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Curriculum Development Council in Hong Kong: Decision making body?

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Curriculum inquiry embraces at least three kinds of phenomena, namely substantive, political-social, and technical-professional. Political-social, according to Goodlad, mainly relates to those human processes through which curriculum decisions are made. The political social aspect of Curriculum Development Council (CDC) in Hong Kong will be reviewed in this article. CDC, having much participation from the front line educators, is regarded as one of the most important curriculum development organizations in Hong Kong. The whole discussion, focusing on the participation in decision making in CDC, will be divided into four main parts. Firstly, the importance of political-social aspect in curriculum development will be identified. Secondly, the context and the organizations of curriculum decision making in Hong Kong will be discussed. Thirdly, this article will examine the participation through three fundamental determinants of decisions in CDC. Finally, critical comments will be made to consider the participation of members in CDC.
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Curriculum inquiry is the study of curriculum practice which educators work at. This embraces at least three kinds of phenomena: substantive, political-social, and technical professional aspects (Goodlad, 1991, p.6). Political-social aspect involves the study of all those human processes through which some interests come to prevail over others so that these ends and means rather than others emerge (Goodlad, 1991, p.6). The study of curriculum decision making and its effects is of prime importance in curriculum inquiry (Hunt, 1980, p.12). Among the different concerns in curriculum decision making, three core elements namely decision making process, nature of decision and people-involved are focused in this paper1.

Curriculum Development Council (CDC), having much participation from the front line educators, is regarded as one of the most important curriculum developing bodies in Hong Kong. The whole discussion, focusing on the participation in decision making in CDC, will be divided into four main parts. Firstly, the importance of political-social aspect in curriculum development will be identified. Secondly, the context and the organizations of curriculum decision making in Hong Kong will be discussed. Thirdly, this article will examine the participation through three fundamental determinants of decisions in CDC. Finally, critical comments will be made to consider the participation of members in CDC.

Importance of political-social inquiry in CDC

When talking about political social aspects of curriculum decision making, it is easy to understand the importance of who participate. In 1960s, the National Education Association (NEA), in the Project on Instruction which published Deciding What to Teach (National Education Association, 1963a), has one of the foci on the relationship of decision-making processes and locus to school quality. To help the public understand the nature of decision-making practices in the schools, they (NEA, 1963a) prescribed a rather simple formula:

*Decisions about what to teach, how to teach, and how to organize for teaching is made daily. Many people are involved in the process. All are*

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1The difference between decision makers and influential groups should be clarified (Kirst & Walker, 1971, p.479-509; Marsh, 1995, p.308). In this article, curriculum decision makers will be used in a formal sense, which can be “defined as those individuals or groups who, because of their professional status or positions of authority, wield influence and have some degree of power to determine courses of action to be followed in schools. Their influence on curricula is not causal or incidental” (Marsh, 1995, p.308).
entitled, by virtue of their citizenship a democracy, to make certain kinds of decisions; some are authorized by law to make other kinds. Some are qualified by education, experience, and position to make still other decisions. The quality and validity of the judgments that are made depend, in part, upon clarification and observance of the differing roles of the various people involved (p.12).

In this paragraph, three main issues are raised: who participate in decision (actors), what to teach (curriculum), and how (through what processes) these decisions are made.

Struman (1989, p.3) stressed that any study of curriculum decision making necessarily touches about participants. There are various groups of people that involved in the curriculum decision making, such as influential group (including publishers, foundations, professional associations), influential individuals, and internal factors (including groups and individuals within the school system) (Cuban, 1992, p.229-231). Cuban (1992, p.236), in particular, mentioned the students, teachers, and principals as the key actors in the processes.

Referring to international picture, it is important to promote teacher involvement, initiative and professionalism, on the assumption that responsibility will be exercised more effectively when people who have to make decisions are also responsible for implementation (Morris, 1995). Morris (1995, p.2) emphasized that centralized mechanisms of curriculum decision making have little impact on the teaching and learning styles used in classrooms. Thus, who should make curriculum decisions is crucial to its implementation (Morris, 1995, p.2).

