

Developing conceptual frameworks for effective school-based planning and curriculum development

Jia Xu and Colin Marsh
School of Education,
Curtin University
Bentley, West Australia, 6102.

j.xu@curtin.edu.au

c.marsh@curtin.edu.au

Paper to be presented at the Australian Curriculum Studies Association Biennial Conference, Hilton Hotel, Sydney, 7-9 October, 2011.

Developing conceptual frameworks for effective school - based planning and curriculum development

Jia Xu and Colin Marsh, Curtin University

Introduction

Ball and Forzani (2011) describe the complicated nature of teaching. They argue that a teacher needs to be able to do a number of things almost simultaneously including unpacking knowledge and ideas and making this accessible to others; being able to see ideas from others' perspectives ; to be able to do this for a number of students , even up to 40 or more; and to do all of this within a caring, productive environment.

The teacher in the classroom plans to interact with his/her students in many different ways. There are unlimited possibilities. For example, if the teacher has been directly involved in developing a teaching topic, either individually or collectively with a small group of colleagues, it is likely that there will be a high level of enthusiasm and the teaching will be well planned and successfully implemented. By contrast, the teacher who is merely provided with a syllabus and teaching materials, with little or no induction into its use, is likely to demonstrate minimal enthusiasm for teaching the unit or course, and may in fact due to misunderstanding of its purposes and methods, teach it very badly.

The planning and execution of effective teaching has become even more difficult in recent years for Australian teachers because of new external pressures. Teachers

have to now consider both external pressures and school level (internal) pressures about what they would want to teach to suit their unique classroom and school community. This juggling involves trying to handle centralised and decentralised pressures. In this paper we are focusing upon decentralised priorities as revealed by school based planning and curriculum development but centralised/external pressures cannot be ignored. In fact, a scenario which is now appearing in a number of countries is that school-based planning is now an adjunct with central planning, with both working toward educational reform (Kennedy, 2010).

Decentralised/school based planning

Priorities for school-based planning and curriculum development seem to be very ephemeral and can go in and out of fashion with educators over the decades. In some cases the rhetoric from system administrators is very strong about teacher flexibility and for devolution of decision-making to schools. A common term used to describe school-based planning is “school-based curriculum development” (SBCD) and this is still widely used in many countries. However other terms are also used such as “school-based management”, and “site-based management”.

According to Gammage and Zajda (2005) ‘the focus on the individual school as the key to successful reform strategies has a good deal of public appeal and research support’ (p.36). Y.Z Xu(2003) argues strongly for this grassroots curriculum reform.

Yet it may be that the rhetoric from education system administrators about devolution and school –based planning is no more than a smokescreen (Kennedy and Lee, 2008; Hwang and Chang,2003).

Gopinathan and Deng 2006 contend that that there is an ongoing struggle between centralized control and decentralized control. Centralized agencies are not always

able to provide timely details for teachers about how to implement some of the initiatives. It then becomes up to staff at individual schools to make sense of the situation and to work out the actions they will take.

This can be very frustrating for teachers if they are concerned creating the best possible teaching and learning opportunities for their students. Teachers need to be knowledgeable about current centralised curricula if they are to be motivated to want to put forward an alternative school- based approach in a particular subject. They may need time to work on their alternative approach by experimenting with some different options using action research. Many writers such as Elliott (1997) argue that teachers need to use action research as a tool to emancipate themselves and to become creators of curriculum.

There are other problems about SBCD to consider. It cannot be assumed that teachers have the capacity to undertake the role of curriculum developers and to undertake curriculum design tasks.

Some common problems that teachers experience include;

- Lack of time to plan, reflect , to develop curricula
 - Lack of expertise –knowledge , understandings, skills
 - Lack of finance-for materials, for teacher relief days
 - Externally imposed restrictions-by employers, parents
 - A threatening school climate-numerous resistors,lack of effective leadership.
- (Marsh 1992, p.131).

Is it possible to develop models for school based curriculum development?

Teachers are influenced very directly by the expectations and requirements of the education system in which they work. Some education systems in the past and even currently, can be very rigid in their demands upon teachers and accountability

issues can loom very large indeed. In some other education systems, responsibility for teacher planning might be more decentralised and this gives teachers more scope to experiment.

It also depends upon the priorities of education systems at a point in time. In some Australian states there has been a major emphasis upon the use of curriculum frameworks over recent years. These frameworks typically require principles that need to be followed in the teaching of the learning areas/subjects.

