

Challenges and Strategies to Educational Change – School Based Curriculum

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Abstract: Since taking responsibility for government in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has launched a series of education reform measure. In the Learning to Learn, Consultation Document (Curriculum Development Council, 2001), the policy of school based curriculum is advocated. The aim is to allow “schools to have more autonomy in choosing some contents more relevant to their students so long as they are in line with the curriculum aims, strands, principles of learning/teaching, with justifiable modifications that suit their students most” (CDC, 2000:47). This paper reports a case study of a local primary school in implementing the school based curriculum in General Studies (GS) in the past three years. The methodology employed includes interviewing different stakes-holders, i.e. head teacher, GS panel, level co-coordinators and subject teachers so as to study why they initiated such educational change, the strategies teachers employed and difficulties they encountered. Parents and students were also invited to fill in questionnaire to tell their perception of school based curriculum and learning in GS lessons. A model is thus presented. It is hoped that the analysis will provide insight for teachers and administrators who want to initiate educational change in schools. In order to institutionalize educational change, teachers have to find meaning in the process of educational change, supported by the administration and facilitated by coherent school policies.

Keywords: school based curriculum, educational change, General Studies

Introduction

Since 1997, the Hong Kong Government has launched a series of educational reforms. The overall aim is to prepare young people to meet the changing expectations and demands of the community in the face of globalization and the development of a knowledge-based society. In Learning to Learn, (Education Commission, Sept 2001), a major policy document, it argues that the education system should be reformed to provide the most favourable environment for teaching and learning in order to fully realize students’ potential, and that teachers should have more scope to help students learn more effectively. School based curriculum has been advocated. This paper reports a study of the implementation of the said policy in General Studies (GS) classrooms in a primary school for the past three years. Strategies and barriers to change were identified. It is hoped that the analysis will provide insight for teachers who want to initiate and institutionalize educational change.

School Based Curriculum

Skilbeck (1984, p.2) defines school base curriculum development (SBCD) as ‘the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of a programme of students’ learnings by the educational institution of which those students are members’. He emphasized shared decision-making between teachers and students. SBCD involves a network of relationships with different groups in the school. Besides teachers and students, they are the school administration, parents and the local community. It is therefore characterized by certain pattern of values, norms, procedures and roles. Marsh *et al.* (1990, p.3) stated, ‘School-based curriculum development is essentially a teacher-initiated grass roots phenomenon, and is likely to survive in this pure form regardless of political and economic contexts’. However, in Hong Kong, in the era of education reform, a new General Studies curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2002) was introduced to the community and was implemented in the six levels of all the primary schools since the academic year 2004-05. It emphasizes the enhancement of students' inquiry and investigative skills for knowledge construction. Schools have been encouraged to adapt the central curriculum in developing their school-based curriculum and promote life-wide learning. The central General Studies curriculum is composed of six strands, i.e. health and living, people and environment, science and technology in everyday life, community and citizenship, national identity and Chinese culture, as well as global understanding and the information era.

Educational Change

In theory, the purpose of educational change is to help schools accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programmes and/or practices with better ones. The participants in education want to investigate whether, how and under what conditions educational change can improve schools (Fullan, 2001). Fullan emphasized that the implementation of educational change involves ‘change in practice’. Change in practice occurs at many levels, such as the teacher, the school or the school district. Change is multidimensional. There are three dimensions in implementing any new policy or programme: the possible use of new or revised materials, the possible use of new teaching approaches, and the possible alternation of beliefs. All these three aspects of change represent the ways of achieving some educational goal(s). Changes in actual practice along the three dimensions are essential if the intended outcome is to be achieved. Furthermore, it is at the individual level, individual practitioners, that change occurs. Therefore, it is necessary to provide supportive or stimulating conditions to foster change in practice.

Methods

The study employed qualitative research methods for data collection in order to

study how the implementation of school based curriculum and assessment for learning in a local primary school for the past three years. The following table summarizes the methods and the purposes of data collection.

Table 1: *Methods and purposes of data collection*

Time	Data Collection	Purposes
1. After each unit was taught	1. GS teachers of each level met for evaluation.	1. To provide feedback about teaching and learning in school based curriculum development (SBCD).
2. At the end of an academic year	1. All the GS teachers held the evaluation meeting. 2. Students filled in questionnaires. 3. Parents filled in questionnaires.	1. To collect data about the teaching and learning (SBCD) in General Studies classrooms. 2. To provide feedback about the teaching and learning (SBCD) in General Studies classrooms. 3. To provide feedback about students' learning in General Studies.
3. At the end of the third year of this study	1. Head teacher, Subject Panel, level coordinators and teachers were interviewed by the researcher.	1. To collect their perception of SBCD, the process of implementation, difficulties encountered, resources acquired and requested, and suggestion for continuation.

