Reconceptualizing Teacher Professionalism in the Face of Curriculum Change in Hong Kong

Jacqueline Kin-sang Chan
(The Hong Kong Institute of Education)

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Abstract

Curriculum changes in Hong Kong have been undergone different phases of changes in the last two decades. Traditionally teachers are trained and developed in an examination driven and selective atmosphere under an elitist education system. In the face of the curriculum changes, the professionalism of teachers has become an important issue in Hong Kong for dealing with the recent curriculum changes. This paper reconceptualizes teacher professionalism in the face of curriculum change in Hong Kong context. In particular, this paper is going to argue that the preconceptions of teachers in teaching and learning is much related to the development of professionalism of Hong Kong teachers in dealing with curriculum changes in the past years.

Introduction

Teacher’s professional development has been the centre of discussions in facing the problems of curriculum changes where failures were usually experienced of the process. This paper starts with the discussion of the nature of curriculum change, then the curriculum changes in Hong Kong, third, the discussions of teachers’ professional development with the argument of the role teachers’ beliefs, and finally the conclusion for this paper.

Through the discussions of the role of teacher plays in the face of the curriculum change, this paper is going to argue that teacher’s belief is significant in influencing the teachers’ actions and therefore have their significant influence in curriculum change.

The nature of change

Educational Change is a broad term that can be used interchangeably with ‘reform’, ‘planned change’ or ‘innovation’ of education involving different levels of organizations and personnel relating the education sector with an ultimate goal to bring about improvement of the present situation. Usually curriculum change is under the umbrella of educational change and specially relates with curricular issues, i.e. it is also an umbrella of changes in different kinds and levels of curricula, the aims and
objectives, instructions and evaluations.

According to Hopkins and others, change tends to manifest itself in organizations in one of the two forms (p.21):

1. Incremental change – a gradual, often subtle transition from one state to another
2. Planned change – seeks to interrupt the natural development of events and often, to break with previous practice to establish a new order.

Besides, change tends to arise from one or two sources:

1. Internal – often ‘natural’ or ‘organic’, whether at individual or at system level
2. External – what others would do on us, to our school and is much harder to assimilate.

In classifying the changes, there are two levels identified by Cuban (1992), i.e. the first-order and the second-order ones. The first-order changes are characterized by the intentional efforts to enhance the existing system by correcting deficiencies in policies and practices without disturbing the existing basic features. The second-order changes seek to alter the essential ways that organizations are put together because of major dissatisfaction with present arrangements. Such changes introduce new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of performing duties into novel solutions to persistent problems.

Normally, planned or second-order changes arouse people’s attention or controversies, in their needs and dissatisfaction of the present situations, the functions and structures of the present organization and the directions and approaches to bring out the changes. Since then related literature has been accumulated on the process of the planned or second-order changes.

The compulsory school system of Hong Kong

Curriculum changes in Hong Kong have been evolving for over twenty years but none of them could be considered as second-ordered although they intended to be. What are the reasons relating to the existing phenomenon? What is (are) the hindrance(s)? Before the discussion goes on, it is necessary to introduce the education system in Hong Kong within which curriculum changes undergo.

In 1965, the six years’ compulsory education was suggested by the Education Policy White Paper (1965) to be introduced in 1971 in Hong Kong. Later in 1974, suggestions were made to introduce the nine years’ compulsory education in 1979 (Hong Kong Government, 1974). In 1978, the nine years’ compulsory education was mandated which was one year earlier than the Government had suggested (Hong Kong Government, 1974).

The nine years’ free and compulsory education in 1978 was introduced abruptly without good preparations. There are three shortcomings resulting from the abrupt
implementation: (1) The government did not have any clear goals and objectives in the implementation; (2) There was a lack of back-ups such as the teacher education for qualified teachers, curriculum designs or other resources; (3) There was no appropriate evaluation mechanisms to follow up the implementation (Wong, 1997).