The impending implementation of the new Australian curriculum will also have a major impact upon how and what teachers plan for their teaching. It would appear that the new Australian curriculum as developed by ACARA, will have a major emphasis upon content and that there will be more rigorous attention given to what is taught at each grade level across all Australian states and territories. This is reinforced further because of the linking of the curriculum with NAPLAN results in years three, five, seven and nine. This means that teachers now have to be very mindful that their students are well prepared for these NAPLAN tests, especially in literacy and numeracy, because the status of the school, to a large extent, is now reflected in NAPLAN results. The principles as espoused by ACARA for the new Australian curriculum sound very wide ranging in terms of it being forward-looking, written to teachers, supporting professional decision-making and promoting teaching practices that engage and challenge students but in actual fact this may or may not be how teachers will react to this new curriculum structure.

Curriculum planning models

Over the decades a number of curriculum planning models have been published which purport to show how teachers can most effectively go about their curriculum planning to lead to effective lessons. These models are typically general and are advanced as being used for any subject area or level of teaching. Many of the early syllabus statements relied upon planning models such as Tyler (1949) to show how

teachers might plan their teaching. These prescriptive approaches, include Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962) but also other descriptive approaches such as Walker's naturalistic model (1970). A recent curriculum planning model developed by Wiggins and McTighe (1998) is the Understanding by Design (UBD) model.

Yet none of these models really address some of the specific issues involved in doing school-based planning and so it is necessary to turn to more context-related models.

SBCD planning models

When examining school-based planning approaches it is evident that each school situation is very different. The mix of teacher background, expertise and motivation; the range of student abilities and interests; and the overall school community and context can vary enormously and so it is more difficult to come up with models that can be generalised across a range of different schools. Yet it may be possible to identify some common factors that are important in doing school-based curriculum development (SBCD) in many different contexts.

Brady (1987) argues that a model can contain a theoretical dimension of factors that can be justified on educational grounds and an administrative/practical dimension which pinpoint methods involved in on-the-ground planning and administering of tasks.

Kemmis et al (2010) refer to teaching practices as a combination of sayings and doings and relatings which can be classed in their entirety as 'metapractices' or "ecologies of practice". Thus any planning model needs to take note of :

- Academic and social practices of students
- New and innovatory educational practices of teachers
- Formal and informal professional development
- Educational policy and administration
- Educational research and evaluation

A more pessimistic stance is taken by Hall and Corkett (2009) who argue that teachers planning now in the 21ST century are skewed to teaching to the test and high stakes testing .This gives them little opportunity to develop creative, reflective learning opportunities within a post-modern framework.

Lim and Chai (2008) contend that planning models must also factor in the complexities of technology-enhanced (ICT) environments. They consider that ICT is so all-pervading in todays teaching that any planning models developed need to consider such ICT matters as :

- does a planning model allow teachers to critically re-examine their existing practices and to actively explore their use of ICT?
- does a planning model enable students and other teachers to be involved in ICT priorities and activities?
- To allow for maximum use of ICT, planning models should be nonlinear and nonsequential and need to be context dependent.

These caveats are an important reminder of what needs to be included in any comprehensive planning model .

Marsh (2010) contends that the important planning questions are;
What is happening when teachers and principals get involved in school-based planning and curriculum development? What are some of the factors that are conducive to effective school-based planning by teachers? How do they know if their plans are working well? How do they communicate their successes and concerns to others?

From an examination of the curriculum planning literature it appears that there are two major categories of school-based models, namely

- models that create typologies of different variations of SBCD.
 - Brady 1987
 - Marsh et al 1990
- models that develop interlinked explanatory factors for successful SBCD
 - Wong Yu Lai Wah (2008)
 - Lo Yiu Chun 1999
 - Lee (2008)
 - Marsh (2009)

Models that create typologies of different variations of SBCD

These models provide basic information about different types of SBCD that might be practised in schools.

For example, Brady (1987) produced a very basic typology based upon approaches of SBCD which he categorised as creation, adaptation and selection of curriculum materials , and people involved in SBCD which he divided into individual, individual in parameters, group, whole staff (see figure 1) .

