

Indicators Mandate Curriculum Change? A reflection of External School Review(ESR) exercise in HK

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Abstract: Curriculum change in HK is often unsatisfactorily actualized. Yet reform in education and curriculum seems nonstop and inevitable for this international city in an era of globalization. Local policy-makers launched a comprehensive curriculum reform in 2001 (CDC, 2001). Regardless of the officials' keen effort to implement the said curriculum reform during these five years, studies still found that real change is implemented only to superficial extent (Yeung, 2003). In fact, most Hong Kong's classrooms could still be portrayed as displaying features that are characterized as the 'three Ts': teacher-centred, textbook-centered and test-centered (Adamson, Kwan & Chan, 2000). In recent years, the strategies undertaken by the officials seem shifting between school-based initiatives and state-mandated attempts to promote forms of outcome-based education. External School Review (ESR) was initiated as a complementary measure for schools to self-evaluate its effectiveness and to 'ensure public accountability' (QAD, 2005). The officials believe that this forms in part a systematic and strong school development and accountability framework. However some informal, local critics are skeptical about the mechanism and frequently connect its notion to cutting of resources and closure of schools. Theoretically speaking, the concept of ESR relates to debates and discourses about standard and indicators, accountability in education, centralization and decentralization of curriculum decision-making, as well as teacher development. The present paper presentation wishes to critically analyze this current educational policy and inquire into the relation between ESR and the official intent to enforce and control curriculum change. Hopefully, questions like the following would also be addressed: how beneficial ESR has been in encouraging schools to develop and improve their curriculum and teaching? Has external inspection gone too far or not far enough? What are the pitfalls and perils of ESR with its underlying rationale, principles and mechanism? Finally, the paper also intends to highlight some recommendations, both practically and empirically, for consideration of policy-makers, officials and practitioners in Hong Kong.

Keywords: Curriculum change, School Self-evaluation, Accountability, Indicators, School improvement

Background

Evidence-based, or outcome-based school self-evaluation has been a recent trend in school improvement movement. School self-evaluation (SSE) is a mechanism through which schools evaluate themselves with regard to the quality of education, improve themselves

continuously and develop themselves into quality schools. This trend, to large extent, is a response to the global call for changes in education systems and organizations.

In Hong Kong, the story of SSE started when Education Commission issued the Education Commission Report no. 7 (Education Commission, 1997). The EC has formulated recommendations to improve school performance towards provision of “quality school education”. To enhance the quality of school education, EC recommends internal quality assurance to be achieved through school-based management and self-evaluation by schools. Another related, major recommendation include translating educational aims into quality indicators, which can provide the incentive for schools to make continuous improvement, and an equitable basis for self-evaluation and comparison among schools. As a consequence, The Education Department introduced a quality assurance framework in September 1997. In this framework, Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) serves as an external QA mechanism while schools are required to conduct school self-evaluation (SSE) as an internal QA process. The Quality Assurance framework in HK school education aims to help schools develop their own models of school-based management and to institutionalize a self-evaluation framework in daily practices for continuous improvement. This reflects the spirit of the recommendations of the *Education Commission Report No. 7* (ECR7). From 2003-04 onwards, the EMB has conducted External School Review (ESR) of public sector schools to validate schools’ self evaluation. To facilitate the schools’ self-evaluation process, the EMB has developed Key Performance Measures (KPM) and measurement tools such as standard stakeholder survey questionnaires. And in line with the ESR, A framework of Performance Indicators (PI) is prepared to let stakeholders to assess school performance. The framework of PIs is composed of four domains and is categorized accordingly (QAD, 2002). The four domains include *management and organization, learning and teaching, student support and school ethos, and student performance*.

The aims of ESR are to validate the results of school self-assessment (SSE), to review self-evaluation mechanism and processes of schools involved. ESR was carried out by a ESR team which is composed of a team leader and several team members. The team leader and two team members are inspectors from EMB. One team member is from District Education Office (also a EMB personnel). One or two external reviewers also assist in the process. The official’s intent that the SSE strategy be institutionalized in the school development framework, and then infused in teachers’ daily practices. Hopefully, the school and the teaching profession will be led to develop continuously and effectively and thus improve the quality of local education. Moreover, SSE also serves as a self-renewal mechanism that helps the officials and the school leaders to manage changes (Pang & et al., 2004).

A Brief Account of my ESR Experience

I got a chance to act an independent school reviewer (observer) last summer. Taking an approach of “narrative inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), I went into the field (the school), collect “lives” and experience of ESR, now report such narratives of experience sketchily with the assistance of the following table (Table 1):

