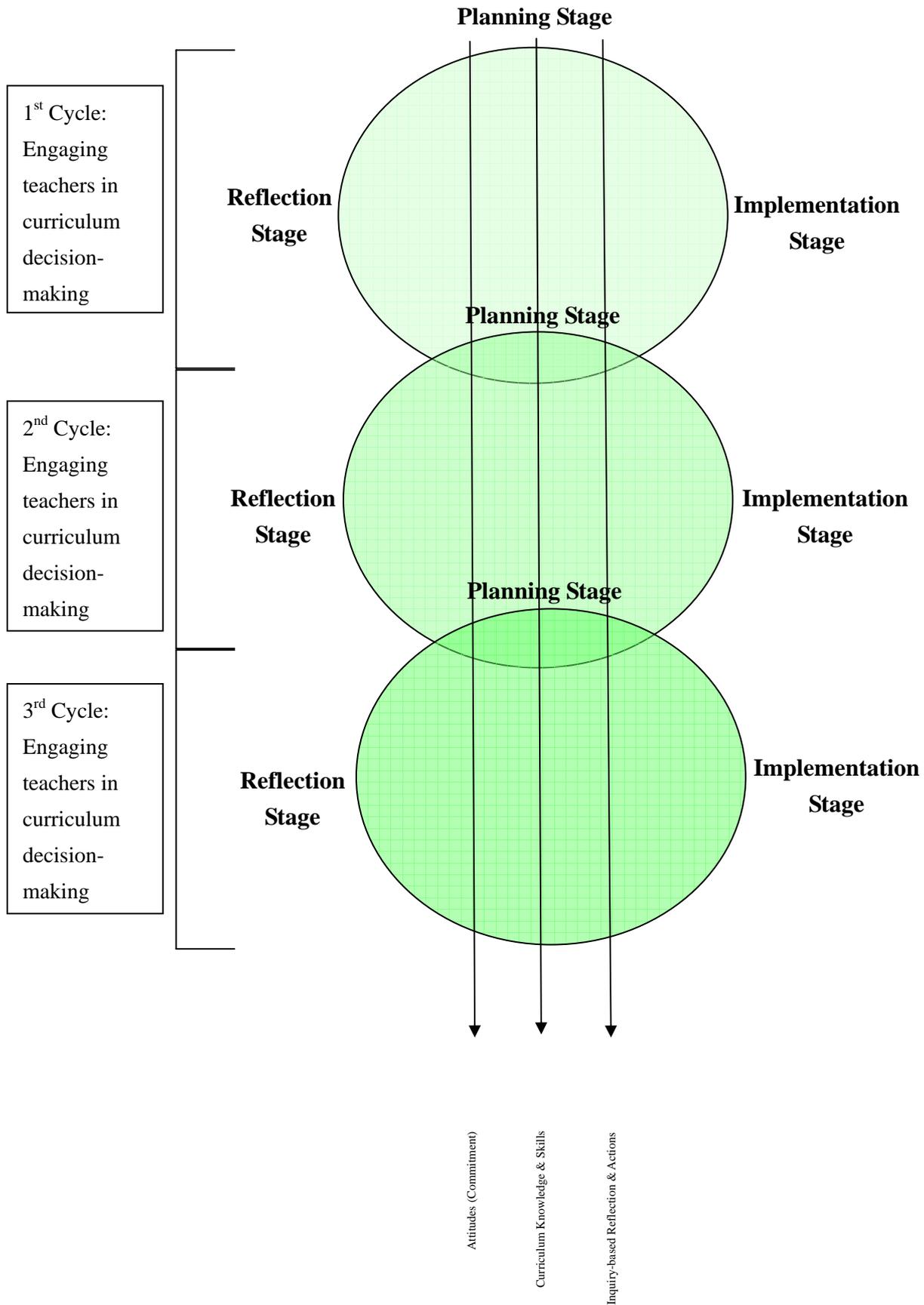
The innovation pattern adopted the PIR model (see Table 1), in which the team reviewed, planned and designed a lesson or a unit of learning in collaborative meetings to begin with. Then, the team assigned teachers to try out the planned innovation lesson and then in step three, the team conducted a reflection meeting.

