The way ahead: Which road should we choose?

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Abstract

Teacher curriculum decision-making addresses the purpose, process and product of making curriculum decisions in teachers’ curriculum work. A research study using narratives from and conversations with a group of primary school teachers and principals uncovered the secret garden of teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong. Both the research question and the methodological approach prompted this study not to remain within the contexts of “what is” or “what may be” in drawing experience from individual participants. It was the sense of ownership, professional commitment and collaboration that participants could envision as an image of “what could be” – a way of thinking outside “the square box”. On the other hand, the involvement of Critical Friends enabled to “triangulate” the decisions on research planning and analyses of data. Taking a phenomenological approach, the involvement of Critical Friends became a hermeneutic iterative process of scrutiny of this study. Furthermore, constant member checking with participants about the data and data analysis throughout the four Action Steps facilitated the operation of the study outside “the black box”. All this made visible and transparent of the ways the researcher analysed her data and kept them as credible and ethical as possible.

The paper reports the research outcomes on four areas which include the lifeworld perspectives of teacher curriculum decision-making, curriculum theorizing, curriculum change and teacher and principal professional development. The paper identifies what further research directions are appropriate and what methodologies may be appropriate for these further investigations. The paper concludes by emphasizing how it is significant and what it can lead to in the way ahead.

I. Introduction

Because of my doctoral studies, I began a collaborative research journey of almost two years with a group of teachers and principals. I conducted a research study which was about teacher curriculum decision-making within the context of curriculum
change in Hong Kong. This paper which reports the study and discusses about the future directions of ongoing investigations is recommended to read concurrently with my other six conference papers presented within the last two years. The other relevant papers are in order as: *Action Research as a collaborative journey navigated by school teachers and university researchers: A feasible and prominent future within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong* (February 1999, paper presented at the International Conference on Teacher Education, Hong Kong); *Stories we need to know, voices we want to echo: Teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong* (April 1999, paper presented at the Annual Conference on Teacher Research, Canada); *We care, we share and we are committed: A researcher’s ongoing journey on curriculum change in Hong Kong* (October 1999, paper presented at the Biennial Conference of Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Australia); *Teachers’ stories: A collaborative journey of reflection and empowerment* (April 2000, paper presented at the Annual Conference on Childhood Education International, U.S.); “*Who am I*: Teachers’ stories at a time of curriculum change” (April 2000, paper presented at the Annual Conference on Teacher Research, U.S.); *Choose to choose for educational research: Moving towards an optimistic future or a dead end?* (December 2000, paper presented at the Conference, Association for Australian Research in Education, Australia). All the above-mentioned conference papers were presented as my ongoing reporting and sharing with a wider community of academics/scholars about my engagement in a collaborative research journey with a group of teachers and principals in Hong Kong. Documenting the research study in conference papers and made it public was actually one of my endeavours to obtain feedback from the audience that could provide me an intellectual forum of managing the data in moving toward the activities of data analysis and drawing conclusions.

Teacher curriculum decision-making addresses the purpose, process and product of making curriculum decisions in teachers’ curriculum work. Such a conception embraces descriptions, understandings, capacities and reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work in which curriculum formulation, development, realisation, and curriculum research and evaluation are the areas of concern. I revealed myself in this study by my “ideal” position as the researcher who incorporated my theorising on curriculum and on teacher decision-making. This ideal position emerged out of my experience as a teacher, a teacher educator and a researcher, and was informed by literature on the one hand and from a positioning in the “real” world where teachers’ lived experiences of their curriculum work unfolded on the other. This “real” world was different from “the ideal rhetoric” of the TOC policy context in the sense that
teachers and principals voiced what they thought their curriculum work should look like. Teachers’ lived experiences of their curriculum work have seldom been explored in the realm of educational research in Hong Kong; and their voices have seldom been heard and have often been neglected at both a school and a policy level.

The focus of this study so was to synthesise all these ideals about curriculum work and teacher curriculum decision-making by mapping a territory of communicative understanding about teachers’ curriculum thinking and actions. In other words, the study attempted to bring all these non-accordant ideals raised in the policy rhetoric, the participants and me (as the researcher) closer to the “real” world by supporting teachers and improving their curriculum work in a sustainable manner.

In a sense, the focus of this study was like a diffractive lens which captured what the study was and gave rise to the research question. Contextualising and conceptualising the study led to the emergence of the methodological approach and to the identification of the limitations and delimitations of the study. The significance of the study lied within the research outcomes which were couched in terms of propositions or principles. All this made possible to my initial intention of seeing the study as an engagement of ongoing critical, collaborative and reconstructive actions.

II. A background to the paper

The research problem was encapsulated within the major premise that teachers should be more responsive to and reflect more on curriculum change within a critical, participative and reconstructive framework which in turn could develop a sense of empowerment, ownership and collaboration. Curriculum change, was thus seen as an ongoing challenge where teachers might be proactive in creating more opportunities for engaging themselves in curriculum decisions within the context of curriculum change as introduced by the TOC (and, therefore, less alienated from their immediate and broader contexts). Within the focus and context of the study, this premise underpins the following statement which I characterise as the research problem:

At a systemic level, teachers are:

- marginalised from authentic curriculum change from an inside-out perspective since policy-makers hold separate views about preferable ways of engaging teachers in changing their curriculum work at various
learning sites;
• asked to implement curriculum decisions (which include goals, content, assessment and evaluation) which are set by outside experts; and
• expected to accept reforms that are considered desirable by the central agencies.

Based upon the research problem, this study was a critical inquiry into the lifeworld perspectives of teachers and principals. Aspland, Elliott and Macpherson (1995) say that “lifeworld perspectives” point to the underlying phenomenon of the various interpersonal and social relations central to teachers’ daily experiences; and which focus specifically on such relationships and are characterised by communicative action (Habermas, 1987). Articulating the research problem captured the necessity of having the three parts of the research question. Bullough’s (2001) words appear to be noteworthy: “it is the question that is asked that determines what sort of study is conducted” (p.15). To accomplish this, the ontological position out of which my contextual and conceptual analyses have come quite clearly shaped my thinking about ways of pursuing this research investigation.

The nature of this study highlighted the importance of “so what” in investigating the lifeworld perspectives of primary school teachers and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making. Both the research question and the conceptual framework which informed it, therefore, suggested that a research design based on Action Research which is critical, collaborative, communicative and interactive was appropriate. I adopted Action Research as an approach for investigating curriculum problems; and empowering participants for ongoing critique and reconstruction of their curriculum work as well as changing their contexts collaboratively.

This research approach had considered the assumptions, and met the purposes and the research question of the study. I, as the university researcher, together with a selection of primary school teachers and principals who came from different education sectors went hand in hand to investigate curriculum problems. Teachers and principals were no more to be researched on; rather to be researched with. The emphasis on democratic participation, mutual agreement, communicative understanding, unforced consensus and harmonising the action plans addressed the essential elements which contributed to the collaborative nature of this research study. It was fundamentally important that my existence in the study was not to be recognised as an ‘outsider’ in the primary schools since it would have degraded the authenticity and trustworthiness of the research findings. The trust between the participants and me enabled me to
have a ‘living-in’ researcher’s position. Nevertheless, this trust had to be built up with
time and commitment, and I regarded that a ‘win-win’ situation facilitated this study
for its ongoing mutual benefits. Both the participants and I derived benefit from
participating in the study. In viewing the necessity of trust-building procedures and
the generative nature of the study, a small selection of primary school teachers and
principals was considered most desirable. I so worked with ten teachers and two
principals from two participating schools in this study.

The study used narratives from and conversations with a selection of primary school
teachers and principals. Narratives (for example, Bruner, 1990; Denzin, 1989; Mishler,
1986; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gough, 1994; Aspland,
Brooker, Macpherson, Proudfoot & Kemmis, 1996; Aspland and Macpherson, 1996;
Aspland, Macpherson, Elliott & Brooker, 1997; Beattie, 1997; Fenstermacher, 1997)
and conversations (for example, Applebee, 1996; Feldman, 1997) were used as a basis
for interacting with and seeking to understand the lifeworld perspectives of teachers
and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making. A narrative (Bruner, 1985,
1990) deals with the vicissitudes or changing nature of intentions (Maykut &
Morehouse, 1994, p.37). Clandinin and Connelly (1998) explain that narrative is both
the phenomenon and method (p.155). According to Clandinin and Connelly’s (1998)
definition, narrative named the structured quality of experience to be studied. Bakhtin
(1986) understands that human subjectivity exists and applies to the qualitative
research as it points to the connectedness and the interaction between knower and
known within a narrative. Bruner (1990) argues that meaning as central to qualitative
research is embedded within narratives or stories.