The implementation of the compulsory and free education provided adequate school places for the children had solved the problem of “quantity” for the need of the population growth in Hong Kong but not for the “quality” of education. In views of the problems emerged from the nine years’ compulsory education, the Visiting Panel (1982) suggested ways to improve the present systems concerning Hong Kong curriculum, the design and implementation, the assessment, the pedagogy…etc. The report of the Visiting Panel had led to subsequent Education Commission Reports for improvement of the educational systems. Consequently, various educational innovations arose since the eighties such as the school-based curriculum project scheme, the school management initiative, the adoption of language of instruction, the Target Oriented Curriculum, the quality assurance, etc. The educational innovations themselves were not implemented without discourses. In particular, the curriculum changes implemented in schools in the past twenty years were problematic and controversial.

Curriculum changes in Hong Kong

Early curriculum changes were introduced in the seventies such as the Activity Approach in primary schools, the Junior Secondary Science syllabus and the Economics syllabus in secondary schools, etc. However, research on the implementation of these curriculum changes indicated that there were no significant changes in the classrooms.

Although the Activity Approach has been introduced for more than twenty years and was adopted by more than thirty-six percent of the primary classes of Hong Kong today, it was found that the strategies used in the classrooms were mainly on traditional teachers’ talks and questions and answers whereas interactions among pupils were limited to 10.5% of the instructional time (Chau, Wu, Chan, Leung and Fung, 1993).

The Junior Secondary Science syllabus implemented in 1973 was another example. Modeling from the Scottish Integrated Science program, the Junior Secondary Science syllabus had the features of one teacher to teach all the integrated material and the students learned through the discovery process. Although there was no negative reports from the Education Department, research found that the lessons were “highly didactic instruction interspersed with laboratory activities carried out as confirmatory demonstrations rather than as investigations” (McClelland, 1991).
The Secondary Economics syllabus implemented in 1975 was a further example. The syllabus required the teachers to adopt a student-centered approach such as role playing and simulation exercises, problem solving exercises, tutorials and seminars, and individualised instructions to enable the students to understand and apply the economics theories. Results of research revealed that the main characteristics of most lessons of the Economics teachers were very similar; that the relationship between teachers and pupils was one which emphasized the transmission of information (Morris, 1990).

Of the common patterns of these curriculum changes in Hong Kong in the seventies, their common characteristics included top-down decision making, imitation of overseas developments, tight focusing on syllabus development, and confirmatory or pseudo-evaluation, with adoption rather than implementation as the target (McClelland, 1991).

From the eighties onwards, the curriculum changes in Hong Kong took place in similar situations such as the school-based curriculum project scheme which allowed successful applicants from schools to develop own subject matter curriculum. The SBCD project was closely under the Education Department’s control and involved only subjects and classes that were examination free.

In the nineties, the most prominent and controversial curriculum change in Hong Kong was the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC). It was a curriculum change involved a wide range of classes (from primary to secondary), subject matters (Chinese, English and Mathematics) and totally different modes of instructions and assessment system. In contrast to the previous curriculum changes, the Education Department had provided in-service teaching training and staff development programs to the schools. However, strong objections from schools, teachers’ Unions and Professors in the Faculties of Education in the Universities requested for a temporary halt or even abolishment of the new curriculum. After modifications, TOC was finally adopted without teachers’ recognition.

The failures of the past experiences of curriculum changes in Hong Kong could provide the lessons to learn, especially when subsequent changes follow closely. Based on the past experiences, planned change could be better received if the following conditions were paid attention to:

At the initiation stage:

1. The decision making of the planned change
   The solutions of the questions of “who decides?” and “how is the planned change decided?” determine whether the planned change is top-down or bottom-up in nature. The past experiences of Hong Kong confirmed that the decisions made by the central did not match the needs of the present
situations of the schools resulting in the lack of support from the peripheral.

③ The nature of planned change
The planned change should not be complex but with clarity. Complexity refers to the degree of difficulty of the change for implementation. Clarity refers to both the goals and means of the change. In so far as the planned changes involved, they were complex with unclear goals and teaching strategies that were imported from the west embedded in child-centered philosophy of education which required much higher levels of teachers’ professionalism.