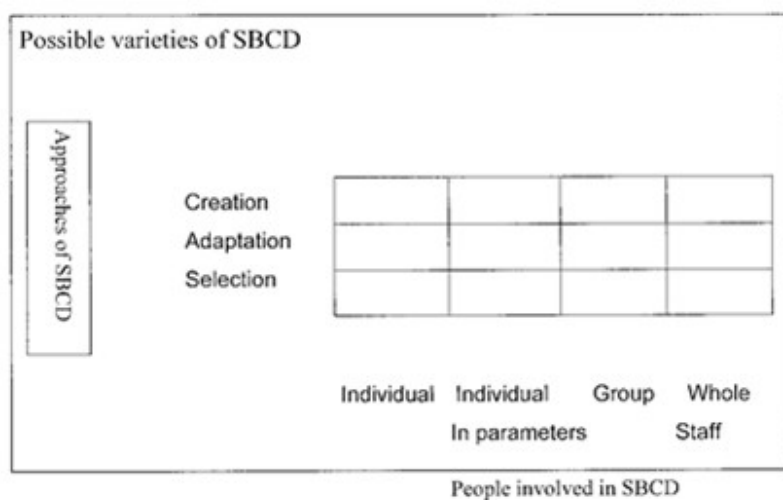


Figure 1: Brady's matrix for analysis of SBCD in practice (Brady, 1987)

Marsh (1990) produced a three-dimensional model which included type of activity, people involved and a time commitment, as illustrated in figure 2. This particular model seemed at the time to produce a useful categorisation of the different types of SBCD which might occur.

For example a typical SBCD activity might be the adaptation of a primary science workbook by a small group of teachers as part of a short-term plan to upgrade the teaching of science in the upper primary grades. This could be shown on a three-dimensional matrix quite clearly by marking in the appropriate matrix cells of adaption, small group of teachers and short-term plan.

By contrast a more ambitious SBCD might be the creation of new materials for a local community unit by a team of teachers, parents and students as a long-term plan to be completed over a period of one calendar year. This example of SBCD is more highly developed and involves creation of materials, involving a team of colleagues and a long-term plan.

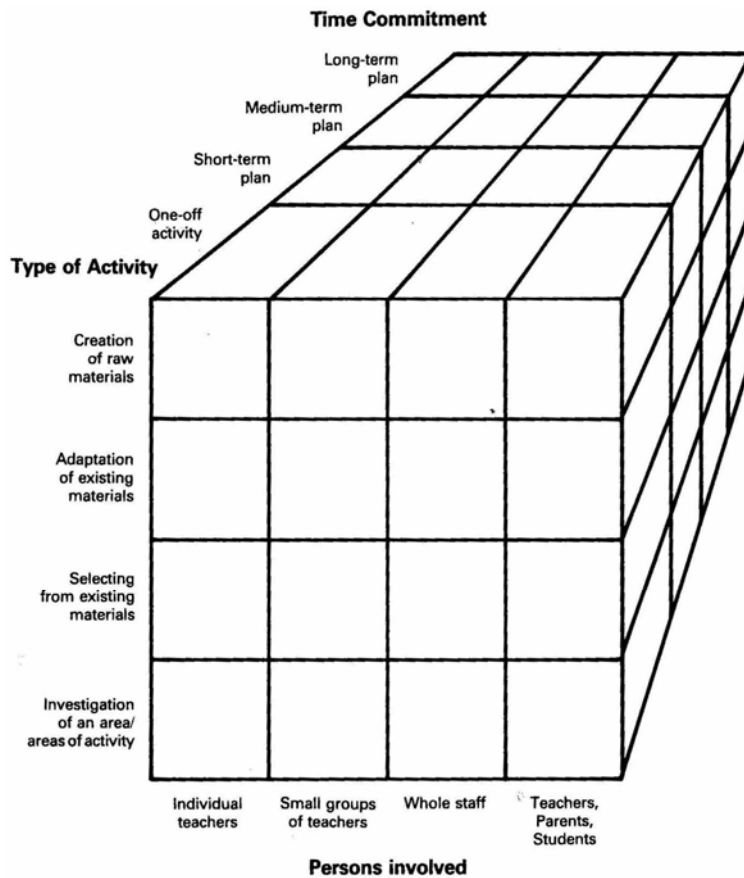


Figure 2: A three-dimensional model of SBCD (Marsh, 1990)

Models that develop interlinked explanatory factors for successful SBCD

Lo(1999) examined school-based curriculum development(SBCD) in three case study schools in Hong Kong and from this data developed an explanatory model of how SBCD might be successfully implemented in that country