In the study, narratives as represented by teachers’ stories became accounts of the
lived experiences to which a selection of primary school teachers gave meanings to
those experiences. Maykurt and Morehouse (1994) maintain that the qualitative
researcher can examine the meanings of these stories because they are public and
shared (p.38). After seeking the consent from the participants, the meanings of these
stories were shared in group meetings. The meanings of the stories were then revisited
by teachers ‘themselves’ and together with me in ensuing conversations. With regard
to the principals’ authority, power and the nature of school work in Hong Kong, the
study inclined to engage individual participants with me at least in the early stages of
the research study (as the occurred in-depth semi-focused interviews). In the later
stage the principal’s involvement with the teachers as a group in each school required
negotiation and consensus. The reason was to ensure the teachers involved were
willing to proceed and to give their voices when the principal joined in as a group.
Teachers’ stories

In this study, participants told their own stories, and the stories of teachers and principals were revisited collaboratively. Written life story pointed to the life story and life history about the participants’ curriculum work within the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making. The written life stories included oral autobiographies elicited from three semi-focused individual interviews. The purpose of using written life story for data collection was its use of interpretation as dialogue (Gadamer, 1993) and reconstruction (Rosenthal, 1993). According to Gadamer, the meaning of a text is never fixed, but always changing in and through its interpretations. Oral autobiography (Olney, 1980; Pinar, 1981, Molloy, 1991) was self-life narration and it met the purpose of interpretation as dialogue. The use of oral autobiography generated an ‘inner speech’ (Vygotsky, 1978) or a ‘dialogical’ (Gadamer, 1993) context for the research participants to see what experience had to say to them, that they tried to apply it to their present situation. Rosenthal (1993) points out that life story and life history always come together in the way which are continuously dialectically linked and produced each other (p.61). Clandinin and Connelly (1998) mention that people live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones (p.155).

Smith (1998) also claims that autobiography incorporates the power of agency in social and literary affairs, and gave voices to people long denied access (p.187). Notions of curriculum reform and school innovation (such as Goodson’s (1992) Studying teachers’ lives) have drawn particular attention to the importance of teachers’ professional lives. Smith (1998) argues that a more powerful way of thinking about Action Research is to construe the activity as “really” a piece of teacher autobiography (p.216). Smith suggested that action researchers should be including more personal context and larger chunks of autobiography in their research statements. The characteristics of autobiography (Smith, 1998) fit into the emerging conceptual framework which sought to provide spaces for teachers’ and principals’ voices about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change.

Individual interviews on the autobiographies between the research participants and me encompassed interaction and communicative understanding. The interview process was a sincere collaboration as well as a caring and trusting relationship that was
established over time for full participation in the storytelling and retelling of personal experiences. It demanded me intensive active listening and giving the narrator full voice. Rosenthal (1993) asserts that each interview of the autobiographies is a product of the mutual interaction between speaker and listener. So, the written life story represented the biographer’s (teacher/principal in this study) overall construction of his or her past and anticipated life, in which biographically relevant experiences were linked up in a temporally and thematically consistent pattern (Fischer, 1982).

To sum up, the written life stories of teachers and principals revolved around the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making that was a coagulate derived from past interactional episodes and future expectations, and was simultaneously a product of the biographer’s present situation. Accounts of written life stories and ensuing conversations were negotiated in terms of their authentication as well as their release to and use by me (as the researcher) and by the groups of participants in any ensuing reconstructive actions. The stories themselves and the conversations which followed were structured interactively with the emerging ideas of the conceptual framework which had the potential to shape the lifeworld perspectives as they were initially elicited from the participants.

**Reflective journals**

A reflective journal (for example, Sarton, 1982; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Moon, 1999) acts as a record of events, and also a record of my thinking about those events. It acted as a piece of evidence, to show how my actions and thinking changed over time. It gave me a space for my voice. With reference to McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead’s (1996) suggestions about the use of reflective diary, I wrote my reflective journals with a set of guiding principles.

I aimed to write up my journals at least once a week during the data collection period. My reflective journal then served as a key reference point for my interactions with the Critical Friends. In a sense, my reflective journal became the written life story of my experience as a researcher – the subject for ongoing communication with this person. I also asked the participants to keep a reflective journal. It was, however, undesirable to use too much of their personal time for this study in terms of the contextual factors in their respective schools. I explained the use of reflective journals to the participants in the first meeting but writing the reflective journal was left totally to participants’ discretion.
Methods of analysis

The recursive and conversational nature of the study is grounded in a hermeneutic phenomenology of understanding through language (Kearney & Rainwater, 1998, p.110). In this light, data analysis becomes the hermeneutic act of interpretation that involves in its most elemental articulation making sense of what has been observed in a way that communicates understanding (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p.285). The methods of analysis in this study included three interrelated parts: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.10). I used the model suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to map the flow of the data analysis which was a continuous and cyclic process in the study.

The three analysis activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification were presented as interwoven before, during, and after data collection in parallel form. The purpose of the data reduction was then a form of analysis that I sharpened, sorted, focused, discarded, and organised data in such a way that “final” conclusions could be drawn and verified in the study. Clandinin and Connelly’s (1998) explain that “field texts are not, in general, constructed with a reflective intent; rather, they are close to experience, tend to be descriptive, and are shaped around particular events” (p.170). Research texts were then at a distance from field texts and grew out of the repeated asking of questions concerning meaning and significance. After each research meeting, I gave each participant a set of exact transcription. Participants were involved in member-checking all the transcription details. So, the first analysis activity was a “necessary” process to make known to the participants in converting field texts into research texts for ongoing reflection and considerable ensuing action.

Data display was the second major flow of analysis activity in the study. I aimed to organise and compress assembly of information that permitted conclusion drawing and action. In a sense, the displayed data involved an ‘intermediate’ transcription between field text and research text. It was sequential and dispersed rather than poorly structured and bulky. Throughout the data collection period, I summarised each meeting’s transcription as an initial analysis by highlighting the main points in either the summary reports or my letters to the participants. It was within these ongoing processes that the field texts (exact transcription) were reorganised and compressed with respect to the conceptual and contextual frameworks and within the three parts of
the research question. Similarly, I member-checked each summary report with the participants and obtained their signatures. Moreover, I had documented the displayed data in conference papers and made them public. In other words, the data display activities helped me (as the researcher) to understand what was happening; to draw ideas and make decisions; and either to analyse further or to take action, based on that understanding – “I know what I display”.

The third analysis activity was conclusion drawing and verification. I used two broad criteria in this activity of data analysis. The first criterion related to teacher curriculum decision-making and used the questions: Does the information address the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making both individually and collectively? Does the information represent the participants’ voices which they can critically reflect upon? The second criterion related to outcomes and implications, and used the question: Does the information provide a platform for participants’ ongoing critique and reconstruction of curriculum work?

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommends the researchers to hold their conclusions lightly at the beginning, maintaining openness and skepticism, but the conclusions are still there, vague at first but then increasingly explicit. However, “final” conclusions might not appear in the study until the data collection was over. I left the mechanical application of a frequency count, the coding of selected categories in transcripts or texts, use of metaphors, or content breakdown but entered into a process of making sense of the data. Van Manen (1990) suggests that understanding the meaning of a lived experience in hermeneutic phenomenological description is a process of insightful grasping and formulating a thematic understanding which is not a rule-bound process but an act of “seeing” meaning (Bray, Lee, Smith & Yorks, 2000, p.101-102). In the study, an integral part of this process of making sense of the data was bracketing – the mental process of setting aside my (the researcher’s) assumptions in order to approach the experience, as much as possible, with a clear mind. Having said this, it was impossible to completely bracket off my pre-interpretations as noted in Heron’s (1992) and Gadamer’s (1993) work about the history of one’s knowledge, values and life concepts to each event. In this sense, my reflective notes unfolded the pre-given experience of the lifeworld contained in language, which was dialectical to my bracketed experience. This dialectical process of my engagement in ongoing reflections contributed to discover meanings of the study.

*Trustworthiness* as the overarching criterion of the collected data meant that the
participants in this study revealed similar sets of understanding from their narratives and ensuing conversations wherever they were placed in various contexts of power and authority. In other words, the research data were assumed to have the ability of promoting insight and interpretation that engaged readers in a genuine act of seeing the essential wholeness – the written life stories of individual participants. This could be demonstrated when the emerging themes from the data were evident and identifiable across the conversation represented or the narrative presented. Trustworthiness, in this sense, encompassed multiple forms of communication among the researcher, participants, critical friends, and the readers by asking that interpretations be checked, that themes be critically scrutinised, and that the “so what” question be vigorously pressed.

Grundy (1995) points out that “evidence should have a rational basis for making judgments about the worthwhileness of what happened, and to provide a basis for further planning” (p.15). I used some of the criteria claimed by Grundy (1995) to demonstrate evidence in Action Research. These criteria were then modified to constitute the trustworthiness of this study and they were truth, appropriateness and authenticity.

**Sampling**

As the purpose of this research study was not to generalise but rather to generate further ideas and insights about teacher curriculum decision-making and curriculum leadership, curriculum change, as well as teacher professional development, selection of samples should not be considered under those means which quantitative research advocated. Sampling in this Action Research involved an action. I needed to define selection criteria of the cases (participating teachers and principals in two selected schools) that I could study within the limits of my time and research strategies; and that connected directly to my research question. It was what emerged from the data analysis that became a platform for stating a position within the context of those involved in the study. This position was presented for ongoing critical scrutiny, or as the basis for politicising issues emerging from the analysis. The politicising of such issues could well become the basis for reconstruction at the sites involved in this study and at least for consideration at other sites within the wider local context.