Table 1: *Brief summary of my live in ESR school*

	Key Actions	Target
Day 1 (pre-visit)	<p>[9:30] meet with school head</p> <p>[10:45] Observation of school facilities and activities</p> <p>[11:30] scrutiny of school documents</p> <p>[13:45] meet with 15 students selected by school</p> <p>[18:30] meet with all staff in the school</p>	<p>- School head introduced the background and other related information of the school, the School Development Plan, the Self-Evaluation report, etc.</p> <p>- Set enquiry points</p> <p>-set enquiry points</p> <p>- set enquiry points, select five students to be shadowed in the next day</p> <p>- a briefing session to clarify ESR purposes and procedures for all staff</p>
Day 2	<p>[8:00 to 16:00] Shadowing of students selected in class and other school activities</p> <p>[8:00 to 16:00] lesson observations</p> <p>[after school hours] ESR team met, sum up the preliminary findings.</p>	<p>- to observe the performance of the students to validate school self-assessment related to Domains II and III</p> <p>- to review general patterns of classroom teaching in the school; and to identify students for interview on Day 3</p> <p>- to make corporate judgment</p>
Day 3	<p>[8:00 to 12:00] lesson observations</p> <p>[1:00 to 4:00]</p> <p>- Scrutiny of school documents</p> <p>- to meet with school personnel in charge of support for student development</p> <p>- Held focus group meeting with teachers to discuss student work</p>	<p>To understand how school assesses student learning;</p> <p>To see whether teachers can distinguish well designed assignments from more common ones;</p> <p>To see whether the school has included curriculum reform related issues in the curriculum</p>
Day 4	[8:00 to 16:00 at different	- meeting with members of the school

	timeslots] Held focus group meetings with different teams, school members and stakeholders Continue scrutinizing school documents during free timeslots	improvement team - meeting with middle managers: department and committee heads - meeting with member from the school management committee - meeting with students selected on Day 1 - meeting with Regional Education Officer - meeting with parents
Day 5	[8:00 to 12:00] the ESR team discussed on the findings, summarized evidence gathered and consolidate judgment [2:00 to 4:00] the ESR team gave oral feedback to school head and members from the school improvement team The team left the school	I wrote and submit my conclusive observation to the team leader. The team met to make corporal judgment
After the ESR week	The team submitted a written report to the school within one week after the visit.	The school had a week's time to respond to the team's report

Table 1 roughly summarizes my 'ESR life' in the school.

The five days were tedious and stressful to the ESR team. Each of the days was filled with tight schedule. The inspectors, including me, were busy with lesson observations, interviews with students and teachers, examination of documents, writing field notes and enquiry points, and then held corporate judgment meetings before leaving schools. The working hours for the five days were from 8:00 to 19:00 – a prolonged and rush period shared by the whole team. As an external observer, my role was much easier than the ESR officials. Yet, I experienced the same working process and therefore the pressure. Fortunately, the team leader was exceptionally smart, skilled, and efficient. Under his leadership, the team managed to work through the process. As one member of the ESR team, I learned to spot important enquiry points, to work out plausible plans and themes for review, to cautiously follow up critical issues, and to ease possible pressure or contradiction between the team and the school personnel.

My observation about the school was interesting. The school managed to plan well in advance. All the key persons of the school including the curriculum leaders, the panels and even the students were 'well drilled'. Bundles of documents were prepared well in advance. There were altogether 40 files of documents for the ESR team to scrutinize. Even their dialogues during the focus group interviews were well drilled. Most lessons were well planned. Students selected for interviews were smart and cooperative. All these gave a visitor

as me a very good impression. The school easily got high scores from this round of ESR.

The ESR exhibited certain positive sides. Compared with the QAI inspection, the ESR process is no longer “a secret garden”. The ESR team operated friendly with an aim to ensure that inspections are independent, responsive, fair and open. All procedures were made available to schools, school boards. All aspects of the process, including reports are available on the Internet. The team leader got every chance to keep communication with the school heads. Discussion and frank communication was guaranteed as much as possible. The ESR team members tried all the best to contact key stakeholders for talking and understanding any query they found during the five days.

As for the school side, my crude observation found that among the school personnel, there was a strong recognition of the need for inspection. The teachers had general agreement with the findings of the inspection team. Where the inspection report was generally positive, the morale of the teachers could be raised. Most teachers appeared to find that the recommendations and the written comments prepared by the ESR team useful.

In summary, I have visualized how an evidence-based tradition has been imposed on school evaluation. I see that this evaluation process has both strength and possible drawback.

Some potential value of ESR

SSE and ESR together help achieve a greater sense of transparency within school and in relation to other related body. It helps schools establish a more systematic and rigorous way to enhance quality and performance of their schools.

Furthermore, SSE and ESR would enable the school to develop as a community of learners, enhance the professional development of staff, and infusing the thinking and practice of teachers and school leaders as life-long learners. ESR somehow helps the school as a whole to develop a sense of “owning the problem” together. ESR helps to create the conditions and processes that the whole school moves down the path of increasingly greater ownership and commitment. Whether if this could help sustain changes in the school and among school teachers remains to be another story. Yet, the process is to a great extent a fair, open one for schools to self-evaluate, to commence a professional discourse among the school stakeholders.

Some drawback

Given that the main purpose of lesson observation is to validate the school’s own evaluation on teaching and learning in the school, ESR procedures focus on the school’s

overall teaching performance (as my team leader explained to the teachers). Furthermore, the tight schedule of ESR allows little space and time for providing professional feedback to individual teachers. Even the teachers voiced this need during the conclusive meeting. The Impact Study conducted by Professor John MacBeath and Bill Clark also highlighted the concerns raised by teachers that class observation was in lack of feedback (QAD, 2005, 2006). If ESR implies a mechanism that helps facilitate ongoing professional development of teachers, substantive feedback to teachers' teaching is essential.