③ The relevancy of local context
No matter how good were the planned changes, they should be relevant to the local context. The reason is simply that the transplanted change would easily wither without the right contextual soil. The change should therefore match the current practice of the local educational system, the professionalism of the teachers, the teaching and learning styles of the teachers and pupils, the expectations of parents, the examination system, etc. So far as the planned changes were involved such as the Activity Approach, the Junior Secondary Science syllabus, the TOC, etc. they were simply taken out from the west and transplanted without modifications and adaptations to the local context.

At the implementation stage:

③ The support from the central
The support from the central should be adequate. For example, in the past, the highly centralized systems of government usually placed resources in the production of the plans such as the policy statements and formal doctrines but far less on implementation expenses (Morris, 1990).

③ The support from the school level
The support from the school system level was important for the implemented change, such as the participation of the principal and the management staff would certainly add to the possibility of success of the change. Consensus among teacher colleagues were important too (Lam, 1996; Morris, 1990).

③ The strategy used
The strategies used in the planned changes of Hong Kong were mainly power-coercive (Morris, 1990) which was not a good trial. Other strategies could be used such as mutual adaptation which involves adjustment in needs, interest and skills of participants and organizations as well as in projects goals and methods (Snyder, Bolin and Zumwalt, 1992).
③ The accountability and evaluation system

Throughout the planned changes in Hong Kong, there was a lack of accountability and evaluation system to check on the validity of the implementation. Accountability should be well defined for the roles of personnel / system or organization participating in the curriculum change. Evaluation system should be laid down for regular check of the validity of the implementation process.

In dealing with changes, proposed here are some fundamental questions to be considered:

① What is the change? (Emphasis on its characteristics and contents)
② Why has it to be changed? (Emphasis on its rationale)
③ How is it going to bring about? (Emphasis on its methods and strategies)
④ What is (are) the expected results? (Emphasis on its outcomes)
⑤ What is (are) it going to affect? (Emphasis on its influence and impact)

With references from these questions, the curriculum changes in Hong Kong seemed to be too vague in the objectives, lack of implementation strategies, irrelevant to the local contexts and without coherent considerations of the whole situation. In the west, educational changes has been evolving for decades with the extension from national wide to school based levels. Though years of changes with new practices adopted at different times, the west is still unsure which way is the best for its education except realizing that the innovations on stage in different times were alike that of the swinging of the pendulum. However, the west had got precious experiences in dealing with educational changes and through the history of the study of change, lessons could be observed for the future development of educational changes of Hong Kong, as summarized by Fullan (1995):

1960s    The Adoption Theme
1970s    The Implemention Theme
1980s    The Mutliple Innovation Theme
1990s    The Dynamic Complexity Theme

The adoption phase emphasized on the development, generation and decision to take on innovations. Here two assumptions were made, there was uncritical acceptance of change for the sake of change and second, once a decision was taken at some level, then change in practice would follow. The second phase posed the problems of change and the role of the school leader, especially the principal was highlighted. The third phase characterized by the overload of expectations and innovations of the schools when they were flooded with multiple innovations. The fourth phase emphasized effective school research, vision, strategic planning, site-based management gained ever-increasing prominence.
Fullan’s framework on the development of educational changes highlights two important points. First, the innovations at different phases are in progressive increase in quantity and complexity. Second, the problems of the innovation are becoming more dynamic and wide spread in different areas. However, Fullan’s concepts of phases should not be treated as discrete phases since there may be overlapping in between the phases, e.g. there may be the situation where there is the leadership problem of the school and simultaneously the school is flooded with innovations. If we take a look at Hong Kong’s case, we get a similar picture of what is going on in the scene. In the early years when there were only limited educational changes, the schools simply adopted the newly introduced innovation such as Integrated Science Program initiated in secondary schools in 1973 and the Activity Approach initiated in primary schools in 1972. However, the adoption of the initiation in the schools posed a lot of problems including the lack of support from various levels, i.e. the system, the teacher education institute and the school (McClelland, 1991). With the introduction of more innovations such as the Target Oriented Curriculum, the school based curriculum project, the school based management initiative, etc. in the recent years, the schools in Hong Kong have experienced the agony of change marking the turn of the phase to the implementation and the multiple innovation. What are the schools going to do in order to deal with these changes? In addition to the support from the central, the school level, the parents or the society as a whole, the role of the frontier teacher should never be neglected. In the past experiences of Hong Kong, the fact that teachers did not have much say in the curriculum changes had induced major causes of failures of the changes.