In viewing the time-consuming but necessary process of building trust in the study, I chose the selected primary schools which already had an established relationship with
me as a teacher educator. (This already-established relationship should be seen as merely general working and friendly partnership between my work and the school). After gaining the acceptance from the principal, I conducted an Introductory Seminar about the study at school. I tried to invite as many teachers as possible in that school to participate in the Seminar so that the teachers were better informed of their decision-making about research participation. I distributed each attendant a Research General File. It was mainly to let the teachers have a general idea about what the research was about, how they could be involved, and what my role as the researcher was.

**Ethical considerations**

In this study, I had to pay much attention to the aftermath of the research (Lightfoot, 1983) and ethical considerations when I moved from field texts (that was participants’ “real” oral life stories) to displayed data (that was the recorded and documented research data). My role as the researcher was initially a facilitator and an orchestrator. In the later phase I was positioned as a Critical Friend to the participants. I needed to take care and to consider my responsibility to the participants and how the research texts reshaped their lives.

As this study used narratives from and conversations with a selection of primary school teachers and principals, Action Steps 1 and 2 needed narrative configuration (Polkinghorne, 1995) which refered to the process by which events and happenings were drawn together and integrated into a temporally organised whole – a story. The orally generated data need to be transcribed and transformed into written stories for analysis. In other words, they, must be “textualised”, for “only in textualised forms do data yield to analysis” (Van Maanen, 1988, p.25). Anonymity and fictionalising research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998) are important ethical concerns in personal experience methods such as storytelling. The generated stories should not only be useful; it should also be faithful to the actual historical happenings (Sass, 1992). So, I did all the translation and handled the conversion from field texts into research contexts. Since there were no other ways to be more authentic and more effective in communication, I invited participants to use Chinese in both interviews and group meetings.

Above all, Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) statement was worthy in considering sampling, trustworthiness and ethical considerations that “this is an age of
emancipation; we have been freed from the confines of a single regime of truth and from the habit of seeing the world in one color” (p.162). The study which employed an Action Research approach, therefore, was a deliberate act to free from the thinking within “a square box” (by retelling, sharing and reflecting upon the teachers’ stories, and envisioning ‘what could be’ through ensuing conversations), and operation inside “a black box” (by involvement of Critical Friends, and constant member-checking the data and data analysis with the participants throughout the data collection period). It was designed both conceptually and methodologically to free to choose and be responsible for a better future of our education.

A plan of action

In order to conduct this curriculum inquiry within the framework of action research methodology, a plan of action was needed which incorporated notions of reflection and collaboration, and used narratives and conversations as research strategies that facilitated generation, collection, organisation, and analysis of information. The plan also needed to provide a means by which the total action could be monitored in order to describe, interpret, and reconstruct what was happening throughout the process in which I was engaged with teachers and principals of the two schools. Given the local research traditions and politics, I held tight of the methodological framework in which I conceptualised and constructed the research steps and analysis activities so that the significance and purpose of this study could be fully acknowledged. The need for a map to explain the conceptualisation of translating and operating the methodological framework into action steps, activities and strategies resulted in Figure 1 (see Appendix).

Conceptualising the plan of action required further clarification of the theoretical stances and methodological issues at the heart of this curriculum inquiry. I have argued in the previous sections that throughout the four Action Steps I was working with data in the form of natural language (narratives and conversations) and the use of noncomputational analytic procedures. As Action Step 2 was mainly about individual participants’ narration, I envisaged that I could combine elements into an emplotted story for each participant. A plot, as Polkinghorne (1995) defined, is a thematic thread which lays out happenings as parts of an unfolding movement that culminates in an outcome (p.5). In each teacher’s story, events and actions were drawn together into an organised whole by means of a plot. Moreover, when happenings are configured or emplotted, they take on narrative meaning of human action (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5).
I was making use of plots which existed as a type of conceptual scheme to display a contextual meaning of individual events. Polkinghorne (1995) notes that “the development of these plots follows the same principles of understanding that are described by the notion of the hermeneutic circle” (p.16). Integral to this analytic development of a story was an emphasis of ongoing checking of both individual and groups perspectives that could satisfy the criteria of judging the data (that was, trustworthiness). Ongoing member checking was so taken as a natural part of narratives and ensuing conversations throughout the four Action Steps.

Since one of the assumptions of the study was that participants (teachers and principals) made curriculum decisions guided by their underlying personal practical knowledge. In this connection, any sorts of analysis of data should be within the capacity to understand stories (Ricoeur, 1984) which derived from the correlation between the unfolding of a story and the temporal character of human experience and the human pre-understanding of human action. In his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Bruner (1985) argues that narrative knowledge is more than mere emotive expression; rather, it is a legitimate form of reasoned knowing about particular situations. Bruner (1985) claims that narrative cognition is one of two modes of thought or cognitive functioning; the other mode of thought, paradigmatic cognition is the more traditional logical-scientific mode of knowing. Polkinghorne (1995) maintains both forms of reasoning generate useful and valid knowledge, and “are part of the human cognitive repertoire for reasoning about and making sense of the encounter with self, others and material realm” (p.9).

The argument outlined above confesses that teachers’ stories have to be knowledge-generative rather than merely expressive. The knowledge generated from narrative cognition (Bruner, 1985) by means of a plot was explanatory of why a participant (teacher/principal) acted as he or she did within the focus of this study. Based upon this sort of reasoning, I expected to have a collection of individual stories in which thought moved from case to case instead of from case to generalisation. Participants’ personal interpretations on individual own stories plus my interpretation and analysis (as the researcher) were elements of collaborative effort in this curriculum inquiry. The aim was to seek some main themes which were either common or different across the stories. According to Polkinghorne (1995), analysis of narrative using paradigmatic reasoning “seeks to locate common themes or conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data” (p.13). It was inductive analysis that I saw being used to collaboratively analyse the teachers’ stories with participants in Action Steps 3 and 4. It was envisaged that the continuous and cyclic flow of
analytical activities would encompass recursive movements from the data to emerging themes. Keeping in mind that the conceptual framework of the study as dynamic, interactive and provocative, the search for emerging themes (by inductive analysis) from teachers’ stories would increase the likelihood of illuminating new emerging ideas at the time of interacting with the aforesaid framework (which was synthesised by deductive approach).

Above all, I have made clear about the methodological framework of this study in which the four Action Steps, activities and strategies could become explicit and operational. The study was action-oriented through active participation, communication and reconstruction. It developed meaning-making processes through which the sharing of knowledge occurred, the growth of understanding was facilitated, a direction of change and reconstruction was espoused, and cooperation by teachers as partners was ensured. In this connection, the participants and I embarked on a collaborative journey of reflection and empowerment since the beginning of the data collection period.

III. Conversations about and reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work

In Action Steps 1 and 2, I collected altogether ten teachers’ stories from the two schools. I wrote these stories initially on the basis of teachers’ oral autobiographies in three individual interviews of Action Step 2, with an attention to the contextual and conceptual frameworks of the study. The teachers’ stories were then reduced into research texts for display with reference to the research question. This further reduction of data was to maintain the data manageable and sensible for analysis at a later stage. Teachers’ stories were framed within the school’s view and principal’s view because the teachers’ expression on their current role and hoped-for role in curriculum decision-making should not go far beyond their immediate school context and the managerial leadership of their principal. This consideration was taken to move teachers’ curriculum work closer to a consensual “ideal” and in context.

My decisions on the content of each teacher’s story and principal’s view mainly based on the three criteria which constituted the trustworthiness of the study. In deciding what was relevant, I continually reminded myself of the purpose of the study which was mainly to develop a sense of empowerment in problematising teachers’ curriculum work and taking resultant reconstructions of teacher curriculum decision-making into actions. Thus, I was able to eliminate much extraneous but
interesting data which were neither directly relevant to the research question nor linked to the emerging conceptual framework. Of course, I would waste some data in which issues other than the research topic emerged. However, it was an important step to keep the study in focus.

In deciding what was credible, I consistently shared my interview transcripts, meeting notes and summary reports with individual participants and solicited their feedback. This process of member checking contributed to the study not to operate inside “a black box” in analysis of data. In deciding what to include, I also continually mindful whether or not particular pieces of information were necessary – both to the story that I was going to report and to the overall quality of my writing. I therefore excluded a great deal of information that appeared to be redundant or might otherwise have detracted from the quality of my writing due to its sheer volume. I had to be selective in choosing representative statements among piles of interview transcripts so as to give evidence for thematic analysis rather than trying to include everything in data presentation.

