The Challenge of a new curriculum framework for a prospective primary school in Hong Kong

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Focus: Curriculum frameworks and its implementation. (what is intended to be achieved?)

Abstract

The paper argues the impact of hidden agenda of curriculum frameworks on a prospective primary school.

To establish a new school with new ideas is not an easy task. Ideally, the school organizer, curriculum experts, principal, teachers, and any other parties concerned would form a planning committee. The committee would formulate a master plan that would meet the school organizer’s as well as the community’s expectations. They should work out the aims of the school and initiate policies for implementation. In turn, a curriculum framework would be created for the new prospective school. However, such a model of developing a primary school seldom exists in Hong Kong. The study indicates that the school principal, instead of working through a comprehensive committee, often master minded the whole planning process. The teachers, curriculum experts, and so on play a minimal role in formulating a curriculum framework for the new school in Hong Kong. The school organizer almost solely relies on the principal for designing and running of the new school.

The author is a member in a new school planning team. This is a reflection paper of the author on his experience in framing the school curriculum. In running a new school, what are the intended aims formulated? What difficulties are encountered in creating the curriculum framework? This paper hopes to shed light on the process of formulating intended curriculum for new school in Hong Kong.

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Introduction

In Hong Kong, the government first designs and builds subsidized funded schools and then allocate them to various educational organizations. So the school designs are standardized. As a rule, different era would have different standardized school buildings. It is fair to children from different social classes. School governing bodies, such as churches, charity organizations and so on can apply for the new schools built. If successful, the school governing body would formally employ a school principal a month before the commencement of the school academic year, though the planning work could have started much earlier. Then the principal would start planning the curriculum framework and other school policies, as well as recruiting new staff. I find such process of starting a new school far from satisfactory. The principal almost invariable shoulders up all the responsibility for starting the school. Such a pattern of developing a school definitely can not meet the expectations arising from the new millennium and the coming era of education revolution. Starting a school needs both vision and mission on educating the young. To attain this, consensus on various guiding principles of running a school have to be developed by the key stakeholders of the school. In this paper, the author shares his experience in starting a school.

This school, called the Case School here, was initiated by a teacher education institute and fortunately received later a substantial donation from a charity organization. Therefore, a committee was formed well before the school was built. Academic staff from different departments led the initial planning process. A committee formed which included education officers, other school principals, educators, and professors both inside and outside the institute. The government, through the Education Department offered substantial assistance.

The Case School is a whole day primary co-educational school with eighteen classes and it is expected to be operational by September 2002. This publicly funded school will be located in the newly built suburban main campus of the institute. Such a school that is run by teacher education institute is the first attempt in the history of Hong Kong. We can imagine that it will face challenges of all sorts from its birth.

The Roles of the Case School

The Case School committee has agreed on providing a quality education for elementary school
children as well as a point of interaction between the prospective teachers from the organization body and the educational community. According to NALS(1991), there are four main roles played by a laboratory school:

1) teacher preparation activities
2) research
3) serving as a “model school” demonstration center
4) providing quality education for students enrolled in the school

1.) Teacher preparation activities
According to the chairman of the committee, the Case School would provide invaluable experience for student-teachers in the institute. It also helps the governing body to realize its mission in teacher education through the following ways (Pang King-chee, 1999):

- providing a venue for academic staff to show student-teachers “primary classes in action” in their teacher education programs;
- providing places for prospective teacher to experience first-hand and reality of a school’s operation.
- students from designated classes in teacher program are assigned to the school to practice their transition from preaching to practice.
- enables the teacher institute to try out innovative placement and supervision arrangements.

2.) Research
The Case School opens good and convenient grounds for the academic staff to do collaborative research and development projects with teachers of the school. One of the aims is put on all “teachers as researchers” have utilized the flexible opportunity found in this new school setting. Moreover, some committee members hope school faculty and teacher institute staff will conduct special pilots and researches project at the Case School to lead to publications and disseminating the relevant innovations for the public.