Lo(1999) noted that the school-based curriculum project scheme in Hong Kong was centrally organised by the Education Department. This may have seemed to be a contradiction because on the one hand the Hong Kong education system in the 1990s was "highly centralised and bureaucratic in nature and did not have a strong tradition of teachers' involvement in curriculum decision-making" (Lo,(1999) p. 421). However teachers at the three case study schools were asked to modify centrally developed materials, under the supervision of inspectors and to try them

out with their respective classes, after which the results should be evaluated and submitted to the Education Department for approval. Afterwards some of the projects from the three case study schools were exhibited at an annual exhibition. It can be seen this was a very centralised form of SBCD and one wonders about the motivation and ownership that this might have been generated by teachers in these three schools. As Lo (1999) indicates in figure 3, the major figure in the organisation and dissemination of SBCD was clearly the Education Department. Although the cycle of development stages for the teachers appeared to be satisfactory and went through the typical phases of awareness, identification, development of materials, evaluation, modification and finalisation, it does appear to be a highly directed approach.

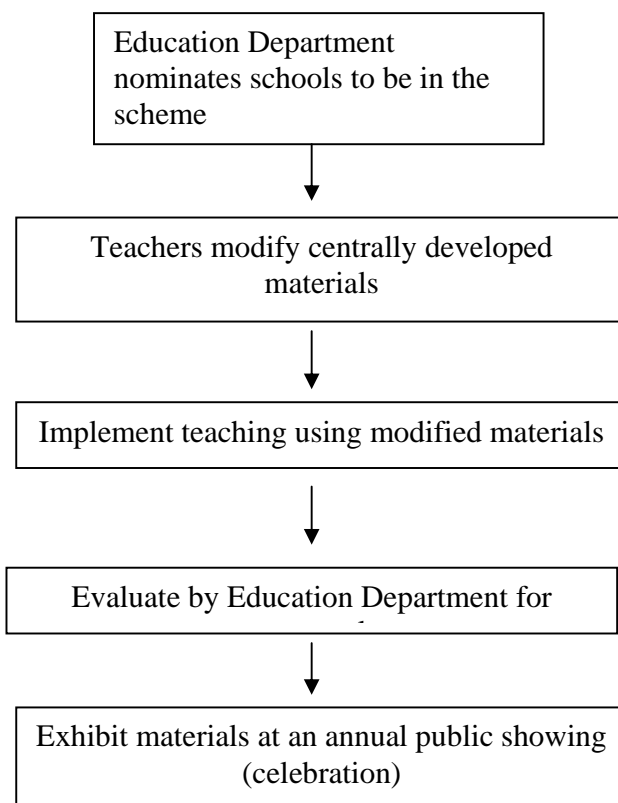


Figure 3: School-Based Curriculum Project Scheme, Hong Kong (Lo, 1999)

Lo (1999) concluded that the SBCD practised in these three case study schools was very much a bureaucratic version which stressed the one-off production of

classroom materials. There was little focus on student needs and the project materials that were tightly linked to existing syllabuses. In this example SBCD was administratively driven rather than educationally driven. Lo (2009) noticed that the rhetoric of the scheme emphasised the importance of teachers' participation but in practice various control mechanisms were employed by the Education Department. Of the three case study schools the most successful one was where there was a degree of consensus in decision-making and collaborative staff relationships.

Lee (2003) developed an SBCD model based upon his research in a number of Asian countries. As indicated in figure 4 he considered that the four major factors leading to successful SBCD included focus, role of teachers, spaces, and constraints.