The school studied in the present research is located in a public housing estate in Hong Kong (More than half of the population of Hong Kong live in public houses). It is a single session school. The school has implemented school based curriculum and assessment for learning in General Studies since 2003-2004. Each year, they prepared a 'school based unit' for each level. After a unit was taught, all the 18 subject teachers held evaluation meetings. They also wrote reflection reports and conducted evaluation at the end of the year. Students and parents also aired their comments by filling in questionnaires. By the end of the school year, 2005-2006, the third year of the implementation, the researcher interviewed different stake-holders, i.e. the head teacher, the subject panel, so as to study why they initiated this educational change in their school/classrooms and the strategies employed as teaching and learning in Hong Kong is usually commented as text-book oriented. Coordinators / teachers of each level were also interviewed so as to collect their perception and challenges confronted

during the process of this educational change. As classroom teachers are in the best position to effect educational change directly, each GS teacher was asked to write a reflection report after a unit was taught in the past three years. At the end of each school year, all GS teachers met together to conduct an evaluation of their work, comments and suggestion were also documented. Fullan (2001) argued that students not only are the potential beneficiaries of educational change, but also participant s in the process of change. He also commented that parents may initiate, reject, support or block educational changes in schools. Consequently students and parents were also invited to fill in a questionnaire to reflect on their perception on school based curriculum and their learning in General Studies lessons at the end of the school year.

Results

Perceptions of Teachers towards School Based Curriculum

Teachers in the present study saw that they had to implement SBC in GS as the English panel had been already implementing it with the assistance of the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB). They saw the policies of school based curriculum as the trend in the educational community. Most of them thought that it is good for the students who showed interest in the lessons than before. In Hong Kong, teaching has been commented as textbook oriented and teacher talk has been the common teaching strategy. However, teachers all admitted they worked very hard in searching reference materials, and preparing the SBC booklets and worksheets. They also organized different community-based activities for the students, e.g. visiting the nearby shopping mall or amenities facilities.

Implementation of School Based Curriculum

Most of the teachers claimed that it is the school administration who initiated the adoption of the SBC policy. They claimed that they were told to implement them and acquired some basic knowledge either through the courses organized by the EMB or talks conducted by the panel. Among the six units to be taught in a year, teachers only developed a school based curriculum and produced a booklet for the students. Consequently, by the end of the third year, there were three SBC booklets for each level. On the other hand, they did not just adopt the previous SBC unit(s) in their teaching; they provided justification for adopting or modifying elements in the previous unit. Teachers teaching the same level held meetings in a fortnight to prepare lessons jointly, especially to design major learning activities and worksheets. Worksheets were the most common methods employed the teachers to assessment the learning of students in the lessons. In this school year, 2005-2006, instead of developing a new unit, teachers take time to do reflection and evaluation on implementing SBCD and plan for the development of school based curriculum in the school.

Effects of the Implementation

The head teacher admitted that since the implementation of the school based curriculum, she worked together with the GS panel to place teachers in teaching different levels. It is because they had to make sure that there was an experienced and good teacher to help the planning and coordination work in that particular level though he/she might not be the level coordinator (due to manpower problem). The head teacher said that before the implementation of SBCD, she did the placement easily by herself as teachers just taught according to the textbooks.

All teachers said that students showed interests in the lessons. Some teacher admitted that through the collaborative lesson preparation, they learned more about the new GS curriculum, teaching strategies, interests and needs of the students. They spent more time to search more resources for their teaching and students' learning. Most teachers saw the value of SCBD in teaching the units such as 'My School' (P.1), 'Our Community', 'Good Shopping Places' (P.2). Some teacher commented they should also design the SBC according the availability of teaching resources in school when doing experimental activities.

Difficulties Encountered during the Implementation

The head teacher, the GS panel and teachers who were interviewed all admitted that they had to make way for the major subjects, Chinese, English and Mathematics. It is because students of primary three and primary six have to sit for the System Tests for these subjects. Though the government says that the purpose of the tests is to ensure students acquire core knowledge and skills, they were afraid the results will be used to determine the effectiveness of the school, then the fate of the school. Consequently, GS is considered as a minor subject.

Among all the 18 GS teachers, most of them teach one or two classes. Out of 30-32 periods in a week, they only taught 4-8 periods (4 periods for each class). Consequently, some teacher complained that she had done much more in GS than in the major subject. A lot of time was spent in collaborative lesson preparation, and revision of worksheets. However, sometimes they could not see the reasons of revisions.