Finally, in deciding whether or not it was ethical to include some thing in my writing, no participants asked me to keep personal information “off the record”. Nevertheless, I tried to show the utmost respect for each teacher who owned the story, and the principals that I did not include any personal information that might cause someone undue embarrassment. The use of pseudonyms for participants and anonymity for their schools was my effort to take into account ethical considerations in the first place though one participant openly addressed that he would prefer to use his real name in reporting. It was because once the data were made public, I had little control over how other people might interpret or use them. The mutual trust between the participants and I reminded that I had the obligation to “protect” them from potential harm as far as I could foresee in the study. I depended partly upon teachers to read their own “full” stories since they knew the best about the people and the politics of their workplace that their “checking” could minimise the risk. Moreover, this member checking was a necessary means to ensure that the way of dealing with the data was not operated within “a black box”. In fact, I continually dealt with ethical issues at every phase of the study with my endeavour. All this was indeed an ongoing challenge to me as the researcher.

In other words, I who reported the stories did not speak for teachers. Teachers were able to speak for themselves.
Unfolding teachers’ stories revealed the complexities of their lived experiences. Based on the displayed data, there were a number of major themes emerging from the teachers’ stories. Comparing these emerging themes across School 1 and School 2 highlighted both the commonality and dissimilarity embedded in the teachers’ stories. In view of this, the use of paradigmatic reasoning appeared to accomplish this part of analysis of data through a logical mode of knowing. The aim of making comparisons and summarising my initial reflections on the emerging themes was to espouse the first set of ideas and propositions as a platform for reporting the way in which Action Steps 3 and 4 were set up and proceeded. With reference to my theoretical positioning of knowledge and action, and the research approach conceptualised as critical, collaborative and recursive, it was inappropriate for me alone to accomplish the knowledge-generative intent of the thematic analysis. The collaborative effort of involving both the participants and me (as the researcher) in identifying the emerging themes of teachers’ stories in the first and second meetings of Action Step 3 was not so much about obtaining again evidentiary warrant for these data. Neither was it a distrust of the researcher’s analysis. This sort of collaboration actually acknowledged the belief of knowledge and meaning as socially constructed in the research study.

Themes filtered main concepts or metaphors of the teachers’ stories from which making sense of and drawing meaning to the participants. In this connection, thematic analysis of this study emphasised the permeability which was comprised of the sensibility and meaningfulness of the main themes emerging from the teachers’ stories. A theme thus could be seen as a conceptual permeable membrane centered on the essence of the fluid data.

In order to identify some major themes emerging from the stories, I firstly looked for the ways in which I could make sense of the data. I started by making the natural sense of the data that focused on the simplicity of the teachers’ stories and used the method of bracketing. The purpose was to approach each story as much as possible when it spoke for itself. I then looked for originality and historicity of the teachers’ stories by making the general sense of the data. It implied critical reflections on the historical, cultural and policy contexts from which the data evolved.

After my initial interpretation, I then engaged in two main activities of discovering meaning of the data: implication and personalisation. A few questions were involved. What did the data mean to the teachers or readers? What did the data actually mean for me (as the researcher) or require of me? What propositions or sets of ideas could be generated? These questions led me to a position that I had to authenticate a visible
and transparent method of interpreting and analysing the data of the study.

Some major themes emerging from the teachers’ stories

Each emerging theme offered a grasp of how the teachers of School 1 and School 2 addressed the fundamental problems of curriculum work, but also allowed me to see how each teacher varied in own approach of tackling curriculum problems within the context of curriculum change. These themes provided me with a context in order to understand better the conversations with the teachers and the principal about sharing their stories in Action Step 3. On the other hand, the participants were reminded to record the “findings” of analysing their own stories. The themes, which were identified by the participants, then became a collaborative refinement of those themes which were elicited and interpreted at the end of Action Step 2. In this light, the hallmark of collaboration was evident in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach of analysing the data.

The comparison of the emerging themes of School 1 and School 2 was determined by two criteria: differentiation across School 1 and School 2 (site-based), and distinctiveness of the emerging themes (theme-based). In other words, these two criteria addressed both the variances of the emerging main themes across the two schools and the unique distinctiveness of individual themes. With regard to the extended conceptual framework, the major themes which were common across School 1 and School 2 generated a set of questions for thinking further about the research question. These themes are listed as follows:

- **Teacher curriculum decision-making**

  How is it possible for teachers to develop a sense of empowerment and thus repositioning themselves in result of problematising curriculum work?

  In what ways can the principal support teachers in curriculum making within the changing curriculum context;

  What can be the new role of school assessment within a context of authentic change on school-based curriculum development?
• **Curriculum change**

In what ways can curriculum evaluation have a role in curriculum development at a school level?

What are the effective ways of reculturing within the ecological systems of school education in order to deepen curriculum change and to develop a sense of ongoingness?

What are the positive factors of school culture that contribute to reconstructing teachers’ curriculum work?

• **Teacher and principal professional development**

In what ways can teachers demonstrate professionalism in their curriculum work?

In what ways can the upgrading of teacher qualifications make a real change on classroom realities, personal growth and enhancement of thinking?

• **Personal growth and educational experience**

How is it possible for teacher’s personality and beliefs initiate an authentic change in order to be more satisfying and challenging for their curriculum work?

What issues emerge from the aspirations of female teachers about curriculum change and transforming their curriculum work?

• **Principles of teaching and learning**

What is the possible link of the principles of teaching and learning to the transformation of teachers’ curriculum work?

Similarly, the major themes which were different across School 1 and School 2 generated another set of questions for responding to the research question of the study. They are listed in the following:
• **Curriculum theorising**

What can be the image of curriculum from the major stakeholders other than the teachers and the principal?

• **Culture of change**

How is it similar or different in each school context about obtaining a shared vision and accepting responsibility of sustaining curriculum change to be ongoing and collaborative?

In summary, the commonality of these major emerging themes identified in Action Steps 1 and 2 foreshadowed a school-based notion of change and improvement as has been emphasised in the policy contexts since the 90’s. Some emerging themes were different as that enough attention must be drawn to the uniqueness of each school context and the people engaged in it while taking conservations about and reconstructions into action in Actions Steps 3 and 4.

The interpretation and analysis of the data from Action Steps 1 and 2 provided a set of propositions which contributed to building a platform for setting up Action Steps 3 and 4 and the ways how these last two actions steps proceeded. It was not surprisingly that the analyses from the participants about individual own stories would not be too explicit, comprehensive and exhaustive due to the required research knowledge and skills. However, this collaborative refinement of the analyses did contribute to discover meaning of the study by seeing one’s own role for an active participation.

First, the participants were more likely to accept change and improvement as their own responsibility in enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. This might result in gaining ownership and developing professional commitment to curriculum change that created spaces for transformation and reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work in Action Steps 3 and 4. Second, the interplay of willingness and openness of participants for sharing their ideas and curriculum problems increased possibilities of engaging participants in sustaining change with collaboration and trust. This might lead to a critical review of the personal factors and organisational infrastructures which exerted influence on the people involved. On the other hand, the collaboration and sharing among colleagues might create conflicts or problems of interpersonal relationships. These conflicts, however, might lead to
intellectual and practical advancements when participants treasured conflicts in harmony. Third, it appeared that the teachers had the heartfelt needs of developing a sense of empowerment in their curriculum work and justifying the legitimacy of teacher curriculum decision-making. Collaboration, trust, democratic participation and negotiation would be important to sustain and deepen the change.

This set of propositions outlined above highlighted several aspects of concerns which should be addressed in conversations with the teachers and principals in Action Steps 3 and 4 for optimising the benefits of the study to the participants of each school. These aspects of concern included ownership of change, commitment and collaboration, transformation of changes into challenges and chances, clear goals and directions commonly accepted by the participants, and reconstruction of a dynamic mix of theory, research and practice.

In essence, it was ultimately the meaning of the research study that motivated participants to have authentic inclusion and commitment of their time and effort. Action Steps 3 and 4 were to take conversations about and reconstructions into action. All this strengthened participants to find “a new pathway” for teachers’ curriculum work both critically and collaboratively.

**IV. Taking the conversations and reconstructions into action**

The collaborative research journey continued in Action Steps 3 and 4, and moved to a pathway along which through ensuing conversations participants’ enacted their ongoing thinking about teachers’ curriculum work through ensuing conversations. The participants’ lifeworld perspectives which were related to teachers’ and principals’ underlying beliefs and the way these beliefs shaped their action incorporated the image of teachers in curriculum making and problematised teachers’ curriculum work as introduced by the TOC. Both the research question and the methodological approach thus prompted this study not to remain within the contexts of “what is” or “what may be” in drawing experience from individual participants. It was the sense of ownership, professional commitment and collaboration that participants could envision as an image of “what could be”.

However, before envisioning “what could be” about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change, two overarching questions appeared at the forefront – “who am I” and “where do we go from here” – which
emerged from the main themes of Action Steps 1 and 2. These questions indeed carried an air of puzzlement and uncertainty among participants within a context of curriculum change as introduced by the TOC. Fortunately, these questions led to a call for ownership, critical reflection, collaboration and reconstructive action in teachers’ curriculum work when considerations were given to (re)create spaces and places for teachers in curriculum making. In this light, Action Steps 3 and 4 helped to form a template for supporting and enhancing this call from participants by which the emerging conceptual framework incorporated the main thrust generated from some ideas such as collegiality, collaboration, critical reflection and unforced consensus.