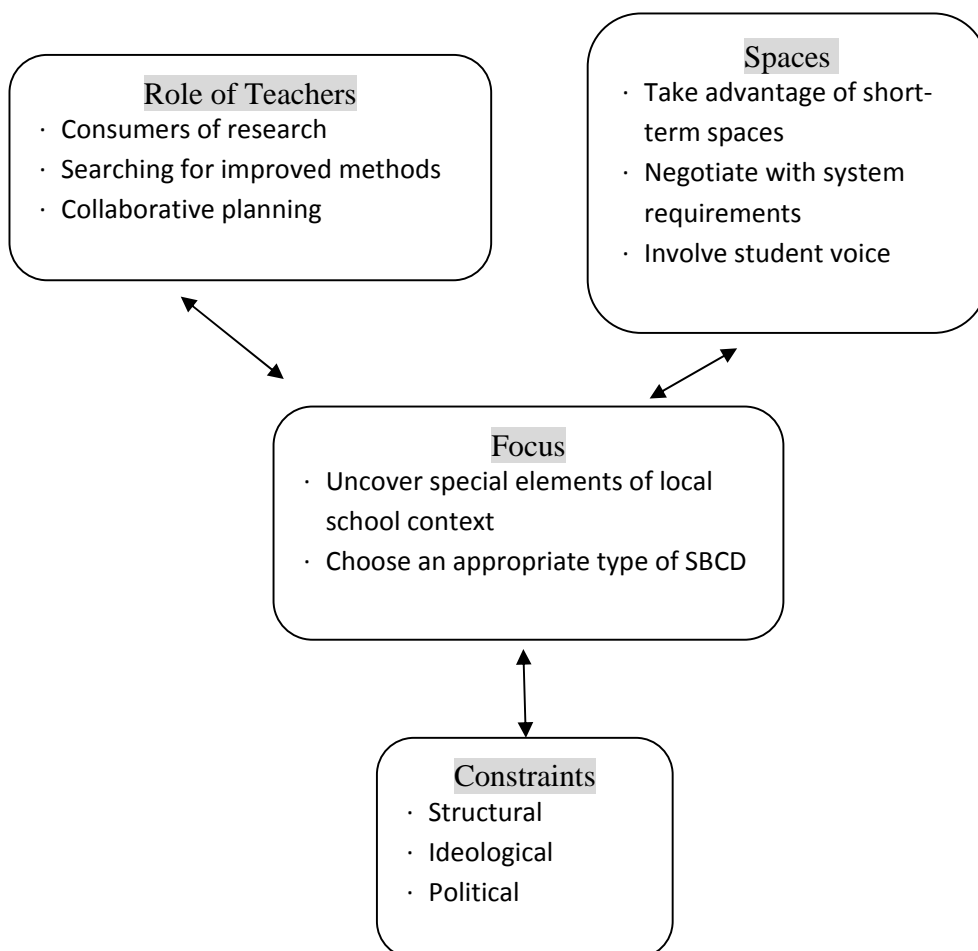


Figure 4: Lee's model of SBCD (2008)

Focus

The focus element is clearly most important. There are a myriad of different kinds of SBCD ranging from central control, to principal controlled, to more democratic forms of organisation. Morris and Adamson(2010) note that the rhetoric of SBCD is often cited in very positive terms such as school-based, bottom-up, teacher-centred, participative, and democratic but the specific focus may be very different.

Lee (2008) argues that some key aspects of focus include the necessity to uncover the special elements of the local school context and to make a conscious effort to deliberate on what actions are needed to effect desirable outcomes.

Role of the teacher

Lee (2008) considers that ideally teachers should be action researchers in trying to find out what is most desirable in their classrooms and taking active steps to experiment with alternatives. Further, he argues that they should be consumers of research and that they should be constantly discussing and looking for ways of improving teaching within a given school. This of course requires a lot of teamwork and collaborative planning. He suggests that teachers must be continually reviewing and reinterpreting their classroom practices and priorities.

Spaces

Finding the spaces in a very tight school timetable can be quite difficult but this must be the starting point. He argues that sometimes the spaces only allow for short term school-based planning to occur but these need to be taken so that in due course more ambitious school-based planning activities can start. He considers that in trying to find spaces in curriculum it is necessary to negotiate between what the system requirements demand and what the needs of students are and how these can be facilitated using more appropriate school-based curriculum (Christenbury, 2011). Lee (2008) also considers that student voice is most important in trying to establish some of these short-term and long-term spaces in curriculum.

Constraints

The typical constraints can be structural, ideological and political. The structural constraints of course are those relating to the nationally determined curriculum and the nonnegotiable structures that are set in place by education systems. Currently an economic impetus is very evident in most education systems as is a very heavy emphasis on literacy and numeracy.

Ideological constraints can occur largely with regard to religious schools which have a very limited curriculum such as the Matrassa schools.

Political factors can also affect the emphasis on the range of subjects included in the school curriculum and this has been very evident in countries in Asia ranging from China through to Indonesia and Korea.

Wong (2008) studied how a new General Studies Curriculum for primary schools was used as the basis for school-based planning by a Hong Kong school over the period 2003 -- 2006. The General Studies Curriculum Guide consists of an integration of primary science, health and social studies and this guide was implemented in all Hong Kong primary schools in 1996 – 1997. This curriculum guide had the potential for teachers to enhance and develop it at the school level because of its integrated focus. Not only was the guide conducive to experimentation by teachers, but the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Department had been running workshops on the General Studies Curriculum each year and these had provided valuable professional development sources for teachers.

Wong (2008) developed a model to depict how specific factors were crucial in the successful implementation of this school-based program (see figure 5). He contends that government initiatives through professional development programs are crucial to change teacher beliefs and understandings. He was adamant that new approaches

and techniques, that would be needed in an integrated approach in the general studies program had to be introduced to teachers first through these professional development programs.