3.) A demonstration center
As a demonstration center, Some committee member proposed the Case School will available each day for visitation by educators from other schools, prospective parents, legislators, current parents, media personnel, institute students…etc. Operating in a “fish bowl” environment is found to be both challenging and stimulating by the faculty and students. However, there are different opinions in the development of the school roles.
4.) Providing quality education for students enrolled in the school
It is intended to preserve the way in school building and curriculum organization in some member’s mind. A transparency idea is not welcomed, they want school keep the secret garden, to keep the traditional way in curriculum organization in safety. It is for the aim of not affecting the children’s learning in Case School. We understand the responsibility to our proposed students enrolled in the school in education. However, the Case School existence as a “laboratory” School, these basic roles are accomplished in manners to enhance, not harm, the educational experiences of the children of the school.

The Vision of the Case School
The Case School will strive to achieve its teacher institute’s vision of “optimizing each child’s potential through the shared joy of learning and teaching”. Apart from the above statement, the Case School is going to serve as a demonstration school for developing an indigenous model of quality education in Hong Kong. The school will strive to demonstrate excellence in the areas of innovative curriculum designs, creative teaching, learning and assessment approaches and methods, effective school management and staff development practices, the provision of balanced education, and home-school cooperation. We dare say that the Case School is going to be a professional development school in Hong Kong.

It understands that good schools constantly review programs and develop or revise curricula to address the changing needs of students and society. The faculty and administration members of the school should be entitled the professional autonomy to develop the management structure, curriculum, a vision statement and a set of benchmarks for each major discipline with which they are going to implement. However, the school will start at 2002 and the school building works will kick off soon. Unfortunately, there are no any teaching staffs in the school at this planning stage. Moreover, the school planning people should have no intention to set all statements in operational terms. Rather, they prepare the documents and construct the foundations for the school development.

During the debate of the vision, mission and guiding principles in this prospective school. Some support the formulating of the draft of the vision and mission, some take different stance.
To my own opinion, a compromise in school vision and mission must be generated before the commencement of the school building design and curriculum frameworks. The underpinned guiding principles directing the architectural and infra-structural design of the school and provide the ways for the school stakeholders in curriculum development.

If we hope, this Case School is going to be a 21st century school, we should take the assumption. The new era is one, which is characterized by advance development in information technology, globalization, rapid changes, knowledge economy and multicultural exchanges, and respect of humanity. So, accordingly to the experience from Kennedy (1998), Pang (1999), Celebration (1999b) and Metcalf (1999), the features must included in the vision and mission statement which consist of quality school life for children, indigenous, a learning community, a global school, life-long education, citizenship education, with ethical and moral education in our school education.

There is an understanding that the Case School is a community of learners whose scholarship takes place in an environment of mutual trust and respect. It emphasizes maximum success, growth, and achievement for each member of the community. It becomes increasingly autonomous, integrated, and directed toward progressively more powerful outcomes.

The Aims of the Case school Education

To formulate the aims of the Case School, the committee members studied the various documents issued by the government as well as obtaining suggestions from various parties concerned. According to the Education Blueprint for the 21st century (Education Commission, 1999), the overall aims of education for Hong Kong in the 21st century should be:

“to enable everyone to develop to their full and individual potential in all areas covering ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics, so that each individual is ready for continuous self-learning, thinking, exploring, innovating and adapting to changes throughout life; filled with self-confidence and team spirit; and is willing to strive incessantly for the prosperity, progress, freedom and democracy of the society, and to contribute to the future well-being of the nation and the world at large.”

School education is the beginning of formal education, to lay the foundation for the life-long
learning of students, and prepare them for the building of a learning and civilized society, the HKSAR Government wishes to

(1) foster the development of every student;
(2) ensure the attainment of basic standards; and
(3) encourage students to take the initiative to learn.