The ways of interpreting and analysing the data were similar to what I did for Action Steps 1 and 2, except that the criteria for examining the data from Action Steps 3 and 4 were more action-based. The collaborative effort in identifying some main themes emerging from the teachers’ stories which resulted from a transformative thrust in participants with courage and mutual support in the way ahead of Action Steps 3 and 4.

Action Step 3 laid a preliminary foundation for establishing a collective force of reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work in each school. The principals chaired the first meetings of Action Step 4 at their respective schools. The reason for this was to develop a sense of empowerment for all the participants in gaining ownership of talking about and acting on reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work. The call for ownership of change, which emerged from the displayed data in Action Steps 2 and 3, was actually one of the major recommendations from the TOC Report (Morris et al., 1996). Teacher ownership also contributed to shaping the emerging conceptual framework of the research study. This was likely to engender improvement in the participants’ ongoing thinking and actions concerning the teachers’ curriculum work. In other words, inviting the principals to chair the first meetings of Action Step 4 was to alert all participants that their involvement in Action Step 4 was not only action-oriented but also considered solely on the benefits of their own schools and the students. All this should be considered neither as a detour from the methodological framework nor as an abuse of the power relationships among the participants. Rather, this arrangement in the first meetings of Action Step 4 was to acknowledge my promise as a researcher to reinforce the collaborative intent of the research study so that both the researcher and the participants could enjoy the benefits of their research involvement in a democratic way.

The last meeting of Action Step 4 mainly focused on participants’ reflections on the
meaning of this collaborative Action Research approach, and evaluation of the research process. The guiding questions of the meeting stimulated a critical reflective turn within the cycles of reflection and action (see Appendix). In fact, the four Action Steps were not conceived as a linear progression from the beginning to the end of the study. The hermeneutic and recursive nature of this Action Research approach characterised an evolving and emancipatory form of action inquiry that engendered a sense of empowerment in the minds of the participants.

After the second meeting of Action Step 4, the activities of data collection were completed. Nevertheless, all the research materials, which included my letters to the participants, provided a resource base for the teachers and the principals in ongoing thinking and reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work into action. At the time I contact the two schools again, I will give each of them a summary report of the research study. It is my responsibility as the researcher to keep the schools informed of the research outcomes. It is also important that the participants are able to refer to a body of knowledge and materials generated from their own inquiry into school-based curriculum problems within the context of curriculum change. In this light, the study is more likely to celebrate a win-win situation to both the participants and me (as the researcher) as addressed in my final letter to the participants in Action Step 4.

This study provided a true account of participants’ lived experiences. Understanding these lifeworld perspectives required reflections on teachers’ voices which formed a basis for transformation and reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work. The principal of School 1 mentioned teachers’ and parents’ concerns about student assessment. Reporting and assessment, therefore, became important for further in-depth discussions among teachers in the school with a view to (re)creating spaces and places for teachers in curriculum making. Two participants were concerned about the inclusion of teachers in central curriculum committees at a policy level. It was evident that a sense of political consciousness raising of teacher empowerment (Smith, 1993) resulted in thinking about greater participation of teachers in curriculum making at various levels. The call for greater participation revealed the fact that, traditionally, committed teachers were mostly concerned about devoting themselves to working within the classroom or inside the school – “an education of love (???)” in ‘a little garden’. However, teachers’ curriculum work is embedded in broader political, social, environmental and economic contexts as supported by the literature relating to educational change, teacher leadership and curriculum inquiry. “An education of love” in Chinese communities may embody new meaning and understanding in the 21st Century celebrating diversity in unity, conflicts in harmony
and regionalisation in globalisation (Koo, 1999c) in terms of knowledge constructions, competing values and power relationships. All this means that teachers need to work with appropriate others to critique and reconstruct curriculum work.

Apparently, the main thrust emerging from the data was about forming alliances for contestation in curriculum problems and problematisation of the policy contexts in which reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work might take place. In this sense, teachers’ love not only discards over-protection and superficial caring, putting students ‘in a greenhouse’; but also implies neither tolerance nor turning a blind eye to injustice impinging on teachers’ personal and professional lives and the well-being of students in terms of teacher curriculum decision-making. Primary schools, therefore, should have a role in continually unfolding curriculum contexts within which teachers are more able to make decisions with reference to equality and justice in the best interests of students. Participants’ voices indicated that teachers developing a sense of empowerment did not necessarily imply political struggle. The essence of their voices was that through critical and reconstructive participation at a policy level it was more likely for presentational voices to be clearly heard and to make central policies become sensible and achievable by the front-line teachers in the multiple realities.

One commented that “teachers lacked competence in deciding or changing their curriculum work”. This highlighted participants’ concerns about engaging teachers and principals in continuous professional development. The comment at the same time reinforced Stenhouse’s (1975) view that “there is no curriculum development without teacher development” (p.208). Teacher education programs, therefore, have an important role in the preparation of in-service teachers both in confidence and competence as reflective practitioners who need to be engaged in ongoing curriculum actions within a context of curriculum change.

Furthermore, the participants identified this study from other research projects by using an Action Research approach that implied uncertainty, challenge and courage on the participants in order to make things known and unknown again. One commented that “after the first meeting of Action Step 1, I did not worry any more because all of us shared genuinely. At least, we did not need to be armed in this room during the research meetings”. Another participant said, “…this study is not anything that shouldn’t be disclosed. Those are all my authentic words. When reading my story, I felt good because of a sense of human touch. I was really happy.” In the last meetings of Action Step 4, the data showed how powerful Action Research could be both as a
tool for improvement of practice to the participants and an overall strategy to advocate a school-based curriculum change from an inside-out perspective. One said that, “we usually have meetings to discuss how things work. But, all this so-called ‘team work’ lacks thought and soul…it is the meaning and the spirit that can generate authentic reforms. It is not the concern of ‘the shell’”. One principal commented that, “We lack this sort of educational research…Meanwhile, more research projects are on the way…What is their actual use in shaping educational policies? It should be research study leading educational policies rather than vice versa…This study is different. We accepted it not because of the existing policies.”

Above all, the encouraging and positive comments from both School 1 and School 2 about the meaning of research participation generated a possibility that Action Research might serve as a springboard to invite system personnel to work with teachers and university researchers to engage in curriculum inquiry. It can be a feasible and prominent future when people join together from various education sectors and work in collaboration and with commitment in a research culture which enables critique and reconstruction of curriculum work and which celebrates change and improvement (Koo, 1999a). This future, then, may be both promising and rewarding as regards effective schooling by enhancing the quality of education in Hong Kong.

V. Emerging themes from the conversations

The comments I made were within the contextual and conceptual frameworks and the boundaries of my sample. Emerging issues from Action Step 4 included communicative understanding of a critical community, the contribution of educational research, teacher empowerment, and implications of curriculum change in teacher education programs. Intertwined with these issues was a crucial question about (re)creating spaces and places for teachers in curriculum making within a context of curriculum change. In this connection, (re)creating spaces and places for teachers pointed to a need for a paradigm shift in their engagement in curriculum work. On the other hand, there is always an associated question about who benefits from the change. Through participation in Action Research, the teachers and principals were engaged in professional learning about transformation and reconstruction of their curriculum work in terms of teacher curriculum decision-making. All this results in teacher empowerment and emancipation which may be incorporated in a matrix of processes in the following:
Reflecting critically on basic assumptions of personal values, attitudes and beliefs;

Being able to interpret curriculum issues and problems through multiple perspectives;

Valuing individual’s voices from the frontier;

Willingly collaborating through negotiation;

Engaging in collaborative research with academic rigor and professional commitment.

These processes emerge from an inside-out perspective and a collective force as in Plato’s (427-347 B.C.) work, *A Similie of the Cave*, that points to an existence of bondage in some primary school teachers. This Cave in a contemporary context does not necessarily have a physical display. The Cave is probably inside an inner universe – the teachers’ hearts. Due to self-closure of the hearts, some teachers are in bondage to innocence and fear that isolates them from ongoing transformation. Unfortunately, these teachers may not notice this because of their frequent abuse of defense mechanisms (Freud, 1962) in order to avoid anxiety, shame and guilt.

It is also possible that some teachers may have put “a full stop” to their present and to the future. They assume what they have learned from previous university or college education is adequate and comfortable enough for many years of teaching so they stop learning anywhere and everywhere; occasionally and frequently; and formally and informally. Very often, these teachers follow safely ‘the teaching blueprint’ – textbooks which are written by publishers and determined by external bodies. Worse than that, the unwillingness and passiveness of these teachers impose another “full stop” to some academically weak and culturally and economically disadvantaged students. All these “full stops” prohibit both the teachers and the students to have ongoing learning and continuous exploration in a changing world. In this sense, the desire for life-long education advocated in both the local and global contexts appears to be merely a motto and remains meaningless. It is very likely that some teachers are still in bondage inside their Cave.
The problem then becomes how these teachers can remove the bondage and be emancipated in an authentic participation in educational research. It is particularly difficult because the images of these teachers inside *their* Cave may have resulted from a distorted reality. Therefore, it appears that teachers in the first place must be enthusiastic about all sorts of learning, awareness and critical consciousness of curriculum issues and problems. An awakening heart means that a teacher has the readiness and the potential for emancipation and reconstruction. Writing and sharing teachers’ reflections helps to awaken their hearts, and to act with an authenticity in facing the changes.