Some teachers in the school have inadequate understanding of the purpose and aims of SSE and ESR, they perceived it as another initiative launched top-down from EMB, alongside with other curriculum innovations. This affects in part the attitude and approach they took to deal with the ESR. Hence, some teachers adopted kinds of "problem-solving" strategy to play against ESR. Lacking appreciation of the positive purpose of the procedure, teachers thought of ways to tackle with the "problem" – preparing a lesson plan for the lesson being observed (though they did not have such practice in their daily teaching); arranging activities to assist students learn (though they rarely did so in their usual practice – as some students said during the interview). Some might wonder if ESR has been successful in encouraging schools to develop and improve their curriculum and teaching as it happens.

Evidences showed that to some extent there exists misunderstanding, miscommunication and disinformation about the purposes of ESR – particularly among frontline teachers. Myth and rumor might have distorted the perceptions and expectations of some teachers. The "defense mechanism" of some teachers is clearly observed. Even the SIT seemed well drilled among themselves during the panel meeting with ESR members. Moreover, some teachers still have uncertain understanding of the whole scheme. Contrary to the educative objective of the procedure as claimed by the officials, some teachers and even some leaders still see that the primary audience for SSE is the ESR team – rather than the school itself. The goal of school improvement might not be well taken by the school teachers as long as they view SSE as an event rather than a process integral to the holistic change of their school curriculum and teaching.

Furthermore, the ESR team based its criticism of the school's assessment practices on a limited sample of school's work (the process of LASW – "Look At Students' Work") might not be accurate or valid enough. A more thorough process of scrutiny might be helpful. Yet, letting school teachers to express their view about good assessment practices would potentially be a good device that gives teachers sense of professional respect. Similar endeavors which probe into teachers' decision-making in curriculum and teaching are recommended.

Some Reflection about ESR

Most would not deny the significance of self-evaluation process. The concept of ESR relates to debates and discourses about standard and indicators, accountability in education, centralization and decentralization of curriculum decision-making, as well as teacher development. The following discusses a few among these issues:

School effectiveness or for school improvement?

Researches tell that the issue of school evaluation often relates the debate between two contrasting concepts – *school effectiveness* and *school improvement* (Marsh, 1997).

EMB stresses that the rationale behind SSE is for school improvement. By online webpage, briefing seminars and memo, the EMB officials transmit this message to the schools. Local officials claim that External School Review (ESR) was initiated as a complementary measure for schools to self-evaluate its effectiveness and to ‘ensure public accountability’ (QAD, 2005). The officials emphasize that this forms in part a systematic and strong school development and accountability framework.

“*School effectiveness*” focuses more on promoting progress for all pupils beyond what would be expected, or ensuring each student achieves the highest standards possible. It aims at enhancing all aspects of student achievement and development and value-added concept (i.e. schools have to show that they continue to improve from year to year. With a broader sense, the concept of “*school improvement*” has evolved to indicate an increased focus on student achievement and capacity building. Hence, it stresses on quantitative evidences of student advancement such as students’ academic results in open examinations, their value-added data, etc (Chapman, 2005).

In contrast to the school effectiveness movement, the school improvement movement has argued that improvement and the capacity **to improve come from *within*** rather than beyond organizations. The principles of improving student outcomes by attempting **to develop organizational culture and capacity** have become central to the efforts of contemporary school improvement research and practice (MacBeath, 1999) Moreover, Proponents of school improvement have tended to view improvement as a ***bottom-up*** rather than top-down improvement efforts (Fullan, 1991; Hopkins, Ainscow and West, 1994).

Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) consider school improvement as:

“A distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change. In this sense school

improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the teaching and learning processes and the conditions that support it. It is about strategies for improving the school's capacity for providing quality education in times of change, rather than blindly accepting the edicts of centralized policies and striving to implement these directives uncritically. (p.3)"

Hence, a good self-evaluation process is itself a *school development* process. It should enable stakeholders in a school to acquire knowledge of what to improve; how to improve; and develop motivation to engage in improvements. The process is really developmental and let stakeholders have a sense of ownership of problem (Ferguson & et al, 2000). Many said that the case for internal evaluation is made on the grounds of *ownership*. The approach rests on a view of educators as self-aware, self-critical, thinking professionals. The primary aim of an ideal self-evaluation process is to establish a climate, or a culture, in which there is a shared belief that everyone can make a difference and that school development is the right and responsibility of every single member of the educational community (MacBeath & McGlynn, 2002). By and large, the process obviously is not a self-justification process. It involves inherent and authentic change inside a school and its personnel. Those who support this practice envision that at a later stage, internal evaluation could become an integral part of school life, embracing key aspects of a school's work, focusing on what matters most to teachers, students and the parents (MacBeath & McGlynn, 2002).

Chapman (2005) compares the abovementioned two concepts with a table. The separate traditions of school effectiveness and school improvement are as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: Comparison between "School Effectiveness" and "School Improvement"

School effectiveness	School improvement
1. Focus on schools	Focus on teachers
2. Focus on organization	Focus on school processes
3. Data-driven, with the emphasis on outcomes	Empirical evaluation of effects of changes
4. Quantitative in orientation	Qualitative in orientation
5. Lack of knowledge about how to implement change strategies	Exclusively concerned with change in schools
6. more concerned with change in student outcomes	More concerned with journey of school improvement than its destination
7. more concerned with schools at one point in time	more concerned with schools as changing
8. based on research knowledge	focused on practitioner knowledge

Table 2 serves well for people to distinguish current practice of school evaluation in Hong Kong.