Some teachers doubted the need of producing the booklets themselves, and not using the textbooks and workbooks in the market which were considered as much better than their own booklets. For example, the photos and pictures about China were colourful and very beautiful. Some teachers saw the production of booklets as a symbol, a sign to show that something was done for SBCD.

Though most teachers saw the value of SCB in teaching the units concerning local

community, some doubted the need of implementing SBCD when teaching the topics such as Hot or Cold (P.3), 'Our Homeland' (P.5). She presumed that all students in Hong Kong should learn the same curriculum about China.

Supported Received and Requested

Some teachers appreciated the time set for joint lesson preparation. Though it was only once in a fortnight, they admitted they could not spare more time as each of them also taught the major subject(s), such as Chinese, English or Mathematics. Consequently, they squeezed time for 'unofficial' discussion. Furthermore, they requested more collaboration, division of labour, among teachers.

Some requested more double lessons so that there would be more time for group work/discussion, presentation and assessment activities.

Perceptions of the Students and Parents

On the questionnaire, students remarked the project work of the SBC units interesting, as some of them conducted their inquiry work outside the school campus. They were also motivated to learn in GS lessons. On the different worksheets, they were assessed in different aspects, i.e. knowledge, skills and attitude. Some of the parents requested a lower percentage of marks for the project work. They may see revising the textbooks and worksheets a 'better' way to score higher marks.

A Model of Implementing School Based Curriculum

From the data analysis of the present study, a model of implementing school based curriculum (Fig. 1) is presented as the following:

Since 1997, the Hong Kong Government has been implementing a series of education reform measures, so as to prepare students to pursue all-round development through life-long learning (Education Commission 2001). Curriculum guides of different key learning areas (Curriculum Development Council, 2002) were produced. Schools are encouraged to design school based curriculum conducive to effective the learning of students. This is illustrated as the top left box and the left circle of Figure 1.

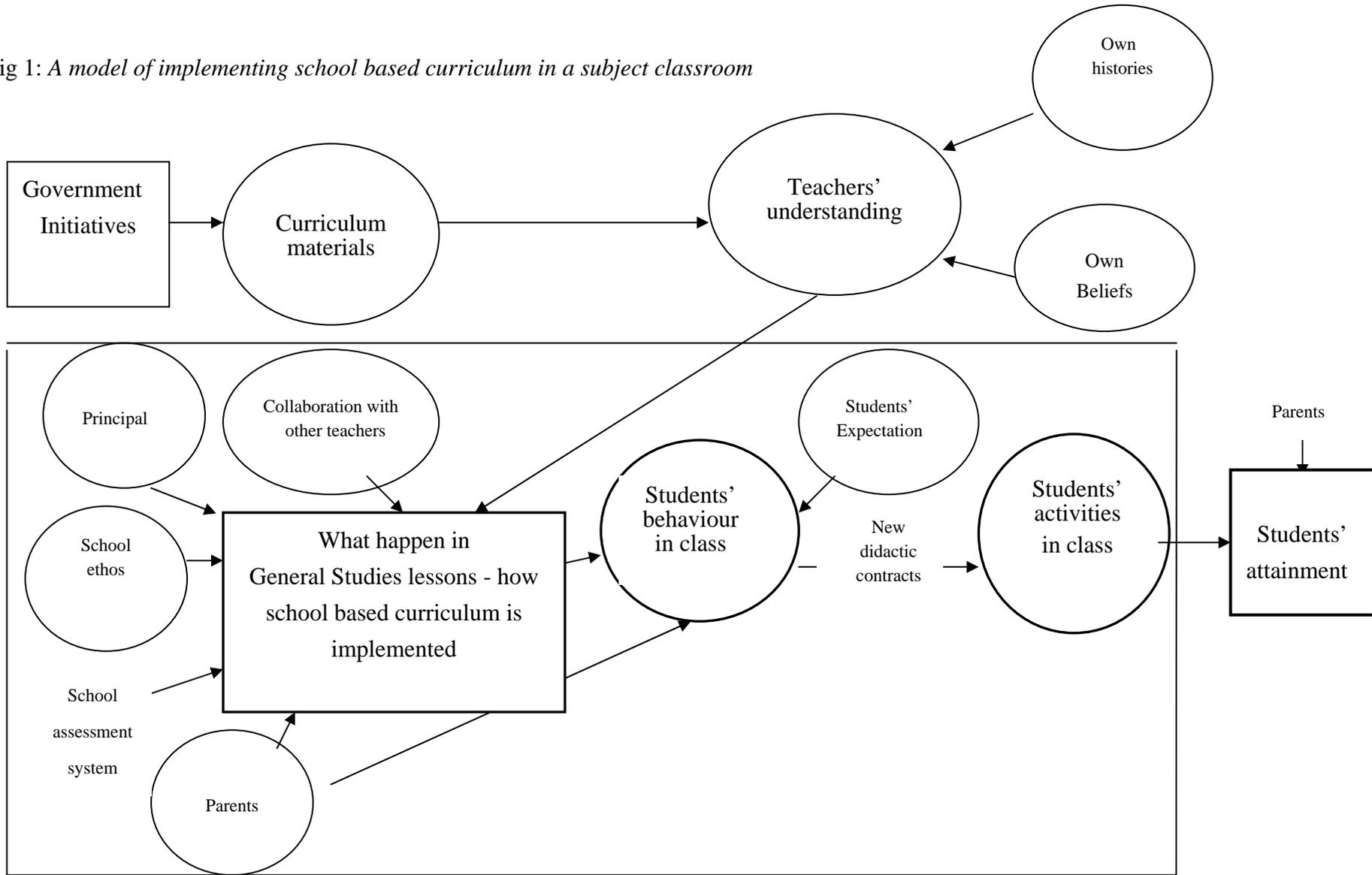
The teachers were introduced the concept of school based curriculum, illustrated as the top middle circle of Figure 1, in order that they were to be facilitators of students' learning in classrooms. Their understanding was affected by their own histories and beliefs of teaching. Some did not see the value of SBCD. These are illustrated as the three circles at the top right side of Figure 1.