Table 1: *A 3-stage model of Teacher Planning, Implementation and Reflection curriculum practices (PIR model)*

Stage	Aims	Teacher Activities
Planning Stage	To identify goals and design strategies for a plan of innovation	SWOT, Whole School Conference, Action Planning Meetings, Collaborative Lesson Preparation Meetings, Production of Materials

Implementation Stage	To put the plan in action in classrooms	Trialling, Peer Observation and Evaluation
Reflection Stage	To review actions and plan for future actions	Post Observation Conference, Completion of Feedback Sheets

This model of change is used in the first action cycle and repeated in the second action cycle in a spirally continuous structure (see Figure 1) (Law & Wan, 2005a, 2005b). This organization has several advantages. First, it creates opportunities for collaboration and team work. Second, it locates changes on pedagogy based on the teaching subject. Third, it adopts a problem solving and critical approach. Fourth, the change becomes an open venture and therefore school knowledge is taken as a matter of possibilities and opens for challenge, rather than a group of definitive subjects merely imposed from external agents to the professional deliberation at school sites (Macpherson, Aspland, Brooker, & Elliott, 1999; Macpherson & Brooker, 1999; Harris, 2004).





Development of Teacher Leadership in Curriculum in School

Figure 1: *Re-conceptualizing School-based Models of Developing Teacher Curriculum Leadership for Life Long Education (Law & Wan, 2005a, 2005b)*

Focus of Curriculum Innovation

Each curriculum development team was free to choose between two directions of change. Each team selects a teaching topic and then decides either to use the same pedagogical approach for all tryout lessons or to adopt a different pedagogical approach in each tryout lesson. The General Studies team chose the topic “consumption” to organize learning activities but experimented the pedagogical approach of problem-solving approach. The creation of the same pedagogical approach to teaching and learning was to create opportunities for comparisons in both the discussions in planning and reflection meetings. In addition, the realization of these pedagogical approaches in tryout lessons provided teachers with concrete experiences to be talked about and analyzed (Ball, 1996; King & Newmann, 2000; Birman, Desimone, Garet, Porter, & Yoon, 2002). Therefore, curriculum reforms and change would not remain to appear in some abstract language or concept in policy documents, but become some authentic experiences not too distant from the real lives of most teachers (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

Methodology

The main objective of the project is to contribute to the professional development of teachers in curriculum development. The project leader and the project assistant carried out the research study. The purpose of this study is thus to explore the extent of the effects of the curriculum innovation brought about upon the participating teachers and students. The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of curriculum innovation?
2. What do teacher encounter in the process of curriculum innovation?
3. What do teachers learn in the process of curriculum innovation?
4. What are teachers’ perceptions of their roles in curriculum innovation?
5. What are teachers’ perceptions of pupil learning in the process of curriculum innovation?
6. How do pupils perceive the curriculum innovation?

This is a case study whereas a school was regarded as a unit. It requires an in-depth exploratory approach. Thus qualitative approach is applied in collecting data for this study. Being exploratory in nature, qualitative approach is construed as a research strategy that

emphasizes words rather than quantification in the data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2004). The current approach acts as research-based enquiry to draw upon the views from the teachers and pupils on the impact brought about by the innovation. Qualitative tool for collecting data included individual interviews with three project teachers in the General Studies Curriculum Development Team of the case school. Data were collected before and after the tryout of curriculum innovation.

For the qualitative analysis, teachers and pupils' interviews were analyzed and emerging categories were identified. Finally, conclusions were drawn from these categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

How did teachers perceive the effectiveness of curriculum innovation?