Evidences show that ESR, rather than genuinely planned for school improvement, aims toward enhancing *school effectiveness*. The ECR 7 said clearly that such mechanism is for improving schools' quality and effectiveness. The framework and design of the SSE and ESR also demonstrates such official intention. The mechanism is a self-justification process; it is data-driven, research-based and quantitative in tradition. Key Performance Measure (KPM) is one good example. KPM is a school data system developed by the EMB under the "School Development and Accountability" framework. It builds on the framework of "performance indicators". The set of KPM data provides objective and quantitative data to supplement the performance indicators, which are mainly qualitatively orientated. It measures the work of schools in quantitative terms, thus provides schools with feedback for schools to evaluate its own performance. It provides schools with feedback for strategic self-improvement. In turn it enhances the transparency and accountability of the work of schools. This also enables EMB to be better informed of, in quantitative terms, the effectiveness of the school system. The 23 KPM items (e.g. APASO¹, SVAIS², Stakeholders' survey, HKCEE and HKALE results, Lesson time for the 8 KLAs, Territory-wide System Assessment, HKAT, Teachers' qualifications and experience, Lesson time for the 8 Key Learning Areas, Number of active school days, etc.) serve as tools for measuring or collecting quantitative data. For each of these items, KMB provides norm data for schools to take as reference. Schools are recommended to choose using the existing channels of communication for reporting KPM data to the key stakeholders, such as the school newsletter. Many schools

I list a few of those critical KPM data in the following section:

SVAIS (School Value-Added Information System)

The SVAIS provides Hong Kong schools with confidential information on the extent to which they add value to the academic progress of their students. Schools are recommended to use SVAIS as tool for school self-evaluation. With SVAIS, schools can compile value-added reports and analyze the value-added patterns. With reference to other available information (e.g. students' performance in the HKAT, internal assessment results as well as the affective and social outcomes of students, survey findings on their self-esteem, and values, etc.), schools can explore the reasons behind the value-added patterns; evaluate learning and

¹ Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcome – comprises 8-11 sets of questionnaires for primary or secondary students; enables schools and EMB to have an understanding of students' performance and development in the affective and social domains.

² School Academic Value-added Performance

teaching effectiveness; formulate and implement follow-up action plans for school self-improvement.

APASO (Assessment Program for Affective and Social Outcomes)

EMB has chosen 'attitudes to school' from the APASO as one of the 'Key Performance Measures'. The seven subscales in the questionnaires are comprehensive and able to reflect the impact of school life on students' affective and social development. Schools are to provide the External School Review team with the relevant data for reference.

SHS (Stakeholder Survey)

It is a measure to help schools collect views from teachers, students, parents and specialists (for special schools) on major aspects of school work for school self-evaluation. These include teachers' view about the professional competence and attitude of the school principal, vice principal and the middle-management; teachers' view about staff development and staff appraisal, curriculum planning, organization and management; students' and parents' view of teachers' teaching attitude, knowledge and strategies; parents' view of home-school co-operation; etc.

TSA (Territory-wide System Assessment)

The Territory-wide System Assessment is an assessment administered at the territory level by the Government. It is mainly conducted on paper-and-pen mode and there is also an oral assessment component for the two languages. The System Assessment is only administered at the three levels of Primary Three, Primary Six and Secondary Three. The one for Primary Three was first conducted in mid 2004 and the System Assessment will be expanded to cover Primary Six and Secondary Three in 2005 and 2006 respectively. EMB stresses that TSA is low-stake in nature. It is to provide feedback to schools about their standards in the three subjects of Chinese Language, English Language and Mathematics, so that schools could draw up plans to increase effectiveness in learning and teaching. She also claims that the TSA data would help the Government to review policies and to provide focused support to schools. However, most schools are very cautious and concerned about the TSA data. Many of them take the data as Q-mark (Quality Assurance Mark). Some of them would use it to publicize their schools.

Overall speaking, EMB's explanation shows quite clearly the aims behind the KPM is to gauge a school's effectiveness,

“(T)he set of KPM is only one set of data among others that facilitate school self-evaluation and assessment of school performance. Schools can also make use of

other information, such as school self-designed questionnaires, reference to evidence of performance as listed in the Hong Kong School Performance Indicators, etc., to conduct a comprehensive analysis and evaluate school performance so that appropriate school development plans can be formulated.”

Although EMB clarifies that she would not rank schools based on the KPM data or compare the differences among schools, it seems inevitable that schools would use the data to publicize and that the public would use these data to compare the performance of individual schools (see for example, Ming Pao, 29 Dec 2006). Consequently, the *quantitative tradition* (Biggs, 1996) of our community overplays. Cheng’s comment (2002) is quite accurate when he said that the ESR enforces “too many proposed means” but with little attention to the end. Hence, teachers and schools pay whole attention to the performance indicators; spend too much effort to ‘revamp’ the schools’ KPM data, but down-playing “students”. In connection, teachers’ workload and stress would be increased to an extent that students’ needs are constantly disregarded. I shared this similar observation with my ESR experience.