Teachers jointly prepared lessons, designed major learning and assessment activities which helped to promote implementation of SBC in General Studies classrooms. However, some teacher still held the traditional view of teaching and learning, e.g., reading the text and underlining the key sentences. She was afraid that students would score low marks in the examinations. On the other hand, the implementation was also facilitated by the support provided by head teacher who was ready to support the educational change by providing different resources and comforting the teachers. Furthermore, the school ethos of collaborative lesson preparation, lesson observation and the formative assessment system facilitated the educational change. However, the low status of General Studies in the school curriculum negatively affected the implementation. Moreover, teachers also had to be very cautious in communicating with the parents who became very anxious when the textbooks or workbooks were not adopted. Some saw no way to help their children to prepare for the tests and examinations. All these are illustrated as the square and the four small circles at its left at the left side of Figure 1.

Students' behaviour such as their active participation in the activities, illustrated as the circle in the middle of Figure1, was not only affected by the design and quality of the activities provided by the teachers, but also their expectation on the teachers and General Studies lessons. On the other hand, the assistance provided by some parents after school also affected students' attitudes in the lessons. This is illustrated as one small circle at the left side of the figure and one small circle near the circle in the middle of Figure 1.

At the start of their teaching, the teachers made new didactic contracts with their students (Brousseau, 1996) about the SBCD and the class behaviour, depicted as the circle at the right side of Figure 1. The attainment of the students, depicted as the square at the right side of Figure 1, was the outcome of the students' activities and performance in the class. However, it was also enhanced by the assistance provided by their parents after school, especially in doing workbooks/worksheets and preparing for tests/examinations.

Fig 1: A model of implementing school based curriculum in a subject classroom



Conclusion

The results of this study may be used to advise schools or policy makers that though most teachers proclaimed that they realized the trend and appreciated the effects of implementing school based curriculum. In order to sustain the implementation (institutionalize it), they have to take the difficulties the teachers encountered into consideration. For example, though there are needs and benefits in implementing different measures at the same time, the teachers may be overloaded (Fullan, 2001), especially in the case of the minor subject, GS. Some teachers were willing to hard but could not be overloaded over years.

Most of the teachers, students and parents do not have a clear concept of SBCD, nor have the experiences in their previous education. The implementation of the school curriculum requires more than willing individual teachers, e.g. the subject panel or level coordinators. Rather, there needs to be a deep re-conceptualisation of the nature of knowledge, teaching, and learning, and changes in the practises of subject department, supported by the principal, school administration, parents and students. The meaning of the educational change must be accomplished at every level of the school system (Fullan, 2001). Consequently, the head teacher, subject panel and level co-ordinators have to discuss thoroughly with all the teachers in the panel the school policy in dealing with the teaching and learning of this subject and its place in the school curriculum. It is to ensure all the policies and system work with each other and agree with each, and teachers find meaning in the process of such educational change and possess ownership of the change. In order to help teachers see clearly the meaning and value of producing the SBC booklets, preparing and revising worksheets, some common criteria and guidelines may be developed. Enough time for collaboration of lesson should be institutionalized so that teachers may have more time to do the preparation and reflection.

Last but not least, different official channels, such as the Parents and Teachers Association, morning assembly, may be employed to communicate with parents and students the characteristics of SBCD and their role in implementing such educational change. It is because parents may initiate, reject, support or block educational changes in schools and students are the participants in the process of educational change (Fullan, 2001).

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