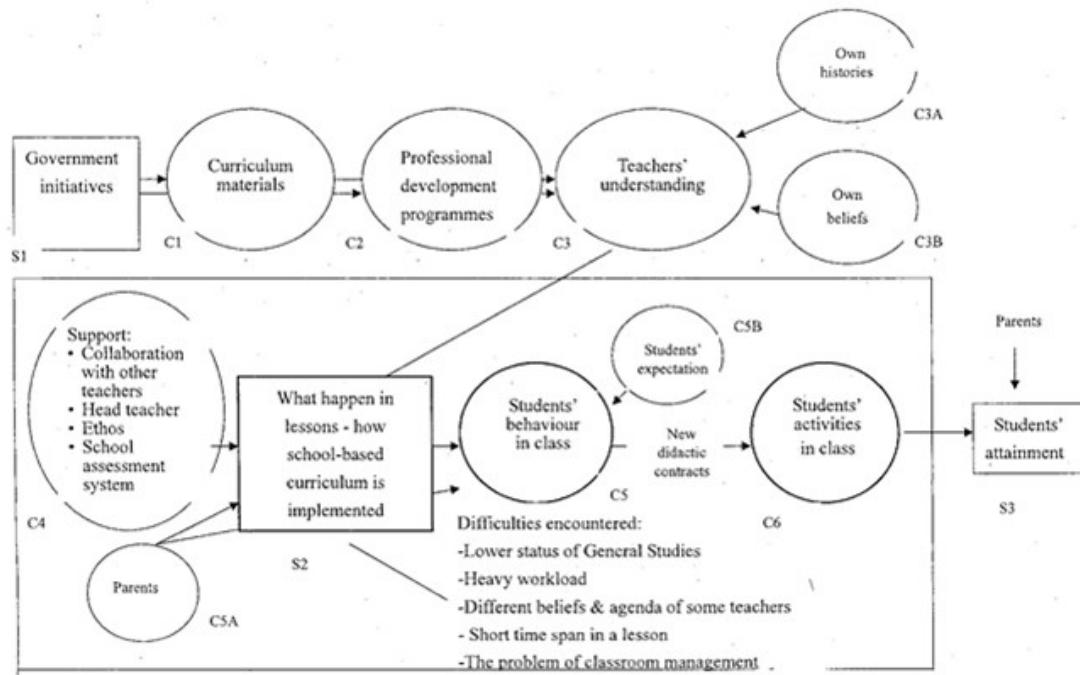


Figure 5: A model of implementing school-based curriculum in a subject (Wong, Y.L.W., 2008)

He argued that what happens in lessons (see central square in figure 5) is affected by the amount of collaboration, support by the principal and the general ethos of the school. Further, he argued that the level of success can be affected by such difficulties as the lower status of the General Studies curriculum, the heavy workload and different beliefs of some teachers. However, if these problems can be overcome he argues that students will want to actively participate in the new curriculum and that higher levels of student attainment can be achieved.

Marsh (2009) developed a more detailed conceptual model of SBCD based upon four major factors as basic dimensions which are progressively linked across processes

in the school to support SBCD (secondary dimension) and to innovative outcomes and practices (final dimension (see fig.6).