Managerial Accountability or Professional accountability?

In the recent past, government in Hong Kong increasingly uses much effort to request schools to be more “accountable” to the society. On document, we can see that the rationale behind SSE and ESR stresses much on the issue of “accountability”.

Yet, to make sense of “accountability” it is necessary to identify first the dominant ‘normative theories’, that is, “statements of the desirable purposes and modes of accountability” (p.17, Kogan, 1986). Kogan (1986) identifies three dimensions of accountability, which are *managerial*, *client* and *professional accountability*. Darling-Hammond (1995) classifies five types of educational accountability: *legal/statutory*, *professional/moral* and *political/market*. Different from the concept of ‘quality control’, the move of quality assurance should be a move away from *managerial/political accountability* to *professional/moral accountability*.

Educational accountability is inevitably a key concern of every government. However, like many governments, officials in Hong Kong place sheer focus on the *political* or *economic* side of accountability. There seems to be a belief in the mind of local officials that,

“(i) t is important to recognize the rights of the nation to information about its schools and the rights of the community to be assured that its local schools are effective institutions. There are risks in handing over the control of education to the professionals without asking who will protect the interests of pupils and their families and ensure that

the school staff does not become cynical and complacent.”

(Ferguson, 2000, p.xvi)

Some critics comment that the bureaucrats in Hong Kong feel the need to control professionals in education and restore the right of the consumer by increasing state control through different forms of inspection. As Macbeath (1999, p.5) comments: ‘When someone wants to defend something or to attack something, he (*sic*) often evaluates it’ and House (1973) concludes, ‘Evaluation is an integral part of the political processes of our society’.

Some local academics comment that there is an apparent confusion about the concept of accountability and that there is an obvious bias towards the *managerial accountability* (Cheng, 2002). Some others criticize that local government is eagerly adopting a *market orientation*, hence *quality, efficiency* and *competitive accountability* has now become the yardstick in assessing the performance of schools (Chan, 2002). This underlying belief of the government shapes our ESR to become “over-pragmatic”. It also causes the alienation of school self-assessment. Hence, rather than carrying out their duties according to professional expertise and experience for the best interest of students, teachers and school leaders may work hard to meet the ‘indicators’. The ending effect may be the government’s stronger control of school education. And the performance indicators become effective tools for the government to look over how schools work to the standards. Certainly, this serves well for the officials to mandate curriculum change. Yet mandated change could hardly be deep and sustainable (Fullan, 2001, 2003).

My ESR experience found that some teachers coped with a half-hearted attitude – they fell into the trap of “the twin dangers” of inspection dependency and self-deluding (MacBeath & McGlynn, 2002). They would “perform” improvement in face of the ‘threat’ of inspection. To play against the rules of ESR, schools would develop certain “strategies”. There are clear dangers of self-evaluation becoming confused with self-delusion. Their professional judgment is somehow misled or distorted with a short-sighted aim as to work to the “narrowly-defined and ‘easily-quantifiable’ performance indicators (Chiu, 2002). Some might contemplate this problem of accountability with two types of liberalism -- *person-centered* and *technological liberalism* (Macpherson, 1998). Person-centered liberalism rejects a hierarchical context but in favor of an egalitarian one and promotes participatory structures in its governance and in its schools. ESR reflects a fact that in local educational system the *technological* orientation overweighs the virtue of *person-centered liberalism*. The *technological* view contends that to remain economically competitive in an international economy, people (schools) must develop itself to be among the best and the most competitive in the world. One teacher from my ESR school shared his secret thought

with me,

“Failure to ‘outperform’ others (other schools) renders a school redundant and vulnerable, so a school would adopt strategies proven useful to render higher scores from ESR.”

PIs--The problem of standardization in a learning era

The Performance Indicators (PIs) are used as reference to evaluate school performance under four domains of school work. They are benchmarks for measuring schools’ performance. Although standards have considerable potential for improving schools, they can lead to an increased degree of centralized control over school curriculum, schooling and even the profession of teaching.

Some people criticize that PIs serve as the baton of local educational reform (Chiu, 2004). Others relate PIs with the concept of standard-based education. Overuse or misuse of PIs would bring forth the issue of “standards movement” or “standardization”. There is much critique against this tendency; the issue worth exceptional contemplation when it is reduced to a ruthless pursuit of market competition. Hargreaves & Fink (2006) summarizes the following effects brought about by pervasive spread of “standardization”:

- Narrowed the curriculum and destroyed the classroom creativity;
- Restricted innovative schools
- Widened the learning gap between elite and other schools
- Encouraged cynical and calculated strategies for raising test scores
- Undermined teacher confidence and competence
- Eroded professional community as teachers have to struggle alone to get through the overwhelming range of reform requirement
- Increased rate of stress, resignation and non-retention
- Instigated and amplified resistance to change

(p.12-13)

Giving too much weight to PIs would possibly make the profession of teaching becoming mired in the routines of “soulless standardization”. Teachers and schools would be squeezed into the “tunnel vision” of test scores; achievement targets (PIs) (Hargreaves, 2003). I really got such impression during my ESR tour to the school. Although EMB modifies its implementation requirements from July 2005 and schools are no longer required to provide ratings on the 14 PIs in their SSA report, the school I observed still took the PIs as a checklist of their school’s practice.