However, it must be recognized that the context, emphasized in this article, in Hong Kong is very different from that in the west. Centralization may be deemed more necessary for its context and it may not be able to rely on well-educated, stable and motivated teaching forces. Centralized systems may also be justified on the grounds of efficiency and coherence (Bray, 1992).

The above discussion clearly shows that political social inquiry of CDC in Hong Kong is still under debate. Hong Kong is a city with centralized curriculum development, which makes the decision mechanism in the system level a crucial item. However, as it is widely agreed that curriculum at the policy making level is always different from the curriculum implemented in the classroom level (Smylie, 1994, p.1253), participation from school practitioners are becoming more and more important.

**Context of curriculum decision making in HK**

**Political context**
1. Executive oriented policy making (bureaucratic) (paternalistic)

Scholars generally accepted Hong Kong is a highly executive oriented (dominated) city (e.g. Huque et al., 1998, p.16). Before the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong to China in 1997, the Governor’s position is central to the government of the territory (Huque et al., 1997, p.11). Miners (1995, p.68) gives an excellent description on this supreme position:

Governor's legal powers to exercise control over the civil service were virtually untrammelled. All appointments, promotions, transfers and dismissals were made by him or in his name; the Public Service Commission exists to advise him on these matters but he was constitutionally entitled to reject its advice. He could give directives to all civil servants as to the policy they must follow or the actions they must take. If he chose to exercise the authority granted to him up to its full legal limits he could impose his arbitrary will on the whole machinery of government, completely reverse past practices, and set the whole colony in turmoil (Miners, 1995, p.68).

In the colonial past, although the Governor ruled as a supreme leader, in practice he was just a symbolic rather than top-down administrator.

After 1 July 1997, the Chinese Government emphasized the importance of maintaining the executive-dominated nature of the political system. Thus, civil service structure and the role of top officials remain unaltered, though their titles have been changed (Huque et al., 1998, p.20). However, Chee Hwa Tung (the first Chief Executive of HKSAR after 1 July 1999) differs from Christopher Patten (the last Governor before 1 July 1999) in his proactive attitude. He exercises strong leadership and determines to be a hands-on Chief Executive. He does not move into the Government House and instead set up his new office in the Central Government Offices, close to the Chief Secretary and other principal officials (Huque et al., 1998). Moreover, he prefers using non-civic servants of his Executive Council to play a more prominent political role by helping in formulating policies and promoting them. In the education sector, he appointed his Executive Councilor Antony Leung to lead policy team to formulate policy proposals on education (Huque et al., 1998), and to be nominated as the new chairman of the Education Commission. It is easy to understand that the government has exercised a tight control in steering educational development (Chan & Leung, 1991).

The above description is similar to situation in curriculum development in HK. The tradition of Hong Kong system can be described as highly centralized, with a curriculum promoting national goals. Moreover, the nature of the curriculum is academic, the teaching methods are direct and teacher-centered, public examination play an extremely important role, and textbooks are central (Morris & Marsh, 1992).

2. Administrative absorptive politics
King (1981) observed that Hong Kong Government uses administrative absorption of politics to contain and neutralize potential opposition from the Chinese community through the adsorption of members of their most prominent elite into the Government. Similar to King, Lau (1990, p.5) proposed that HK government involves the Chinese elite as collaborators in ruling HK: “the co-optive system had been highly successful in bolstering colonial rule. Quite a number of advisors to the colonial government among the Chinese elite have been reshaped into supporters of the system.”.

The advisory bodies related to curriculum decision, similar to nature of Hong Kong government, absorb educational elite into committees. Take CDC as an example, it includes heads of schools, practicing teachers, academics from tertiary institutions, Vocational Training Council members, employers and officers of the Education Department. Many of these are regarded as experts or elite in the field (Yu, 1999). Thus, this is a substantiation of administrative absorption in CDC.