The committee agreed with the Education Commission that the focus of the school should be on developing students’ interests in learning, communicative skills, commitment to society and country, and finally creativity. It is our expectation that our school would provide

1. Sound, mental, and physical health and the practice of safety in daily living, enjoy funs in learning and relearning, and are able to use leisure time profitably.
2. A functional use of the basic skills. These would include communication in bi-literacy and tri-lingual as shown in their mastery of Chinese, English and Putonghua and computation skills as well as special skills to be developed in other areas of the curriculum at their primary level.
3. Self-confident and have the ability to make decisions both individually and in the groups with sheer joy.
4. Self-reliance and independence of action with due regard to the rights of others.
5. A responsible sensitivity to and empathy for others and show commitment to society.
6. An understanding of the cultural aspects of our Chinese societies, history, Chinese culture and other societies of the world. To love Hong Kong society and our environment, and respect differences in opinions, culture and religious belief in the multi-cultural Hong Kong context.
7. Creative abilities and have aesthetic and human sensitivities
8. Computer literate with an ability to use computers as a means, as a learning tools, to an end for their learning and daily application.
9. An inquisitive attitude and a desire to explore the environment.
10. The moral and ethical values and behaviors inherent in our democratic way of life.
11. An understanding of economic principles and the wise use of time and resources including both human and natural.
12. The use of analytical thinking (method of science, critical thinking, reflective thinking in the solving of problems in all areas including those in the area of human affairs).
Our Belief

When schools are based on a shared, coherent set of beliefs about the purposes of education and the nature of learning, students, and organizational functioning, they are more likely to succeed on achieving its goals that when no guiding beliefs are present (Doss, 1997). The Case School does follow these thinking. However, what is intended to be achieved in the curriculum frameworks?

Nature of Education

Education is a dynamic process of social change maintained in the interest of all members of society and directed toward the improvement of society. Therefore, the good education will be the one that fosters a desire and ability on the part of men and women to plan and work together to make life more worthwhile, more satisfying, and more secure for all -- everywhere.

Primary Purpose of the school education

The primary purpose of education in this school is to promote the continuing development of individuals so that they may understand, adjust, and contribute to the democratic way of life. The school purpose is also to make school a place that is fun and offers children the special chances to enrich their lives (Deal & Peterson, 1999:110). The school is for people, as individuals and as a community. The emphasis is on acquiring and integrating knowledge and skills, developing integrity, and creating and maintaining meaningful relationships. The school will seek to provide a challenging environment, opportunity, stimulus, and guidance that will further democratic ideals and meet the need of the growing child. The nature and quality of the attitudes, appreciation, understandings largely determine the kind of citizen that a student becomes, and skills, which he has developed from birth. The human relations who exist in the school also heavily influence the significance of children’s school experiences.

Education Changes

As our knowledge of the learning process grows and as our normative values change, so will what we believe about education growth and change. Systematic investigations of the total education process should be a responsibility of all education. Change is not to be made for jumping on and off educational band (that means the student’s assessment results) wagons. Rather, proven ineffective education processes will be eliminated and replaced by more sound
Organizational Plans for the School

Organizational plans should serve the purposes of the school. The following serve as criteria for school organization:

1. It is in keeping with democratic ideals, democratic practices, and good human relationships?
2. Does it provide for close personal relationships and guidance?
3. Does it provide for continuity and relatedness in learning?
4. Does it facilitate individualization of instruction?
5. Does it provide for flexibility and resiliency in the approach to teaching as well as selection of content?
6. Does it encourage security, positive self-concepts, and sound, mental health?
7. Does it make possible the learning of essential subject matter and/or skills?