ESR as one Implementation Strategies of local curriculum reform– is this effective?

Hong Kong has long been criticized as a highly centralized and bureaucratic with its curriculum decision-making, development and implementation strategies. ESR seems representing another center-periphery version. Taking the perspective of curriculum implementation, ESR could be described as a tool for curriculum alignment (Glatthorn, 1987). Curriculum alignment associates the fidelity perspective (Synder, Bolin & Zumwalt, 1992) of curriculum implementation. Similarly, these approaches affiliate the centrally based curriculum development. Experience from western countries has proven that curriculum alignment is often used to achieve high implementation levels and consequently higher student achievement standards (Marsh, 1997).

The SSE and ESR framework, as described in prior sections, demonstrates itself as a very powerful influence in persuading schools and teachers to actualize the planned, official curriculum change into implemented curriculum. By PI framework and KPM measures, EMB aligns the school self assessment criteria to centrally set curriculum standards and student performance standards. Thus, the government is potentially successful to mandate and direct the officially designed curriculum change.

To local schools, ESR is an important school evaluation mechanism. The evaluation report issued by the ESR team is often taken as the school's "report card", which has to be shared with the school parents and the public. There is a growing acceptance in the community that a school that does well in an ESR is, by definition, a good school. Subsequently, schools with good reports are keen to publicize this in their prospectus, and increasing in advertisements. As a result, almost all the schools that would undergo ESR look upon the official intent to prepare for ESR. Schools therefore develop various strategies to cope with ESR. They would be very cautious to prepare documentation (e.g. 3-year plan, School Self-Assessment Report, selection of students' work, collecting various data about school performance, etc.) and select teachers to be members of SIT (School Improvement Team), etc. Many schools would spend many hours to hold ESR preparation meeting. To "better up" their assessment result, they would write their school documents in ways that the school curriculum has followed CDC imposed change (CDC, 2001). Some schools may even invite external experts to act as their ESR consultants and carry out kinds of 'mock ESR' for them.

Some might criticize that these schools have not got clear understanding of the ESR rationale (e.g. QAD, 2006). However, schools' skeptical attitude towards ESR is to certain extent sensible. With crude documentary analysis of twenties of ESR reports for schools, it could be found that both positive and negative comments align closely with proposals of

curriculum reform. The following examples, which are extracted from the 2004-2005 ESR Annual Report (EMB, 2004-2005), demonstrate this tendency. Phrases or terms highlighted by *italic font* are key proposals of local curriculum reform (CDC, 2001):

“The curriculum in a vast majority of the schools was *in line with curriculum reform*...A small number of secondary schools had started to plan for the new senior secondary curriculum by trying to integrate related subjects to offer Liberal Studies, and the planning of their curriculum was forward looking.”

“A great majority of the schools endeavored to promote *Learning to Learn* with more than 80% of the schools formulated it as their area of concern in the previous three years.”

“To encourage students to develop *good reading habits*, suitable reading activities were arranged, including reading schemes, reading lessons, morning/afternoon reading sessions, etc. to create an atmosphere conducive to reading..”

“*IT* facilities in a small number of schools provided relevant support for *project learning* and helped to *improve student abilities* in data collection....”

“Most of the schools were determined to develop the *generic skills* of students. Apart from focusing on developing students’ *communication, creativity and critical thinking skills*, schools also looked into students’ needs and further developed their *skills in studying, collaboration and problem-solving*.”

(2.3.1)

Even the observation form designed for observing teachers’ teaching is found coherent with key proposals of local curriculum reform (e.g. e.g 9 generic skills; curriculum integration, it in education, etc.) Obviously, the EMB adopts this strategy to enforce curriculum implementation -- *using assessment as a strategy to promote change*. While the schools are told that SSE and ESR could help them ‘ensure public accountability’ (EMB, 2005), this might be a strategy used by EMB to impose and manage changes. Houston’s (1999) criticism may have smartly described the condition in HK,

“Accountability has as many interpretations as beauty: It is usually in the eye of the beholder. It can mean the reconstitution of schools or state takeovers. Or the ending of social promotion. Or highstakes graduation exams. Or firing of administrators. It can fall on the innocent or the guilty. It can be applied to those who can make the necessary

changes and on those who cannot. The reality is that accountability means what those in powers choose to make it mean, which makes it an elusive target.”