3. Consultation

Consultation has been an effective device for the government to gain support for its policies as power is concentrated at the top (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.59), and the Hong Kong government builds up the network of advisory committees to achieve high consultation. The advisory committees seeks to obtain, through consultation with interested groups and individuals in the community, the best possible advice on which base decisions (ISD, 1998, p.21-22). Almost 4000 members of the public have been appointed to serve on a total of about 350 advisory boards and committees, and some serve on more than one. These members are appointed for their specialist knowledge or expertise, or for their record or interest in contribution to community service (ISD, 1998, p.21-22).

Over the last two decades, CDC members consist of representatives from different sectors and government agencies responsible for curriculum development. Despite the advisory status of the CDC, consultation is a top-down process as the Governor appoints all members. The real decision making power still less lies firmly at the top in the hands of the executive. The case of CDC is similar to that of Education Commission (EC) and Board of Education (BoE) (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.59). However, EC & BoE will not be covered in this article.

Members of the community play an important part in the planning, development and management of the education system at all levels, sitting on advisory bodies, executive bodies, management committees of schools and governing bodies of tertiary institutions. Public views are sought on major changes to existing policies/practices and new policies in education through extensive consultative exercises and regular policy fora. This is also the case in CDC, where members come from different sectors of the community. For example, it includes heads of schools, practicing teachers, academics
from tertiary institutions, Vocational Training Council members, parents, employers and officers of the Education Department. Many of these are regarded as experts or elite in the field (Yu, 1999). Thus, this is a substantiation of administrative absorption in CDC (ISD, 1998, p.133).

**Organization of curriculum decision making**

The three main levels of educational executives in HK government have three different advisory bodies to provide advise. The inter-related structure is shown in a figure (see fig. 1). One of the major consultative committees in curriculum decision making is the CDC, which oversees curriculum development in all subject areas at all school levels. The CDC cooperates closely with the newly established Curriculum Development Institute. CDC members are mostly educators from different sectors, including schoolteachers, teacher educators, union representatives and HK Examination Authority, but there are also non-educator members who usually include the chairman (Cheng, 1997, p.73).

**Structure**

The CDC is a free-standing advisory body appointed by the Chief Executive of HKSAR to give advice to the Government on curriculum development from kindergarten to the sixth form. CDC is a three-tier structure advisory body, consisting of the Council proper at the top, the coordinating committees in the middle, and the subject committees at the base. The main function of the Curriculum Development Council was to develop teaching syllabuses recommended for use in primary and secondary schools.

The CDC has a three-tier structure and operates through a system of coordinating committees. Membership of the CDC and its coordinating and subject committees includes heads of schools, teachers, tertiary academics, representatives from the HK Examination Authority and the Vocational Training Council, parents and employers (ISD, 1998, p.134). There are seven coordinating committees and seventy-one subject committees (see fig 2).

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2 The CDC is restructured in Sept 1999, which remains as the main advisory body on setting general directions of curriculum policies in school education. This new CDC is composed of a two-tier structure. The Curriculum Development Council, with 3 Standing Committees inside, is at the first tier. At the second tier, there are 8 Key Learning Area (KLA) Committees and 5 Functional Committees. The KLA Committees formed a forum for formulating directions of development in the KLAs. The 5 Functional committees advise on matters related to the conduct of research and development of learning resources in support of early childhood education, basic education, post-basic education as well as for children with special education needs. Ad hoc committees can be formed on a need basis under the 13 CDC Committees to carry out tasks as designated by the Committee(s) concerned. Once the assigned task is completed, the committee will be dissolved. There is nothing new in the nature and composition of the new CDC, when compared with the old one. Thus, that makes no difference between the comment on the new and old structured CDC (CDC, 1999).
Figure 1: The Educational Decision Making Mechanism in Hong Kong (Fok, 1999)

Advisory committee system
- Executive Council
- Education Commission
- BoE
- VTC
- UGC
- UGC Secretary
- VTI
- LD
- ED