About Learning

The learner’s family background, needs, and interests heavily condition learning. The school is concerned with the whole child in his/her total environment and recognizes that learning really takes place through interaction of the two; thus a stimulating environment is necessary to maximal learning. The teacher studies both child and his/her environment in order that he may better guide him/her into purposeful experiences which are within his/her level of social, mental, emotional, and physical maturity and at the same time contribute toward the democratic ideals. The concept of readiness for learning must be applied to teaching at all levels. The child learns most effectively when interest in the thing to be learned is the major force. Since children learn in different ways, the learning process cannot be defined as a set group of procedures. Undue frustrations, tensions, and unresolved conflicts will be guarded against at all times. Overemphasis on marks, awards, and other driving devices lead to spurious learning. Teaching media must be varied and creative, providing learners with multi-opportunities to work at different rates and different levels.

Individual Differences

The reality of individual differences must be fully accepted. It is believed that an individual is the product of his/her environment coupled with the undetermined native ability. The school
should provide a challenging environment to every child in terms of his/her needs, interests, and ability, thus, every child will have an opportunity to achieve and succeed in worthwhile activities, thereby establishing a measure of security for all. Basic civic liberties will be respected and accorded to all in practice; likewise, their meaning will be clarified through study. Perspective in meeting individual needs is essential. An exclusive emphasis upon individualizing instruction to the exclusion of social learning may transform the blessing of individualism into the curse of selfishness. Likewise, and over-commitment to group-oriented activities renders us incapable of providing for the uniqueness and individualized learning necessary for the maximal benefit of each student. The learner should become increasingly responsible for determining his/her own program; he/she becomes at all times an active, but not a sole, participant in deciding how and what he/she learns.

**Curriculum Sources**

The major sources of the curriculum are the needs of children, social realities, organized fields of knowledge, and the democratic values. The curriculum should at all times be scaled to the maturation of the child. This means that the curriculum will attempt to meet the unique needs of each child. Experiences, which provide children with knowledge and skills for democratic efficiency, will be stressed. A balanced curriculum must provide for the achievement of all of the school’s general educational objectives. Thus, desirable lines of student growth in preparation for life in our society will be our aim rather than the restricted aim of subject matter mastery or the equally restrictive aim of the "child-centered" curriculum. It is to be remembered that a child meets life as an integrated whole, not as a compartmentalized area of decimals, grammar, spelling, or other specific areas of subject matter.

**Learning Design**

The school learning design includes a curriculum that builds on the natural motivation of learners exploring diverse domains of knowledge, engaging in inquiry and reasoning to find meaningful answers and solutions, and conversing, thinking and constructing knowledge to understand people and the world. The school curriculum is coherent, innovative and always learner-centered. Learning is based on a combination of hands-on experience, demonstrated academic outcomes, and validated achievement of clear and measurable standards. Learning is assessed by the use of exhibited projects, locally assessed presentations, standardized evaluation and in the form of portfolio.
Teacher's Role

The role of the teacher is that of a guide, leader, facilitator and motivator. The teacher facilitates continuous learning for each student and provides an environment for the development of desirable attitudes. The teacher will involve the student in choosing and planning those activities which can best serve him/her and society. The teacher will be accorded his/her rights or citizenship at all times. Sense of success, security, and belongingness is necessary for all individuals, including teachers. Teachers teach as a team and all the lesson plans are integrated so that the teachers try to integrate pieces of learning into life to get students ready for the real world.

Assessing Student Progress

Evaluation is the means by which goals are verified and clarified, needs are diagnosed, and progress is assessed. It is a broad process, which appraises student growth in relation to all of our educational objectives. At the same time, evaluation should be an essential contributing element in that growth. Since learning takes place in many forms and many levels, evaluation should be both continuous and multifaceted; it must be both qualitative and quantitative. The method and techniques of appraisal must be appropriate to the kinds of behavior to be appraised. Evaluation involves careful diagnosis, prescription, and immediate reaction. Each student at School is responsible for developing his/her own portfolio, either electronically or paper-based. Student’s portfolios become a cumulative effort representing who they are at model school. The portfolio is in turn used by teachers and parents to evaluate how and what a student is doing.