Indeed, the ESR school I observed was really respectful and she seems satisfied with a fidelity approach to implement the top-down curriculum reform. School team was found eagerly trying effort to ensure maximum congruency and alignment between the school plan and the official, planned curriculum. Hence, the ESR experience tells that decision-making about the planned curriculum is still faithful to the Centre-Periphery (CP) model. The CP model incorporates two basic assumptions – i.e. the innovation must be deemed to be of good quality (produced by curriculum experts) prior to its diffusion; and the diffusion is a centrally managed process. With ESR, EMB works quite effectively as the central policy-making agencies to enforce such imposed change. However, this made the EMB the dominant group who controls the selection of knowledge and curriculum structure (Apple, 1990, 1993). Curriculum alignment therefore reduces teacher autonomy and sense of ownership to reform initiatives. McLaughlin (1987) argued that implementation is not about transmitting top-down policy by political or technical strategies (see also House, 1979), but about bargaining, negotiating and transformation. Experience tells that implementation practice with a ‘cultural’ perspective that emphasizes cultural transformation as a major factor in determining the success of implementation endeavors is more favorable. Implementation must be framed in terms of individual actors’ incentives, beliefs and capacities (Lewis, 1988). Obviously, curriculum reform in Hong Kong rarely paid adequate consideration of these factors.

There is a principle or rule of change – “an organization does not change until the individuals within it change” (Hall & Hord, 2006). Educational change is not just a matter of successful or unsuccessful implementation of innovations but more basically and importantly *a change in the profession of teaching, and the institutions in which teachers are trained and in which they work* (including schools).

Conclusion

The above discussion illustrates that local educational policy-making bodies are still conservative with their approaches to enforce change. The government still keeps with its high degree of centralization of curriculum decision-making (Morris, 1996). The hidden agenda of the SSE/ESR is for ensuring *school effectiveness* and *managerial/political accountability*. The carefully designed SSE/ESR is found to be a compelling mechanism to *mandate the planned, official curriculum change*. Quite certain, local officials were used to adopt this kind of “power-coercive approach” to effecting change (Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1969). As a global society, some might find it hard to imagine such imbalance of power distribution between the legitimate authority and the frontline practitioners.

By all means, curriculum is neither value-free nor value-neutral. School curriculum is under pressure from social and political interest groups. It is also a form of socio-political action (Skilbeck & Harris, 1976). In Apple’s words, curriculum is “the reproduction of ideology” (Apple, 1990). It is part of the apparatus that stabilizes social order and oppresses

the majority of the population. Manipulation of curriculum in the interests of the ruling elite is conscious and deliberate (Reid, 1992). Policy-makers in contemporary world could use mandatory curriculum materials to produce and reproduce a particular form of 'consciousness' in their countries/regions: (1) deskilling of teachers --teachers act as 'educational workers', whose job is little more than 'curriculum manual operation'; (2) reproduction of certain types of consciousness in pupils' mind (Apple, 1990). Furthermore, through formal and informal curricula, dominant social groups could exercise 'hegemonic processes'³ so as to legitimate particular areas of knowledge in their society (Giroux, 1989).

In any case, 'knowledge' of curriculum is 'socially constructed'⁴ (Blum, 1971) and 'culturally constructed'⁵ (Grundy, 1987). The participants and other educational practitioners in Hong Kong could join and define, research and re-define the curriculum conception with 'collective wisdom'. With this, the paper ends with a few recommendations for reference of local educators, if improvement is to be looked for.

Recommendation

Critical review of the policy about educational evaluation

It is necessary to have a framework of accountability that serves as a "common point of reference" (Kogan, 1986, p.17). However, this seems to be missing in local SD framework. Researchers tell that there are three major perspectives on evaluation: *the accountability perspective, knowledge perspective and developmental perspective* (Chelimsky and Shadish, 1999). In Hong Kong, the existing school evaluation framework sticks with the *accountability perspective* – concentrating in pressing schools to provide data on performance and effectiveness. Local policymakers and bureaucrats are recommended to have a review of this orientation. To facilitate sheer autonomy and professionalism in our school communities, evaluation should aims for strengthening the capacity of the school for self-improvement. EMB has invited external professors to conduct an independent study of the ESR; two reports have been submitted to the EMB (MacBeath & Clark, 2004, 2006). Drawing suggestions given by the external professors and also those from Chelimsky and Shadish (1999), external review taken by the bureaucrats would sooner or later phase out and be replaced by school-based self-evaluation. Individual school would independently exercise formative self-evaluation with the support of external critical friends.

In order to make a self-evaluation process really be a self-development one, we should be

³ Hegemonic processes include:

- attempts by a dominant class to obtain control over the resources of society mainly via the mass media and the educational system;
- the dominant class controls other classes so that the preferred view of the world becomes all inclusive and universal;
- force and consent are used to shape and incorporate the views of the subordinate groups;
- the dominant group places limits on the oppositional discussions and practices that are permitted to occur.(Giroux, 1981)

⁴ Implied from Blum's (1971) statement that " it is a product of informal understandings negotiated among members of an organized intellectual collectivity."