No doubt that one of the significant individuals in the schools to bring about curriculum change is the teacher. The role of the teacher has become significant when educational change is said to be successful only when it is institutionalized and only means little if it is not implemented in the classroom. It is therefore very often the case that curriculum changes have to seek for teachers’ approval or participation. Doll (1996) emphasized the importance of care in working with teachers where specific factors are raised:

1. At the beginning of the change process, the teacher is thought to receive motivation from dissatisfaction associated with the present situation.
2. After the initial stages of the process, the teacher is motivated by a feeling of need to complete the task and to complete it with appropriate speed.

However, what are the motivational factors for the teachers in the participation of curriculum changes? How ably is the teacher in performing the curriculum changes? What hindrance of the teacher has in conceptualizing the curriculum changes? These basic questions have to be resolved before anything could be done to
Reconceptualizing Teacher’s professional Development

According to the literature of teacher’s development (Burden, 1990), it means the stages of development in which the teacher undergoes. The professional development of a teacher includes aspects of job skills and knowledge acquired; affective concerns such as feelings, attitudes and concerns. Currently the knowledge and skills dimensions of teacher’s professional development are much attended for in the provision of pre-service and in-service teacher education. Comparatively, the affective dimension such as the perceptions and feelings of teacher’s development is much neglected. The teachers’ concerns and feelings in their stages of development in fact have their impact on the teacher’s belief development which in turn influenced his/her attitudes in teaching and learning.

The term ‘belief’ generally refers to suppositions, commitments and ideologies which can be used interchangeable with terms such as ‘attitudes’, ‘judgments’, ‘opinions’, ‘ideologies’. ‘perceptions’, ‘conceptions’, ‘conceptual system’, ‘preconceptions’, ‘dispositions’, ‘implicit theories’, ‘personal theories’ and ‘perspectives’ (Calderhead, 1996). Teacher beliefs have vital impact on teachers’ decisions made in planning the lessons, giving instructions and interacting with children, knowing and expecting children’s growth. Moreover, the beliefs help teacher colleagues to recognize the compatibility in the working context and form mutually supportive social groups.

In the studies of curriculum changes in Hong Kong, the role of the teachers and their attitudes towards the changes were highlighted (Morris, Chan & Lo, 1997):

The findings in the present study were in line with the models described by Elmore, Tyack and Cuban that the teachers face the curriculum innovations with their own experiences and interpretations. Hidden are the teachers’ trial & errors and accommodations to evolve a more grounded and adaptive solutions for the change. (pp 19).

The teachers’ perceptions were not built in a day. Rather, they emerged from the results of personal past experiences (Cheung, 1996):

There were cases where conventional classroom approach was used in TOC classroom for most of the time whereas the TOC mode of teaching was used only shortly before or during TOC inspectors came to observe lessons. Shum (1995) observed that quite a number the teachers’ daily classroom decision making was made more by ‘routines' and ‘habits’ rather than by thoughtful actions depending on
different circumstances. (pp 42)

The teachers’ preconceptions were formed as a result of self-experience during their lifetime and professional development, including their classroom learning and teaching. For most of the curriculum changes took place in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong, the teacher’s attitudes on the new implemented curriculum usually based on the following aspects:

1. The examination system in Hong Kong

Most of the teachers in Hong Kong had been brought up in Hong Kong where the examination system was strict and rigorous for screening the academic able students to enter the universities. Although the nine-year free education has been adopted for more than twenty years, the students still have to face the examination pressure at primary five and six for the allocation of school places in the secondary schools which are divided in five bands according to the achievements of the students admitted. The second public examination that the students have to face is the school certificate examination at secondary five. The third public examination is the A-level examination which determines the students’ eligibility for entrance into the universities. Through the development of the teacher’s learning experiences, they believed that good academic preparation of the students would bring them to a better status of development in life. Examination was so powerful in influencing teaching and learning that examination is ranked as the top priority of the classroom teaching which in turn has an adverse effect on students’ growth.