The support teacher expressed that the overall process was smooth and the teachers could make continuous improvement after implementation. She said,

“After the tryout, we discovered what we amended was beneficial to the pupils’ learning. It is because before the tryout, our objective was not clear or it was too wide. So during the process, the objective became very clear.” (ST, after tryout)

Moreover, the teachers could cater for individual differences in their tryouts. The support teacher observed,

“As I had observed two teachers, I found that the teaching contents were basically the same. Possibly because of different abilities of the pupils, I found that what teachers did was different. One class was faster, so the lesson we observed the teacher taught another thing. And the teacher re-arranged the sequence of the activities, but I think even the two teachers’ teaching arrangement was different and their expectations might be different, they could bring out what was planned to teach. For example, before the observed lesson, the teacher asked the pupils to design some menus. On the day of lesson observation, the pupils were asked to present what the contents were in their menus and the reasons behind their design. After that, the pupils asked question to the presentation group. The pupils were asked to design an advertisement because the pupils were required to do an election in which the advertisement that can effectively bring out a message of promoting health, environmental protection and effective consumption.” (ST, after tryout)

In spite of that, there is still some room for making improvement to the innovation. The team leader said,

“We planned several teaching objectives, including developing healthy habits. I feel that they cannot totally do it. But for developing critical thinking or using different angles to think, they could achieve. They really could criticize and help others....they just could not apply in the reality.” Some improvement could be made to the innovation. The tryout teacher stated, *“Possibly we need to set more clear guidelines to the children.... if we can give the rules clearly, they can accommodate to each other and collaborate with each other.”* (TT, after tryout)

What difficulties did teachers encounter in the process of curriculum innovation?

The most common obstacles to any innovation are lack of resources and time. In the process, the tryout teacher mentioned,

“I feel that our space was not enough, especially the time. When we wanted to do something, there was just no time. ... I feel that I do more and more work. I feel there should be a space for me to think or listen to something, for example, after school we can group together to listen and talk to each other.” (TT, after tryout)

To make space and time for teachers is equally important to create opportunities of success to any innovation that brings about better pupil learning.

What did teachers learn in the process of curriculum innovation?

Although the teacher encountered some difficulties in the process of curriculum innovation, innovation has provided a suitable platform for teacher learning. The co-planning meeting of all members of the team enhanced their understanding of lesson planning. The support teacher mentioned,

“I really want to try out a curriculum to see whether the pupils can achieve what learning objectives that we set, whether they can learn what they want, and then to see what is achieved and what is not achieved. After that, we evaluate our design and reflect on it.” (ST, after tryout)

The team leader reflected what she learnt from the project. She said, *“...[I learnt how to do] co-planning, how to organize activities...mostly when you teach, you will use what has been learnt into daily teaching when it is suitable.”* (TT, after tryout) The tryout teacher also had a similar view. She mentioned, *“[I learnt] how to design a lesson based on pupils’ abilities and how to achieve learning objectives.”* (ST, after tryout)

The peer observation by members of the team strengthened their understanding of the innovation. The support teacher stressed,

“During classroom observation, we reflect on what was done well and what needed to be improved, why teachers could not achieve, and for teachers who had not taught the topic, they could know what needed to be paid much attention and this was a good feedback to us.” (ST, after tryout)

What are teachers’ perceptions of their roles in curriculum innovation?

The role of the current team leader was perceived by the other members of the curriculum team as a supporter and facilitator of the curriculum making process, rather than a leader who assumes a more directive role. The tryout teacher expressed her observation in the following way. She said,

“She is a leader, a coordinator. ... For example, she helped us to integrate our ideas with that of the consultant, and then she will ask for our opinions to make a balance.” (TT, before tryout) The team leader herself saw her role in a similar way, stating that, *“She tried out the project, and she plays a leading role in the team.”* (TL, after tryout)

The support teacher also shared a similar view, saying that,

“I think that the team leader’s role is that she does the things before we do. Most of the time she would think and plan before our meeting. Then during the meeting, we discuss together. Mostly she directly contacts with the consultant. And she would suggest us purchasing the necessary teaching materials. She would also allocate the work amongst us. She is playing a good leadership role.” (ST, after tryout)