⁵ Adapting Grundy's (1987) claim that "curriculum, however, is not a concept, it is a cultural construction" (p.5).

aware that SSE and school renewal is *a complex process* (Pang, 2005). It needs a change in school culture or mind habits (see also Sarason, 1971) and it *takes time*. Time is needed for participants (both school principals and teachers) to acquire knowledge, skills and a change of culture; for schools to hold workshops for teacher development and organizational change, etc. One could consider Pang's (2005) suggestion of some strategies to change school organization:

1. construct appropriate change climax
2. development of leadership
3. decentralization of power and participant decision-making
4. develop whole-school mission
5. common value and development of constructive school culture
6. A Kaizen or continuous process of development (a Japanese concept)

Rethinking strategies for effecting changes

It is quite clear that our community could not rely on ESR to lead a successful curriculum reform. There must be some basic shifts in beliefs, policies, and practices as necessary to move ahead with authentic reform. These include a change:

- from individual to institutional responsibility for achievement
- from instrumentality to entitlement
- from control to empowerment
- from bureaucracy to democracy
- from commonality to diversity
- from competition to collaboration

(Astuto & et. al, 1994)

The underlying ideal of local educational reform and curriculum change has a 'progressive' orientation (Eisner, 1992). Learner-centered/knowledge-centered systems of learning for all are highly sophisticated in-depth pedagogical reforms which require much greater individual and collective capacity in school systems. To achieve successful large-scale sustainable reform, substantial system change is imperative (Fullan, 2003). Deep change occurs if local school teachers share "informed professional judgment". Otherwise, top-down and external ideas could not easily find their way into schools, and even if they existed they did not really sustain. ESR and SSE have the potential to assist local educational context to build professional learning communities – yet that is surely not a straightforward matter. Hargreaves (2003) reminds us that many versions of apparent professional learning communities are actually quite superficial and narrow. He implies that teachers and schools in

poorer communities are performing to meet the official requirement. I did have similar observation as an external reviewer. To move beyond following official's intention into productive professional learning communities, the purposes of the ESR will continue to need clarification, elaboration and rectification. The school curriculum is formed and shaped ideologically. The dominant forms of school curriculum reflect the dominant ideological forms in a society (Giroux, 1990; Goodson, 1990). In brief, to realize any ideal change, it is imperative that our society needs a change of ideology and a change in market and managerial approaches. An extensive, contextual study of local climate and ideological interest is may be helpful in formulating future philosophy, aims of education and related policy.

Some concrete suggestions include adopting the *empirical-rational* and *normative-re-educative* type of strategies. By empirical-rational, we refer to strategies that take men as rational. Compared with the power-coercive ones, empirical-rational strategy depends on "knowledge" as a major ingredient of power (Bennis, Benne & Chin, 1969). Social incidents in Hong Kong show that local citizens are rational who look forward to rationally justified missions. Hence, policy-makers should take careful situational analysis before planning their strategies to implement change.

The Normative-re-educative approach stresses on strategies that change the sociocultural norms and normative orientations of the frontline practitioners. My research showed that conceptions and beliefs of teachers are determining factors of curriculum implementation (Yeung, 2004). Hence, this type of strategy might be essential to help teachers deliberate the needs of change.

Collaborative process is helpful to transform sociocultural norms in the professional community. In fact, teaching for the knowledge society involves cultivating the capacities to work in networks and teams and commitment to continuous improvement as organizations (Hargreaves, 2003). Local school communities are really changing in current years – teachers in schools are frequently working in teams to prepare lessons, to exchange professional ideas, to put innovative into practice and to reflect and evaluate professionally. Thus, teams and cultures extend the opportunities and capacities for mutual, spontaneous learning. Working as communities of learners, teachers envisage their own professional growth and thus build up their confidence to act as "catalysts of the knowledge society". This process may lead teachers to experience Walker's three-step sequence of 'platform-deliberation-design' to sort out ways for putting curriculum reform proposals into practice (Walker, 1971, 1990).

Walker's *deliberative approach* to curriculum planning portrays how curriculum planners

‘actually’ go about their task. Compared with other top-down, linear approaches which prescribe how curriculum planning should occur, this approach identifies how planning actually occurs in practice. Individuals (Teachers) would enter the scenario with certain *platforms*. By “platforms”, Walker means that individuals will have certain beliefs and values, perceptions of the task and assertions about what should be prescribed. *Deliberation* incorporates processes of interpretation and making meaning of a situation so that appropriate action can be decided upon and taken. This process involves individuals’ interpretation, understanding, interaction and negotiation. By and large, Schwab’s saying that the curriculum problems are language of practical (Schwab, 1969). Deliberation would finally lead to some decisions for action – the *design* phase when individuals and the group they work with have achieved sufficient consensus and made potential solutions.

However, the “deliberative ideal” is really, as shown in this study and as Walker himself claimed, “obviously a difficult ideal to attain (1990, p.185).” Walker said that “the (deliberation) ideal can only be reached with complete knowledge and with perfect justice in dealing with disputed values (Ibid., p.185).”

Walker implies that deliberation should be supported with complete knowledge of the curriculum problem. People should possess the power and resources needed to deliberate. Otherwise, gaps would occur. The ESR experience shows that ‘power’ is distributed unevenly between policy-makers and teachers. Moreover the officials are trying to shape the discourse by prescribed official values. Politically speaking, the officials have the power that others lack. The others, particularly most teachers, could be said to have been placed into an unjust positions with limited or incomplete knowledge of the curriculum notion and of the particulars of the contexts. Their deliberations may be misguided by mistaken beliefs of themselves. For some teachers, their alternative option is to ‘say what they are told (by the governing body and its document)’.

To get themselves empowered, teachers therefore need to be committed and engage themselves actively in pursuing, upgrading, self-monitoring and reviewing their own professional learning (Hargreaves, 2003). This includes undertaking action research and inquiry, and becoming an active, reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983)

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