Nonetheless, a pioneer who is going to “find the way out” is indispensable. This pioneer may feel lonely in experiencing uncertainty and failure before he/she can “see” a different but real world from the inner heart. What the pioneer has witnessed outside the Cave brings important messages to other teachers. Having said this, it is also likely that there will be threatening experiences for the pioneer because other teachers inside the Cave can hardly believe what they have newly heard. It is a risk for the pioneer to convince the rest of the teachers to follow the path leading to the way out. There is no panacea in this regard. The principle is not necessarily to ask other teachers follow the same path but to plan and act collaboratively on the experiences and knowledge the pioneer generates as guidelines in mapping a new way out. In essence, taking reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work from an inside-out perspective sheds the light of teacher emancipation by removing one’s bondage firstly within one’s self.

On the other hand, forming alliances or “finding people on the same road” is of significant importance in strengthening individual teachers to work against acute situations with confidence and with mutual support when these teachers are positioned within an “I-Thou” relationship in their social interactions within a context of curriculum change. In this light, it seems that reviewing the lifeworld perspectives of a group of teachers and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making can set up a shared language as a means of communication with those in the school contexts and the systems.

Table 1 presents some possible actions from the emerging ideas of School 1 and School 2 while taking conversations and reconstructions into action. It is on the basis of these school-based actions that the data are compared across the two schools by thematic analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging Ideas (from five teachers and the principal of each school)</th>
<th>Possible Actions</th>
<th>School 1</th>
<th>School 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What may be some implications for teacher curriculum decision-making when internal school assessment is put in place after the removal of the Secondary School Place Assessment in Primary Six?</td>
<td>• Introduce a diversified curriculum for students with various abilities</td>
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<td>• Initiate a critical review of the subject content, homework, tests and examinations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Introduce constant review and evaluation of teachers’ curriculum work throughout the year</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Explore possibilities of other means of learning assessment which may better link to the changing demands of student personal development and social change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways can teachers feel more confident in embracing the centrality of teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change?</td>
<td>• Explore ways of effective and open communication between teachers, principal, parents and students</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Build up teacher networks and school alliances: sharing curriculum experiences of new initiatives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ensure equal opportunity for teacher participation in various forms of curriculum meetings</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promote genuine and professional sharing, and authentic participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Seek sustainable support from the school board in teacher and principal professional development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Restructure teacher education programmes with due emphasis on curriculum studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will curriculum change involve one single subject?</td>
<td>Are there any initiatives for transforming teachers’ curriculum work that teachers and the principal have in mind within a context of curriculum change?</td>
<td>Is it desirable to initiate curriculum change on a large scale within the school context?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Consider inter-subject linkage at a school level</td>
<td>• Allocate two school-based professional development days in the second half of the school year</td>
<td>• Advocate ongoing actions – “the road is long”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Introduce professional sharing across subjects in curriculum meetings</td>
<td>• Reconsider the Saturday time-table and the year’s school calendar</td>
<td>• Generate some principles from good examples of school-based curriculum change, e.g. General Studies</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reschedule time for a balance of learning and rest at school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Enact the consensus on the new role of extra-curricular activities in relation to the whole school curriculum and child development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Continue curriculum evaluation at two levels: a grade level and a subject level by involving all the teachers and the principal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Allocate additional funding and manpower deployment in consideration of teacher’s workload at the time of curriculum change</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Initial ideas emerged from some ad-hoc attempts in the school:

1. Student collaborative learning in evaluation of own work;
2. Students making their own ‘books’ in General Studies subject;
3. Telling and retelling stories in learning English at school;
4. Enriching the contextual examples of Chinese (TOC) speaking and listening;
5. ‘Big Brothers and Big Sisters Scheme’ to aid student learning and develop a sense of belonging;
6. ‘Lovely Mothers Scheme’ as a rich base of resources for teachers in curriculum making

Table 1 A summary of possible actions of School 1 and School
The criteria used for the analysis of data from Action Steps 3 and 4 were the same as the previous two action steps as the processes involved were all within the methodological framework of the study. The main themes, which were common across School 1 and School 2, were not completely distinctive but closely inter-related. These themes generated a set of questions for further inquiry about the research topic. The details are summarised in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes</th>
<th>Questions generated for further thinking on the research topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Curriculum Change and School Curriculum**                                  | 1. What is/are the common value(s) or belief(s) central in an innovative integrated curriculum?  
2. How can an innovative integrated curriculum be effective and convincing for subject teachers?  
3. How can teachers (as well as students and parents) be meaningfully engaged in curriculum change across subjects?  
4. What is the new role of assessment in the integrated curriculum?  
5. What happens to time-tabling and resource management in an integrated curriculum?  
6. What are the implications for teacher education programmes by moving towards an integrated primary school curriculum? |
| **Curriculum Change and Teacher Empowerment**                                | 1. What conditions do teachers and the principal need for ongoing participation in collaborative Action Research?  
2. In what ways can teachers mobilise all staff to be involved in a critical research community of reconstruction of teachers’ curriculum work? |
| **Teacher Curriculum Decision-Making and Teacher Education**                  | 1. In what ways can teacher education institutions facilitate primary schools to form networks and alliances both locally and internationally for reconstructions of teachers’ curriculum work within a context of curriculum change?  
2. In what ways can the restructuring of teacher education programmes become cost-effective and empowering to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers who envision their changing role in the 21st Century in terms of teacher curriculum decision-making? |
1. In what ways can parents enhance their role in working with teachers (the schools) as partners in shaping curriculum change?

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes which are different across School 1 and School 2</th>
<th>Questions generated for further thinking on the research topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Student assessment and curriculum Change                      | 1. In what ways can the assessment practices address both the uniqueness of each learning site and the needs of accountability to the general public?  
2. In what ways can the assessment information effectively support curriculum actions and engender organisational improvement? |
| School-based curriculum change                                 | 1. What criteria and procedures should the schools select and include Critical Friends?  
2. What sort of professional development activities are needed in order to cater for the individual staff needs and the development of the whole school?  
3. What factors are of paramount importance in making decisions in rescheduling the school calendar and time-table? |
4. Considering the aftermath of the introduction of the TOC, in what ways can the schools restore trust across school staff in generating ongoing actions for transforming curriculum work?

Table 3  Some major themes which are different across School 1 and School 2 from Action Steps 3 and 4

These major themes, which were different across School 1 and School 2, incorporated particulars of school-based development. The questions generated for further thinking about the research topic involved some profound changes in conceptions, structures, and practices of curriculum making and school management. In summary, the analyses of data collected from Action Steps 3 and 4 portrayed a pathway to advance the conceptual framework. This pathway was guided by conceptions and practices of school-based development, learning assessment, educational partnership and curriculum studies within a context of curriculum change. The emerging conceptual framework of this study, therefore, did not only function as a mechanism for understanding but also as a corner stone for generating insightful ideas for further inquiry as an outcome of this study.

In summary, grounded in the data and data analysis of Action Steps 3 and 4 was a set of values and conceptions underpinning the lifeworld perspectives of a group of teachers and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change. Values of collaboration, trust, support and respect as well as conceptions of democratic education, shared joy of learning and teaching, reflective practices, curriculum theorising, personal growth and professional learning emerged from the changing interpersonal and social relations of participants. This set of values and conceptions together built a transformative thrust of curriculum change from an inside-out perspective. The transformative thrust might create several areas of change in the two participatin schools. These areas included teacher leadership, educational partnership, school-based curriculum development, curriculum evaluation, assessment practices and reporting, and teacher and principal professional development.

These identified areas would pose new challenges for people involved in the school setting. It also required teacher educators to revisit the conceptions, structures, contexts, and practices of the course programs with a view to curriculum studies. In this light, the third part of the research question was an initial attempt to identify these
changes and challenges to teacher and principal professional development.

VI. Where and how the journey continues

From the narratives of and conversations with a group of primary school teachers and principals, I have identified a number of insights which I present below as propositions about teacher curriculum decision-making, curriculum theorising, curriculum change and professional development. These emerging propositions which inform the conceptual framework are as follows:

Some emerging propositions of informing the conceptual framework

The first part: The lifeworld perspectives of teacher curriculum decision-making

Propositions:
Teacher curriculum decision-making is an ongoing, dynamic, interactive and communicative process of making sense to and further discovers meaning of the conception and practice of curriculum in various sites. It also requires clarification of the meaning of policy initiatives and comes to a better understanding of curriculum problems and issues which can emerge during the process of policy implementation.

Teachers’ current role in curriculum decision-making is the phenomenon of a day-to-day basis about teachers’ curriculum work. However, teacher curriculum decision-making focuses beyond the conceptions and practices in the current state. The aspirations of teachers about their hoped-for-role in curriculum decision-making, which go beyond the reality, reflect the critical consciousness and self-awareness of teachers in leading learners to learn at various sites.