The role of the tryout teacher was also perceived as a pioneer role in supporting the innovation. The team leader said, *“The tryout teacher is to carry out the project...is a leadership role.”* (TL, after tryout) The tryout teacher added,

“The tryout teacher is to carry out, do experiments and implement the project and new teaching strategies. He/she looks like a pioneer for the teachers who wants to learn new teaching strategies.” (TT, after tryout)

The support teacher also had a similar viewpoint, stating that, *“I think that the tryout teacher*

actually does the actions, carrying out our plan in the reality so as to find out the feasibility of our plan.” (ST, after tryout)

In supporting the innovation, there was a subject consultant. The role of consultant did have positive impact on giving support to the teachers. The support teacher reflected that,

“I think that this project is to enhance teachers’ skills in lesson design. With the help of the consultant, teachers are given assistance in their designs, and they can learn how to evaluate the effectiveness of the learning objectives, teaching aids, learning task sheets, and pupils’ learning effectiveness. Through the lesson, pupils can practically use their generic skills.” (ST, after tryout)

And,

“I think in the whole process, his role is to give us some guidance, give us some advice on the aspects that are not detailed enough, and he gives us a lot of ideas on how to design, and guide us to consider some activities that are suitable to the levels of our pupils. He always has an evaluation discussion with us, and he observes the classes. After classroom observation, he gives us some feedback. This helps to reinforce our activity approach and thematic approach in our teaching.” (ST, after tryout)

The tryout teacher added that,

“He guides us to discuss, or lead us to think about some problems, and discuss what we have done, and give comments on teaching...when there are some problems, he will lead us to think and re-amend.” (TT, after tryout)

The team leader concluded that,

“He is very active. When he has some ideas, he will immediately send them to us by email. ...he is very active and involved.” (TL, after tryout)

The role of the support teacher helped assist the process of the innovation. The support teacher saw her role in this way, stating that,

“I think I act as a third person to design the curriculum. I also teach P.3 pupils. And I also tried out in my class. We allocated resources and distributed work together. We searched for information together and discussed how to adjust the

materials in our classes to suit their learning needs.” (ST, after tryout)

The tryout teacher stressed that every role shares work with each other. She said,

“As a support teacher, in spite of being so called a support teacher, actually in our practice, we worked together. There was no difference amongst our roles. It is just a name.” (TT, after tryout)

The team leader highlighted the role of the support teacher is to give support to the team. She said,

“[The support teacher] did not try out, but she gave us a lot of comments during co-planning periods. After class observation, she also gave us a lot of comments. And she helped the allocation of materials.” (TL, after tryout)

What are teachers’ perceptions of pupil learning in the process of curriculum innovation?

During the process of the innovation, the children enjoyed the process and developed collaboration skills. The support teacher observed,

“I think the most successful thing of the tryout is: First, the pupils knew what to do; secondly, they were very serious; third, those activity designs were very interesting and everyone was able to do and got highly involved.” (ST, after tryout)

The tryout teacher mentioned, *“Pupils enjoyed the process very much. The whole lesson was so lively. They could use what they learnt as shown in their presentation.” (TT, after tryout)*

The team leader also added,

“Pupils learnt collaboration skills and team spirit through their interaction.... I and the pupils could work it out. I devoted myself as one of the members in their group. They were also very devoted to the process.” (TL, after tryout)

Overall speaking, the innovation was successful in providing an effective learning process to the students who learnt more actively and pleasantly.

Conclusion

This study is based on a small-scale case study and therefore, can by no means conclude a generalized conclusion. However, this study can give some references to those interested in school based curriculum development. The PIR Model did create a platform that promoted

opportunities for professional development of teachers in school based curriculum development to better pupil learning. In the process of the innovation, not only pupils could learn but also teachers did learn skills and strategies to develop pupils' learning. In supporting the implementation of any innovation, it is notably noted that there should be sufficient support to the teachers. More importantly, it is also remark that every team member should know and understand his or her role(s) in the process of curriculum innovation.

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