Decision Making and Implementation system
- HKSAR Chief Executive
- Education & Manpower Bureau
- BoE
- VTC
- UGC
- UGC Secretary
- VTI
- LD
- ED

Governance
- HKSAR Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
- BoE Board of Education
- VTC Vocational Training Council
- UGC University Grant Council
- VTI Vocational Training Institutes
- LD Labour Department
- ED Education Department

Function
The Council, the coordinating committees and subject committees perform clearly defined functions. Their functions are listed as below:

- Council: responsible for formulating directions and programmes and recommending priorities in curriculum development;
- Coordinating committees: responsible for maintaining an overall review of the curriculum at their particular level or sector of education, and ensuring that the curriculum is balanced;
- Subject committees: taking on directions and priorities established by the Council, and implementing them in their particular subject areas, often through the production of subject syllabuses and resource/teaching materials (ISD, 1998).

Fig. 2: The 3-tier structure of CDC

Kindergarten C.C.

Primary C.C.

8 Subject Committees, e.g.
- Art & Craft
- Chinese Language
- English Language
**Fundamental determinants of CDC as decision mechanism**

In the legal sense, the Hong Kong government is an autocracy. Nevertheless, there is an extensive network of consultation for policymaking (Cheng, 1992, p.107). In this section, the mentioned conceptual framework, which comprise of three fundamental determinants, will be used to describe the curriculum decision making within CDC.

**Nature of problem**

As mentioned before, CDC operates through a system of co-ordinating committees and subject committees. It responsible for formulating directions and programs and recommending priorities in curriculum development; maintaining an overall review of the curriculum at their particular level or sector of education, and ensuring that the curriculum is balanced; and taking on directions and priorities established by the Council, and implementing them in their particular subject areas, often through the production of subject syllabuses and resource/teaching materials (ISD, 1998).

However, in reality, CDC mainly responsible for two tasks. Firstly, CDC prepares teaching syllabuses, which are highly related to HKEA examination papers, are having great importance to the schoolteachers and pupils. In other words, the curriculum guidelines produced by the CDC serve to control the curriculum at the junior secondary (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.62). Secondly, CDC supervises and coordinates textbook publication through one of its coordinating committees (Morris,
The decisions make by CDC is just in preparing teaching syllabus and textbooks for the school. However, when comparing with the definition proposed by curriculum scholars, the decisions are obviously insufficient. They (e.g. Goodlad, 1991, p.4; Glatthorn, 1987) regard curriculum is not only as planning or course, but also learning activities that students can experience. What other committees are responsible for developing experiences other than teaching syllabus and textbooks for the students?

Decision makers

Goodlad (1991, p.9) regards that few matters are more important than who makes curriculum decisions. Klein (1991, p.223), with similar idea as Goodlad, also emphasizes that consideration of who should make what kinds of curriculum decisions is an urgent task. Sturman (1989, p.3) proposes that all study of curriculum decision making necessarily touches about participants in curriculum decision making. Klein (1991, p.1) presents the importance of actors in curriculum decision making as:

*The question of who makes curriculum decisions is a fundamental and timeless issue which has received continuing discussion and debate throughout the history of the curriculum field. The answers to this question have changed over time and are certain to change in the future, given the increasing rate and complexity of change in the world.* (Klein, 1991, p.1).

Different conceptions about the role played by actors in curriculum decision making are complex. Some people try hard to become involved in making curriculum decisions, and diligently perform their right. Others would like to have an influence but not be directly responsible for making curriculum decisions. Yet others believe exclusively educators should make curriculum decisions because they are trained professionals, and they want little or no involvement of the parents or lay publics. These privileges have produced competing participants and decisions which are not always consistent or in the best interests of teachers and students (Klein, 1991, p.24).

Membership of the CDC comprises:

- coordinating committees;
- subject committees;
- heads of schools;
- practicing teachers;
- academics from tertiary institutions;
- representatives from the Hong Kong Examinations Authority;
- the Vocational Training Council;
- parents;
- employers;
officers of the Education Department (CDC, 1998).