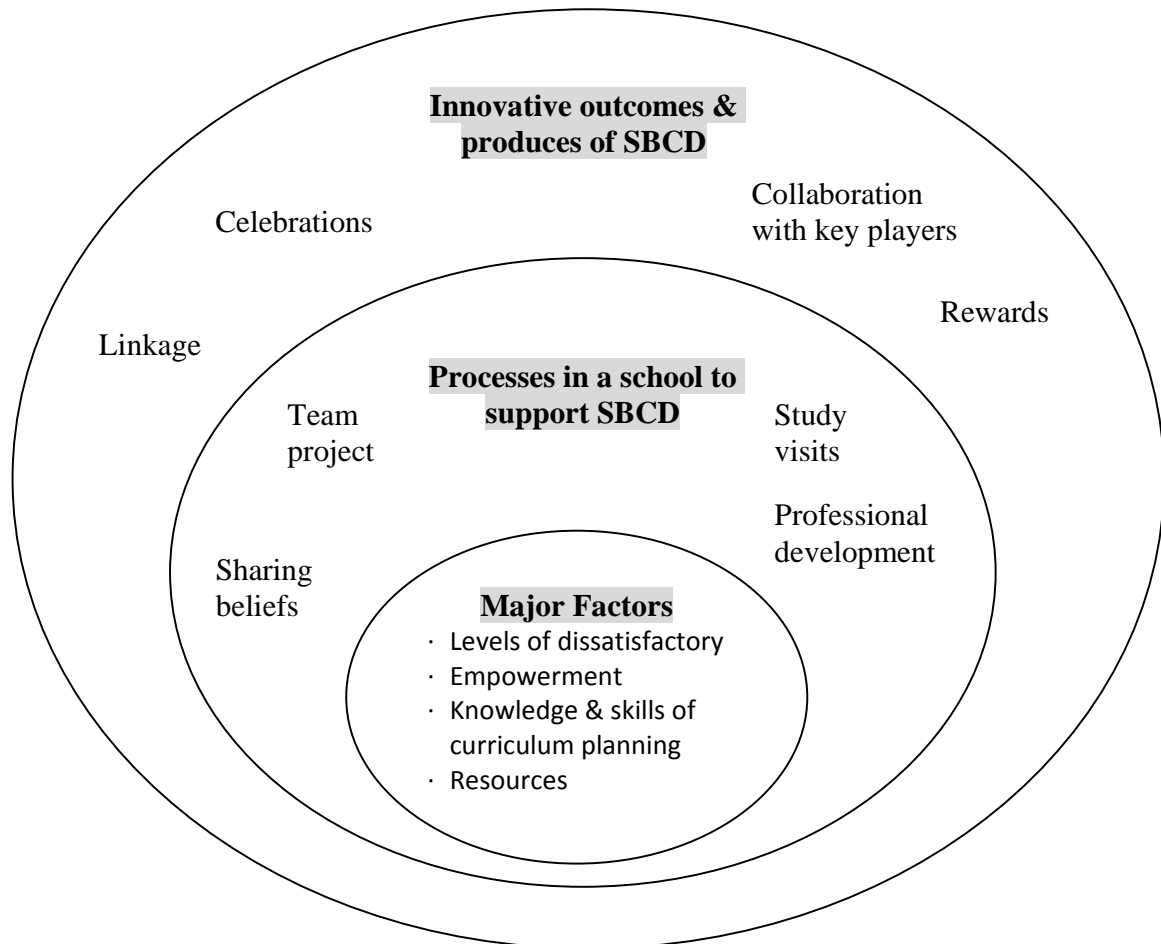


Figure 6: A Conceptual Model of SBCD (Marsh, 2009)

(1) His four factors (basic dimension) include;

- levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with central controls
- empowerment
- knowledge and skills of curriculum planning
- resources

(2) Processes in the school to support SBCD (secondary dimension)

Examples include exploring alternatives such as distributed leadership and action research.

(3) Innovative outcomes and practices of SBCD in a school

This can include celebration of small and large scale successes, plans for continuity and improved student results, higher levels of camaraderie, rewards, ongoing comprehensive evaluations

Factors (basic dimension)

Levels of satisfaction / dissatisfaction with central controls

Marsh (2009) argues that job satisfaction is a key variable. If teachers are satisfied with what their students are achieving then there is little motivation for them to change this state of affairs. He argues that teachers have to balance out competing forces about whether they want to become involved in SBCD or not. Some of the driving forces can be very influential such as group pressure and personal ambitions but so to can restraining forces such as limited time available and likelihood of receiving criticism from important groups such as parents.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a significant concept in understanding some of the complex relations that happen within and between staff at a school. Devolution of significant authority to teachers is an important avenue for bringing about distributed leadership.

Curriculum planning participants in SBCD need to have knowledge and skills of curriculum planning if they are to be effective. An open dialogue is necessary for staff to consider their various opinions and beliefs and to gradually move to a platform that enables them to operate collaboratively.

Resources

SBCD relies heavily upon human and nonhuman resources (Stewart, 2011). Doing

SBCD using self- nurturing resources can be extremely difficult. External funding from education authorities can be very effective indeed in terms of providing professional development, and for enabling extra staff allocations to be made to free up other staff for planning sessions

Processes in a school to support SBCD (secondary dimension).

This is a critical element. There can be many and varied opportunities for teachers to explore alternatives and to be given leadership opportunities for distributed leadership. On occasions external experts can be used to communicate knowledge and skills to those teachers just learning to embark upon an SBCD project.