2. The syllabus, the textbook and the teaching schedule

The syllabus and textbooks are prescribed under the guidelines of the Education Department in Hong Kong. Usually, the school can have the freedom only in choosing the kinds of textbooks and to determine the teaching schedule for one academic year alongside with the internal examinations. Furthermore, the examination syllabus determines the teaching schedule as well as the teaching contents. Usually the teachers perceive that their responsibility is to complete the syllabus and well-equip the students to take examinations. The study of Lam (1996) revealed that the major concern of teachers is the academic attainments of the students. The participating teachers thought that to help students to achieve good academic standard so that students would be allocated to the schools they wanted was the teacher’s major responsibility.

3. The teaching strategies

The teacher usually inclined to teacher-centered teaching approach rather than the child-centered approach. Studies on most of the curriculum implementations involving innovations of teaching strategies usually found that traditional teacher-
centered approach was adopted in reality instead of the new introduced child-centered approach (e.g. Lam, 1996, McCelland, 1991; Morris et al., 1996; Chau, Wu, Chan, Leung & Fung; 1993). The participants in the study of Lam (1996) thought that TOC had caused the down slope of the students’ academic achievement because there were less exercises to up keep the students’ standards. The student-centered activities, according to the teachers’ views were therefore of lower value. Accordingly, the teachers expected more taught contents, more exercises and drills.

4. The teacher’s role

The traditional teacher’s role expected in a Chinese society is to teach and provide knowledge to the students so that student can learn to be knowledgeable. “More effort, less play” is a Chinese proverb that almost taught by every family to enable the children to concentrate on academic learning. The teachers therefore expect that they teach more and the students can learn more in class. Since student-centered activities involve a lot of games and play, most teachers thought these were irrelevant to the normal teaching. After all, these activities need more time that is not possible under the tight teaching schedule.

5. The culture of the society

The culture of the society is part of teachers’ developmental input. One of the cultural aspects of the society of Hong Kong is individual competition. In order to enhance students’ competitive power, more knowledge input and more exercises are the ways to get through the examinations which would mean a better life chance for the students. The ultimate goal of learning is the product rather than the process which is not easily observed. This is the consensus held by most of the parents or the public. Although recent innovations in Hong Kong have attempted to shift the product-oriented view of learning to process-oriented, it is not easy to influence the traditional cultural beliefs held by the parents, teachers and students.

Therefore, moving ahead of the changes for the pre-service teacher education, some would advocate the needs for more practical knowledge and skills, or the interdisciplinary rather than disciplinary program for the teacher preparation program, or the thinking skills for the training of prospective teachers.

In the context of in-service teacher training, staff development should be reconstructed for the teacher participants to redefine or reconstruct their existing preconceptions so as to help to understand how teachers see their worlds.

In fact, it is important for the staff development to emphasize (Pinar, 1995):

③ The acknowledgment on teacher’s complex work in which teaching is viewed as an intellectual activity rather than merely skills acquisition and performance.
Teacher’s frame of reference can be interpreted through their ways of teaching which represents certain beliefs, norms or cultures of their own or of their context. If teaching changes, the frame of reference changes as well. Through the lived experiences of the teachers, their thinking and conceptions of teaching are interpreted in order to understand how the teachers implement in the curriculum

Conclusions
Curriculum change has become part of our life in schooling when our society advances in political, economic and social aspects. In analyzing the nature of the change, the scenario of the change becomes clearer. However, factors affecting the successful implementation of the change are numerous and there is no single solutions and best way to fix it. Among the actors of the curriculum implementation process, teacher is one of the most significant figures and due to this reason, one important part of teacher’s professional development is the teachers’ beliefs which have important impact on teachers’ attitudes as well as respective actions. Therefore, teacher education should play a proactive role to understand the preconceptions of the teachers so as to provide relevant pre-service and in-service teacher education for them.

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