The membership of CDC is typically persons suggested by Marsh (1997, p.8): Curriculum workers are many and include school-based personnel such as teachers, principals, and parents and university-based specialists, industry and community groups and government agencies and politicians. This is also in line with idea presented by Pinar et al, (1995): “… the shrinking domain of curriculum development as politicians, textbook companies, and subject-matter specialists in the university, rather than school practitioners and university professors of curriculum, exercised leadership and control over curriculum development”. To conclude, the membership, which is the decision makers in the CDC, is a suitable design. However, the members are appointed by the government. This will be discussed in the final part of this article.

**Decision making processes**

There are no specific processes in making curriculum decisions in CDC. The description of educational policy in system level will help to clarify this. According to Cheng (1992, p.107), policy deliberations usually involve the following steps:

1. a specially appointed committee usually invites public submissions before or during its course of deliberation;
2. after submission to the Executive Council, recommendations of the commissioned committee are often published, in whole or in a summary form, sometimes as a Green Paper, for public comments;
3. the recommendations are then modified, supposedly with due consideration to the public comments, and tabled at the Legislative Council, often in the form of a White Paper.

There are no standard procedures for the formulation of education policies, but until recently, the inclusion of consultation has been seen as essential. Consultation is a special feature in educational policy making in HK (Cheng, 1992, p.107).

Besides Cheng, Chan & Leung (1997, p.60) also observed this “no standard procedure” policy making, and identify this in the educational policy making. However, they figure out some of the possible procedures:

1. Identification of issues or problems by the senior officials in the Education Department or the Education and Manpower Branch;
2. If necessary, set up working groups or committees to study the issues and consult the public;
3. Identified issues are discussed by advisory bodies such as the Education Commission (EC) or the Board of Education (BoE);
4. During policy formulation, working committees usually invite public comments;
5. Before release to the public, policy papers will be discussed in the Executive Council;
6. Policy proposals will then be published in the form of consultative papers or Green papers for public consultation (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.60).
The curriculum decision making processes in CDC is neither clarify nor transparent. A reactive and proactive decision making process should be established for long term curriculum decision. This is important for developing new trend curriculum for students to face the 21st century challenges.

**Critical comments on CDC decisions**

1. **Reactive and proactive**

   As Hong Kong government focus on the social stability of the society, its education development has always tended to be reactive (Chan & Leung, 1997) in the past. Morris et al (1999) observed that the decision model of HKSAR has changed after 1 July 1997. Under the British, HK adopted the positive non-intervene strategy, which do not have long term planning. While the HKSAR has more intervention, and planned in the long run (see table 2).

   Morris et al (1999) explained that one reason for the change is the character of Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa. Tung claimed that he would exercise strong leadership and was determined to be a hands-on Chief Executive. Huque et al (1998, p.9) explained the change in a macro perspective. Huque et al (1998, p.9) find the need for proactively pursuing change and the risk to the advantages gained over the years from a predictable and reliable system merit further attention. It is obvious that civil services have to undergo change as societies develop, as pressures are exerted upon the environment (from both internal as well as external sources), and as there is a general tendency to improve the methods and mechanisms of administration.

| Table 2: Compare strategies of education planning before and after return of sovereignty |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
|                                 | HK Government                | HKSAR                                           |
| Planning strategy               | Short term                   | Long term                                       |
| Reactive                        | Government officials         | Government officials, appointed committee members, |
| Decision makers                 | Reactive                      | consultation committees                         |
| Attitude                        | Less intervention            | More intervention                               |
| Time to decide                  | Long                          | Short                                           |

The proactive attitude of HKSAR results in numerous educational and curriculum reform (ISD, 1998). However, this also results in more explicit top down and expertise oriented curriculum decision making (Morris et al, 1999).