Effective Citizens

Students who learn to cooperate with others in the solution of common problems, who develop scientific and creative ways of thinking, who grow continuously in their understanding of the world around them, and who believe in democracy as a way of living, will help to improve our society. Neither the passive and "good" individual nor the one who is "good" but illiterate may be considered as effective citizens in our society. Likewise, the individual who is literate, knowledgeable, and active but whose value system is out of tune with democracy may not be considered a good citizen.
Democratic Values Give Direction

Democracy is a great social faith, a way of life which has its purpose equal opportunity for the maximal development of all in terms of the unique potentialities, capabilities, and personalities of each. This means that all participants (faculty, administration, students, and parents) will have an appropriate share in the planning, in the work, and in the evaluation of the results. The fundamental democratic values provide direction to the entire program of the school. As teachers, we must always bear in mind that we are representatives of the society in which we educate.

Parents and the Community

Parents and the community is a major force in the learning process. We hope the new school has partnership relationship with parents, business, service organizations, other educational agencies, and government. All of these partnerships are made with regards to serve the needs of students, both academically and socially, and to provide opportunities for experience-base learning activities.

Mission and Founding Principles

In running a school for the new millennium, all agreed that we need a sensible mission and philosophy. However, such a consensus is extremely difficult to arrive. Without such a consensus, we would be at a lost in developing a sound curriculum framework, not to mention the structural design of the new school and other matters. It would like a ship sailing in the ocean without a helmsman and a destination.

Mission

In this stage, the Case School’s mission is still evolving. However, the mission must be based on the belief that all students can learn and should be empowered to develop and to realize their academic, physical, emotional, artistic and social potentials. The school is a caring community of lifelong learners. The school acts as a model for educational methods and theory in support of the preparation of future educators, conduct educational research, offer quality educational programs for children, and disseminate information to others in the education profession. We trust education is a cooperative process among school stakeholders. It is very difficult in using
just few words to represent the mission fully reflecting the expected elements. Besides, the school stakeholders develop a shared set of beliefs that are condensed in the school’s mission statement is very important.

**Founding principles**

Substantial time was spending on developing the founding principles for the school. Experience from other schools reveals that numerous principles are identified (Celebration, 1999b; Metcalf, 1999):

1. **Self Respect**: Students behave are demonstrated by the following set of statements:
   - I know who I am and I like myself;
   - I feel safe and secure emotionally and physically;
   - I feel I belong;
   - I take care of myself;
   - I have a healthy lifestyle; and
   - I have a purpose in life and I know I can make a difference.

2. **Self-worth**: Believe in one’s self and demonstrate the ability to take risks, learn from mistakes and success.

3. **Competence**: Expand confidence through actions of quality.

4. **Love of learning**: Encompasses an open-minded, enthusiastic, and curious attitude toward new ideas. An environment that encourages creativity, critical thinking, self-reflection, exploration, and perseverance is essential to foster a true love of learning.

5. **Communication**: Engage in effective, open and efficient verbal, written, and symbolic methods of communicating thoughts and feelings.

6. **Positive attitude**: Express stable in a state of mind that promotes a high level of self-esteem, confidence in one’s abilities, a sense of humor, and the courage to persevere.

7. **Rationality**: Demonstrate the ability to think logically and reasonably.

8. **Human Dignity**: Respect the right of every human being to have needs met and potential developed.

9. **Kindness**: Behave caring attitudes and caring acts.

10. **Accountability**: Accept responsibility for personal choice and actions in relationship to self and community.
11 **Responsibility:** Accept the obligation to be dependable, trustworthy, and accountable to oneself and to others.

12 **Honesty:** Act on truthful, fair, sincere, trustworthy, and open with careful regard for the rights of others.

13 **Service:** Use unique talents and abilities to contribute positively to society.

14 **Cooperation:** Work cooperatively with others to enhance each person's unique skills and qualities.