Legitimacy of teacher curriculum decision-making ties in with the basic principles of education: caring, love, respect and justice; and extends to the effectiveness of learning and teaching, and teacher professionalism.

“Shared decision-making and shared responsibility” of teachers’ curriculum work calls for or legitimise teacher curriculum decision-making as a shared
phenomenon of innate passion and conscience about the professional responsibilities in teachers and principals within the changing curriculum context. Emerging views of teacher curriculum decision-making incline to reject a designated role and practice in school traditions about curriculum making.

Through a critical review of take-for-granted traditions of school authority and power structures, (re)positioning teachers within the changing context of school management is very likely to create places and spaces of teacher curriculum decision-making. The ultimate aim is to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The second part: Curriculum theorising

**Propositions:**
Envisioning “what could be” is a heightened state of theorising teacher curriculum decision-making. This transformative view of curriculum making takes reconstruction into action.

Inclusion of major stakeholders other than teachers and principals in theorising curriculum is still mysterious and needs further systematic investigations. It is very significant for teachers to include multiple perspectives in transforming their daily practices into concerted curriculum actions.

Curriculum theorising which is conceptualised as a field-based, research-based and well-articulated scholarly activity is generative and ongoing rather than static and definitional. It welcomes collaboration of teachers, university researchers and system personnel to enhancing the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers through an Action Research approach.

The third part: Curriculum change

**Propositions:**
Raising critical consciousness of the impact of social change, school culture and teacher culture on teachers’ curriculum work is crucial to both understanding and critiquing the broader contexts in which teachers operate.
Curriculum change is not a single affair. It should not involve only a special group of experts. Teachers from various subject disciplines have a role in achieving a balanced curriculum. This implies all teachers in the school to have an equal opportunity for a more open and fair participation of negotiating and transforming their curriculum work within the context of curriculum change. In this regard, communicative action among the school staff may be an effective way of arriving at a consensus of the reality and ideal.

Innovations of assessment practice and reporting should not stand alone within a context of curriculum change. It is in fact an integral part of teachers’ curriculum work which needs a holistic view of teacher curriculum decision-making.

Strategic planning of human resources and the notion of school-based development are the necessary means of leading to a success at both a personal level and a school level within a context of curriculum change.

The fourth part: Teacher and principal professional development

Propositions
Teachers do not accept a given role of curriculum implementors, adopters and adapters at face value. They critically examine their role in terms of their own professional values and experiences and the realities of their professional context. Teacher education programs, therefore, have a role in preparing pre-service and in-service teachers for reflecting and transforming their assumed role of teacher curriculum decision-making.

It is important to acknowledge the contextual uniqueness in diversified learning settings and school sites while considering professional development activities about the changing role of teachers in curriculum making. It is indeed doubtful of the effectiveness of using a vaccinated approach by injecting one-shot firework approach of professional development activities from the top-down to those teachers in down under.

Framing curriculum studies in teacher education programs within the ethos of lifelong learning and empowering education considers the contexts of, conceptions of, structures for and pedagogies or practices in curriculum
studies in teacher education. Personal and social education in teacher education programs contribute to develop the “selves” of teachers that are better equipped for taking up the role as curriculum decision-makers, and principals are more willing and open-minded for (re)creating spaces and places for teacher curriculum decision-making.

Cost-effectiveness of resource management urge teacher and principal professional development as a sort of continuing education which should be heart-touching. Critical reflection is thus a reliable, worthwhile yet cost-free meaning-making process built in school-based staff development.

All this is possible to envision a new partnership between the teacher education institutes (tertiary education) and schools (basic education) as a reciprocal relationship that is engaging and mutually empowering.

The propositions as suggested will be a useful way of shaping supportive professional development activities. As such, teachers and principals will go through critical reflections which may be painstaking processes. So far what these people have ‘compromised’ in their understanding of curriculum practices need to stir up vigorously in ‘spirited debate’. All this may be resulted in feelings of discomfort. Taking reconstructions of teacher’s curriculum work into action will be a sensible way of harmonising these feelings of discomfort and envisioning personal growth and institutional accountability.

In summary, the emerging propositions of the four parts of the conceptual framework contribute to a conceptual basis for underpinning efforts to enhance the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers in three ways. First, reculturing a strong sense of professional commitment of teachers and principals is vital for ongoing transformation of curriculum work. Teachers and principals should be empowered from an inside-out perspective to take reconstructions into action as their relative responsibilities in enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. All this should be considered within the recognition of the importance of continuing professional development and the issue of life-long learning for teachers and principals. Second, increasing the willingness and widening the openness of teachers and principals to share and collaborate with other major stakeholders have a critical link to the personal factors and organisational structures of those people involved. Third, arousing critical consciousness of broader contexts which are embedded in social, cultural, economic and political changes can facilitate teachers as curriculum
decision-makers irrespective of the ranks in the school they are positioned. The empowerment of teachers and principals about enhancing the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers should go beyond personal commitment within the classroom context in order to enable a change of culture out of their involvement and their voices to be heard in making policies at school and systems levels.

Curriculum decision-making thus tends to become a phenomenon of involving every teacher within the school structure provided that it does not result in a power struggle and not intend to increase one’s bossiness. Teacher curriculum decision-making as proposed is to facilitate each professional to gain the power from within that the entire school community continually develops. The reason is that the power strength of the whole school is not constant in which each staff member seems to have the necessity of struggling with other people in order to regain the power of decision-making. Taking a reconstructive stance, the ongoing improvement of the entire school strengthens the organisational structure in which power of decision-making, power of professionalism, power of educational change continue to increase simultaneously with the empowerment of individual teachers within the spaces and places of teacher curriculum decision-making. It is in fact a win-win situation. In such case, teacher curriculum decision-making facilitates self-strengthening of both individual teachers and the school community. It does need courage, vision and commitment.

Above all, the ways in which I describe teacher curriculum decision-making are useful in seeking to understand the diversity across and within teaching/learning sites where teachers engage in curriculum making. It is argued that the centrality of teachers in curriculum making does have a role in global education of the 21st Century.

Some emerging propositions of informing the methodological framework

Positioning the researcher in the “real” world foster a critical and communicative understanding about teachers and principals’ problems in confronting their taken-for-granted values, beliefs and curriculum practices. Some ideas outlined below help in taking me forward in my efforts to enhance the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers in the way ahead.

Identify what further research directions are appropriate
It is evident that further investigations about moving teacher curriculum decision-making toward a notion of curriculum leadership are most desirable within an Action Research approach and using a hermeneutic spiral of involving a critical friend network (see Chapman, 1996; Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland, Elliott, 1998) across cultural boarders. The reason is that research participants have internalised a set of core values with a view to personal needs, professional concerns and the vision and mission of their own school. These values contribute to take curriculum inquiry into a realm of educational research which enables:

- To lead innovation and change in the “real” world of teachers by collaboration of teacher education institutes, schools and systems
- To transform teaching, curriculum work and research activities to be dynamic and interactive in the lived realities of participants
- To provide satisfying and challenging conditions to educational practitioners by shaping a work culture which treasures attitudes of caring, sharing, democratic participation, ownership, collaboration, negotiation and empowering
- To recognise academic excellence and professionalism as mutually inclusive, which is a reflexive relationship of theory, research and policy

Thus, in order to invite school participation in researching about curriculum issues and problems, and school-based professional development, some factors listed below may be important for consideration. They are listed as follows:

- Building genuine trust between researchers and school participants
  - Details of research processes to be explicit and accessible to school participants whenever possible and applicable
  - Voluntary participation and informed choice of research participants especially front-line teachers
  - Sustaining ongoing research activities with institutional support and resources
  - Acknowledging professionalism in terms of teaching and research
  - Assuring contribution of collaborative research to educational
change (or school improvement)

What methodologies might be appropriate for further investigations

- From the point of teachers

It appears that the teachers and the principals welcome any methodology that can address the “real” problems of their curriculum practices, and the research study that can enter into the participants’ “real” world. It is important to consider not to silence the teachers’ voices but to channel every opportunity to elicit their voices by narratives and conversations. Some people may say that this sort of research strategies is hard to make generalisations within a context of curriculum change and so has very limited significance to the policy-makers and various education sectors. I would argue that teachers and principals are already used to the rhetoric of policy initiatives as “unauthentic, huge and vague (in Chinese words: ? , ? , ? )” within the context of education reforms. It is very likely that what teachers and principals evaluate the effectiveness of their research participation is the impact on which their current role and curriculum work can be enhanced and transformed in context. All this needs educational research to provide a solid base/platform for moving closer to the ideals of the participants, the researcher and the policy-makers both collaboratively and critically.

- From the point of teacher educators

I respond to this statement from my position as a teacher educator who practices in Hong Kong with a mixed culture of the east and the west, who was brought up in Chinese traditions and who have completed university education in Australia for the undergraduate and masters programs and is now pursuing a doctoral degree.