2. **CDC is controlling the curriculum decision in Hong Kong**

   As CDC is responsible for the preparation of teaching syllabuses and supervision of textbook
publication, it serves as a device for the bureaucratic control of the school curriculum (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.63). Morris (1992, p.136) described: “…the production of curriculum guidelines, is wholly under the control of the government’s Education Department. Its decisions and ‘suggestion’ are communicated directly and confidentially to the publishers who, for commercial reasons, usually prefer to avoid publicity and make the suggested changes.”

3. Techniques of control
Although the government has tried to make the CDC appear to be independent and has invited participation of school heads and teachers, university academics, HKEA representatives, parents and employers, its operation is under the tight bureaucratic control of the Advisory Inspectorate of the Education Department (Morris, 1992, p.142-143; Chan & Leung, 1997, p.62; Wong, 1993). Moreover, it also uses a range of techniques to control and influence those bodies. These includes: setting up a number of committees to study the same topic, careful control of the agenda, careful selection of committee members, ignoring recommendations which are not consistent with the government’s view or implementing policies in a way which is contrary to that recommended (Morris, 1996, p.111).

One typical example of curriculum decision not decided by CDC is the Target Oriented Curriculum (TOC). TOC is regarded as an important landmark in the curriculum reform history, on which the Hong Kong Government has spent billions of dollars (Fok et al., 1997). However, this curriculum reform is decided before consulting or informing the CDC.

4. Involvement of teachers in curriculum development

In empower teacher’s capacity in developing curriculum, the Visiting Panel has the following comment (Fok, 1999a):

“To encourage curriculum development efforts, …..we believe there is merit in drawing the teaching service, as a professional force, into curriculum development and assessment practices. Strategies should be implemented to improve the coordination and communication between the agencies responsible for curriculum development and examination. A genuine drive towards school-based curriculum selection and adaptation, together with school-based programme and pupil evaluation, would open up new horizons for teacher participation. This involvement would be from periphery-to-center rather than the center-to-periphery tradition which now permeates educational planning, policy making and innovation, limiting the number of teachers who can become involved in these activities.”

Though this paragraph is produced in 1982, it is still essential now.
5. **Consultation is not high degree of participation**

Consultation is a kind of participation, but not with high degree of participation. During consultation, the decision maker may or may not listen to the consultant (Cheng, 1997, p.74). In reality, CDC always help to legitimize the policies and the government. In the first role, the committees provide the government with the necessary information to formulate and implement policies with confidence. In the second role, CDC manages to develop or is obliged to entertain a convention, or belief, that working through advisory committees is the most acceptable means of making policies (Cheng, 1992, p.102).

6. **Committee included a lot of expertise**

As CDC included a lot of expertise from subject specialist, curriculum scholars, principals, teachers, and businessmen, it got many experts from different fields. Expertise is indispensable in readily evidenced by the fact that: “Public officials, journalists, interest group leaders and interested citizens often join in informed discussion……Specialised professional fact finding, research, and policy analyses flourish as routine inputs into policymaking. A policymaker will ordinarily feel naked without help both informed discussion and specialized professional studies. (Lindblom, 1980, p.12)”

7. **content of decision**

While the structure and rhetoric of the CDC appears to encourage a participative problem-solving strategy, the reality is that the mechanisms used to disseminate and develop curricula rely on the classic tools of bureaucratic control, namely, official directives and mandates (Morris, 1992, p.121-122).

**Conclusion**

From the above discussion, it is easy to draw conclusion of participation in CDC. It is not a real way for participation, rather it is a tool for the government to legitimize its own policies and to control over curriculum in Hong Kong schools (Chan & Leung, 1997, p.62). Morris (1995, p.7) describes it in a straight way and is still valid now:

> Whilst the structure of the CDC is an attempt to encourage a problem solving strategy, the reality is more akin to a power coercive strategy. Changes usually emanate from within the Education Department, and generally in response to problems perceived by the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy (Morris, 1995, p.7).

According to the above discussion, it is questionable to conclude that CDC is a real decision making body.
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