15 **Sheer Joy:** Discover joy in individual and community experiences.

16 **Community Mindedness:** Promote the realization that everyone is a member of multiple communities ranging from small school communities to city communities to very large global communities. In each of these communities there is a need to practice good citizenship through active participation.

17 **Diversity:** Recognize and act on the belief that the inclusion of persons from a variety of cultures, backgrounds, and abilities builds a rich learning environment. Differences are approached with openness, sensitivity, and the realization that diversity is a cherished asset of a pluralistic society.

18 **Equity:** Promote the moral and ethical claim of each person to legal, social, and economic fairness.

19 **Respect for others:** Recognize the worth of other people, their ideas, beliefs, and possessions. Consideration is given to the rights and feelings of others when making decisions. Having the ability to be self reflective in an effort to appreciate personal strengths and recognize and accept personal weaknesses.

20 **Environmental Sensitivity:** Take responsibility for protecting and preserving the beauty and balance of the natural world.

21 **Wellness:** Pursue a balance of mind and body through the development of skills that meet emotional and physical needs.

22 **Innovation:** Originate, develop, and express creative ideas for positive change.

23 **Insight:** Engage in active pursuits of knowledge to construct understanding.

These twenty-three founding principles are still in developing. It is not necessary adopted by the faculty without debates. However, I believe these principles will become touchstones for decision-making in reflecting the undermined values of the school curriculum development, what is intended to be achieved.
Conclusion

The above founding principles, the Blueprint for 21st century, the NALS experiences…etc., give us invaluable insights in formulating the aims of Case School. However, they are hard to realize. Indeed, different principles represent different ideologies in education. In many cases, they represent different interest groups and inevitably conflict one another. In the case of building a new Case School in Hong Kong, additional difficulties and challenges are encountered.

First of all, teaching staff are not involved in the initial planning stage as they did not report duty yet. So the curriculum designers had no communication with those who were going to implement the curriculum. To the matter worse, the teaching staff, who did not understand well the curriculum framework created by those experts, could not identify themselves with the founding principles of the school.

Secondly, educators in Hong Kong do not create curriculum framework according to the vision, mission, and the guiding principles of the school. In such a big commercial city like Hong Kong, time is too limited to allow the school stakeholders to develop consensus on their founding principles. In addition, such a culture of collaboration among the education stakeholders simply does not exist in the profit-oriented in Hong Kong. Even a consensus is secured, it is more like an ad hoc compromise than a result of genuine collaboration.

Thirdly, though Hong Kong is a rich city, resources spend on education is far from adequate. In Hong Kong, we spent only 3 to 4 percent of our GNP on education, compare with the 5 to 6 percents in other developed countries. To make the matter worse, resources input on education are not evenly or fairly distributed. During the late-eighties, the government spent huge sum on developing tertiary education at the expense of basic education. So, the resources are not enough to carry out curriculum innovation. How can the Case School implement the various curriculum innovations initiated by the government with inadequate resources? Recently the Hong Kong government does realize the shortcomings in the education system especially the shortage of resources on basic education. We are still waiting to the government to realize her promise to improve basic education with adequate resources.
The experience of initiating the Case School indicates that the previous principal-led ad hoc model of running a new school should not continue. A more comprehensive planning, not only the hardware, but more importantly, the software of running a new school should be adopted. In addition, all the education stakeholders should be involved to develop the school curriculum framework. For this, “what will be needed in the process of the curriculum frameworks building will be curriculum settlement that will allow school stakeholders to come together and agree about the directions the school curriculum will take (Kennedy, 1998). Furthermore, Kennedy (1998) reminds us that performance itself is not competence. Rather, it is an indicator that the competence is held. The new school is to get a debate what is central for young people in the new era and to make this the centerpiece of the curriculum framework. To realize the above, a participative and collaborative culture should be first cultivated in a prospective school.
References


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