Recognition of innovative approaches (final dimension)

It is important that SBCD activities whether they are small-scale or large-scale are given recognition for their efforts and their projects are celebrated both within the school and within the wider community. Further efforts must be made to plan for continuity and linkage between levels of schooling so that successes are maintained and not short-lived. Above all collaboration between key players is needed to maintain a positive school atmosphere.

Concluding comment

As noted by Kennedy 2010 and Gopinathan and Deng (2006) there continues to be tensions between centralised and decentralised forms of curriculum development. Making curriculum space available for SBCD is occurring in many countries but within parameters of centralised frameworks and externally imposed accountability measures.

Therefore if conceptual planning models are to be effective in this dualist environment, it is essential that centralised and decentralised targets are factored into the structures. The models outlined in this paper consist of a variety of approaches, some of which pursue a social democratic goal (Kennedy, 2010) while

others are more attuned to a somewhat limited role for SBCD of finding spaces within a centralised framework.

References

Ball, D.B. Forzani, F. M. (2011) Teaching skilful teaching, *Educational Leadership*, 68,4, pp40-45

Brady, L. (1987) The relationship between models and methods in school-based curriculum development, *Curriculum Perspectives*,7,1,47-52.

Christenbury, L. (2011). The flexible teacher, *Educational Leadership*. 68, 4, 46 – 50

Elliott, J. (1997) School-based based curriculum development and action research in the United Kingdom. In S. Hollingsworth (ed) *International action research: a case study for educational reform*, Falmer press, London.

Gamage, D. Zajda, J. (2005) Decentralisation and School-based management: A comparative study of Self-Governing Schools Models Educational practice and theory, 27, 2, 35-58

Gopinathan, S. Deng, Z. (2006) Fostering school – based curriculum development in the context of new educational initiatives in Singapore, *Planning and Changing*, 37, 1-2, 93 – 110.

Hall B.E. and Corkett, J.K. (2009) Post – modern instructional design: Teacher As Slave, pPaper presented at the International Association of Scientific Knowledge, Aveiro, Portugal

Hwang, J.J. Chang (2003) Curriculum study in Taiwan: Retrospect and prospect, in

W.F. Pinar (ed) International Handbook of Curriculum research, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, New Jersey.

Kemmis, S. Wilkinson, J. Hardy, I. Edwards – Groves, C. (2009) Leading and Learning: Developing Ecologies of Educational Practice, Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Adelaide.

Kennedy, K.J. (2010) School – Based Curriculum Development for New Times: A comparative analysis, in E.H. Law and N. Nieveen (eds) Schools as Curriculum Agencies: Sense publishers, Rotterdam

Kennedy, K.J. Lee. J.C.(2008) The changing role of schools in Asian Societies ,Routledge, London.

Law, E.H. Nieveen, N. (eds),(2010) Schools as Curriculum Agencies, Sense publishers, Rotterdam

Lee, J.C (2008) Curriculum reform; school –based curriculum development as a strategy for Asia's schools, in K.J. Kennedy and J. C. Lee The changing role of schools in Asian Societies, Routledge, London.

Lim, C.P Chai, C.S. (2008) Re-thinking classroom-oriented instructional development models to mediate instructional planning in technology-enhanced learning environments, Teaching and Teacher Education,24,2002-2013.

Lo, Yiu Chun (1999) School – based curriculum development: The Hong Kong experience, The Curriculum Journal, 10,3, 419 – 442.

Marsh C.J. (2009) Key concepts for understanding curriculum, 4th ed, Routledge,

London.

Marsh, C.J. Day, C. Hannay, L. McCutcheon, G (1990) *Reconceptualising school – based curriculum development*, Falmer Press, London.

Morris, P. Adamson, B.(2010) *Curriculum, Schooling and society in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong.

Stewart, V. (2011) *Raising teacher quality around the world*, *Educational Leadership*, 68, 4, 16 – 21

Taba, H. (1962) *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*, Harcourt Brace and World, New York.

Tyler, RW (1949) *Basic principles of curriculum and instruction*, University of Chicago press, Chicago.

Walker, D.F. (1971) *A naturalistic model of curriculum development*, *School Review* 80, 1, 51 – 65.

Wiggins, G and McTighe J. (1998) *Understanding by design*: ASCD Alexandria, Virginia.

Wong, Yu and Lai, Wah (2008) *Challenges and strategies to educational change: Introducing School- based curriculum*, unpublished paper, Hong Kong Institute of Education

Xu, Y.Z. (2003) *Theories and Examples of School-Based Curriculum developments* (in Chinese) People's Education Press, Beijing