It is a serious question whether researchers want to conceptualise and reduce the huge chunk of data into the world of analysis within the positivist paradigms. There are five dimensions which might be crucially important for consideration in framing the research methodologies of enhancing the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers. These dimensions are suggested as follows:
Having the vision of global education about teacher curriculum decision-making, it is an excellent idea of not to avoid the complexity and subjectivity of the data collected. It is certainly meaningful and useful to use narratives of and conversations with a group of participants and a network of critical friends within the local arena, and then extend to other groups of participants across cultural contexts and with their respective networks of critical friends overseas. By doing so, the research methods become multi-layered, dynamic, interactive and communicative to achieve the research purpose. The pursuit of knowledge (or wisdom), the inclusiveness of intrinsic value and the quest for ongoing reflections are justified to exist in an Action Research as proposed.

VII. A note of personal reflections

Due to the collaborative research journey, I told my story by myself and with the participants.

I kept my promise to the participants to proceed within the time frame which was mutually agreed upon in the Introductory Seminars of School 1 and School 2 two years ago. I do not deny that it was not at all an easy process for me as a researcher, a student, a teacher educator, a wife, a mother, a daughter and so on in terms of contributing time and effort.

I handled all the working procedures of the research study. These included buying stationery and audio tapes, borrowing cassette recorders, making phone calls, photocopying, stapling, filing, sorting research materials into envelopes for distribution, delivering research materials to the schools, transcribing, translating, recording, interviewing, preparing meeting notes and summaries, writing letters,
setting the environment for meetings, communicating with participants and other school staff both formally and informally, collecting signatures and member-checking with participants. It was evident that my handling of all these working procedures could ensure the confidentiality of the participants and the data. At the same time, my ongoing reflections enhanced my commitment to and passion for the study. All this in turn catalysed the work of data selection, data display and initial analysis in Action Steps 1 and 2 to move into the next phase of Action Steps 3 and 4.

As I think of the reflections throughout my study and thesis, I have learned several significant things about doing research about curriculum decision-making. They are reported in a set of propositions and principles:

About the research focus

Contextualising and conceptualising the research problem

Understanding the contextual complexities is a basis for researching curriculum decision-making. However, the changing policy contexts have increased the difficulties of keeping the research study in focus. Fortunately, this uncertainty engenders possibility of ongoing pioneering and hope in curriculum inquiry.

In order to pursue about the research question(s), a conceptual framework is necessary. It is emerging and dynamic as it continually interacts with the activities of data management as in an Action Research. All this fits well for researching about “real” curriculum problems in the “real” world of teachers with a sense of challenge and satisfaction.

Remaining open, flexible and transparent

Notions of openness, flexibility and transparency not only apply to the research strategies and activities (for example, setting up the action steps) but also make sense to the writing of the thesis in a way that the researcher can communicate the research details effectively to the readers.

Being ethical
A doubt of “whose interests” prevails in educational research. In order to
demonstrate the trustworthiness of the data and maintain ethical, the
participation of an Action Research which is critical, collaborative and
recursive should be voluntary. The participants need to be clear about
some important research details (for example, research purpose,
significance, time involved and so on) and are responsible for their own
member checking. Nonetheless, they will be informed about the research
outcomes with reference to their own school context. All this is not only
due to ethical considerations but also considers academic rigor in
conducting curriculum inquiry.

I believe that the ethical considerations should demonstrate adequate
attention to the rights and responsibilities of both the researcher and the
participants.

*Envisioning messines, ongoingness and hopefulness*

It is important to acknowledge that research about curriculum
decision-making is contextualised in multiple realities in the “real”
world of participants. It is my pleasure of engaging in and reflecting
upon my qualitative research efforts; and at the same time developing a
responsible way of advocating for and authenticating my continuing
efforts. I would say that this pleasure is actually a result of “no pain, no
gain” – the “pain” embedded in the messiness, and the “gain” generated
from the ongoingness and the hopefulness due to the impact of the
collaborative inquiry.

*About the researcher*

*Positioning the researcher*

The researcher should be willing to declare his/her ontological positions
for optimising the research effort (as noted in the purposes of the study).
This declaration can help the researcher not to be presumptuous and
complacent about the methodological approach he/she chose for the
study. Rather, the researcher was particularly aware of setting sound and
cogent arguments for promoting, justifying and defending his/her
position in curriculum inquiry. I therefore reflected on my strategies for advocating the purposes of the research, reporting the research processes, analysing the research data and documenting the research outcomes.

**Different orientations to philosophy**

Through my ongoing reflections in this collaborative research journey, it is amazing for me to become aware of different orientations to philosophy between the east and the west that have severe impacts on shaping one’s epistemological and ontological beliefs. The central point of Chinese philosophy is on *life* from which other important conceptions of knowledge, reality, truth and so on are able to emerge (Miu, 1998). Chinese philosophy also highlights wholeness, subjectivity, reflectivity and inner morality. These differences are crucial to understanding about why one’s research is conceptualised, contextualised and conducted in a particular way and how likely one’s research makes sense to and further discovers meanings of his/her own life, participants’ lives and other people’s lives in a wider community.

I, therefore, argue that educational researchers regardless of their cultural backgrounds should treat western and eastern philosophy on an equal footing while conceptualising the research problem – to be complementary to each other – in order to obtain a global perspective for minimising knowledge hegemony and drawing utmost significance of curriculum inquiry.

**About the participants**

**Questions about why we are here and in whose interests**

In order to save time, research participants who are usually school teachers and principals respond to questionnaires and interviews for providing quantitative and qualitative data. Having said this, in local research context participants seldom question *why* they are involved, *whose interests* are considered, and *what* they can get out of their participation in terms of personal needs and institutional concerns. It is often the case that the participants are either hand-picked by the
principal or the research participation may lead to some remuneration in terms of public advertising or other sorts of rewards.

I strongly believe that teachers and principals must critically reflect on all these questions raised in the research traditions and school culture. A collaborative journey of researching about curriculum decision-making can take the interests of both the participants and the researcher closer to a shared intent.

**About the collaboration**

*Having a shared language*

It is not surprising that there is a gap of the use of language between the university academics and the practitioners about the discipline of curriculum studies. The researchers are recommended to be more acquainted with the field of investigations in order to increase the chance of understanding the personal practical knowledge teachers and principals have. A contextual analysis is always useful in order to have some practical or contextual frame of reference for considering theoretical perspectives on policy issues. An introductory seminar to the participating school about the research study is highly recommended as to share a common language appropriate for a two-way communication at the later stage of data collection. The teachers can be thus more confident and competent to make an informed choice of their voluntary research participation.

*Having a shared intent*

I learned from my experiences in this study that researchers are much better to negotiate the entry with the potential schools in order to optimise the benefits of the schools and to appraise the uniqueness of each school context in order to obtain authentic participation. Advocating for a shared intent in terms of the purpose and significance of the study can facilitate the time arrangement and trust building in Action Research. This can be achieved by reassuring the openness, transparency and ethical considerations of the research process.
Dealing with emotions

Qualitative research using narratives and conversations yields complex and personal data. When the research study investigates curriculum decision-making in the “real” world of participants, emotion which is not vocal in its nature becomes a component of the data. The researcher must take careful notes to record both the researcher’s and the participants’ emotions in the period of data collection. The reason is to keep sufficient field data for the authenticication of the participants’ voices.

In view of this, the research meetings should be not only well prepared but also kept open and flexible as much as they can be. It is even better to keep the participants informed in advance about the main focus and procedure of each meeting so that unnecessary emotions can be minimised.

Mapping the way forward

The research outcomes of this collaborative research journey emerged from the “real” world of teachers about curriculum decision-making. In planning the way ahead, further investigations of enhancing the profile of teachers as curriculum decision-makers, and what curriculum leadership looks like in Hong Kong changing educational context become significant.

So, which road should we choose while moving ahead together both locally and internationally about making sense of curriculum leadership to the teachers in the frontier and the systems?

Here, I would quote two statements from two influential scholars in the early 20th Century in China:

“Our future is in our hands; our confidence should be in the future”. Hu Shi (1986) focuses on the importance of self-consciousness within the context of reforms. His emphasis was to work realistically on what
matters.

“Actually there is no road on the ground; when more people walk along, the road will take its shape”. Lu Xun, an author who critically examined the Chinese take-for-granted traditions and deep-rooted cultural beliefs made this comment. This statement is insightful for people to think about what is possible while not leaving the work merely on the current state.

In the end, being a part-time mature-age student who works in the field of teacher education, I position myself at the intersection of research and practice. I have identified five moments as my agony in this collaborative research study. I am willing to share some of my reflective notes in a wider arena so that more people not only understand what the research is about but also wish to echo the voices elicited from the teachers, the principals and the researcher. The Australian Association of Research in Education has already accepted my paper proposal about how these moments portray a reflexive account of my story that authenticate the meaning of collaborative inquiry to the “real” world of teachers. I look forward to presenting all this in December at Perth.

References


Koo, M. (1999c). *We care, we share and we are committed: A researcher’s ongoing journey on curriculum change in Hong Kong*. Paper presented at the Biennial Conference of Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Perth, October.


APPENDIX

Trustworthiness: truth, appropriateness, authenticity

Action Step 1

Action Step 2

Action Step 3

Action Step 4

Arrow indicates an increased function of activity during this Action Step. Note that all activities occur during all steps to a