School Widening curriculum conversations: initiatives of reculturing and restructuring

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Abstract
The paper is based on some emerging ideas about theorising curriculum leadership within a context of school-based management. The study is situated in a changing context of Hong Kong where two major reforms, school-based curriculum development and school-based management, have been on the school agenda for several years. The inclusion of parents, teachers and students for exploring innovative practices of school program, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation with reference to the Key Learning Areas is investigated.

In the study, widening curriculum conversations with some major stakeholders of education is characterised by collaborative efforts of school reculturing and restructuring. The schools reculturing and restructuring themselves as productive and innovative places for curriculum change are those who are committed to confronting own problems and taking those problems and issues on board. Given the importance of sustaining curriculum conversations and actions, factors contributing to shape initiatives of school reculturing and restructuring are then identified and elaborated.

Introduction
This paper explores some initial thoughts of school initiatives about reculturing and restructuring in the face of curriculum leadership. The paper follows through some emerging ideas from the first phase of the study reported in my AERA 2003 paper at Chicago, which have embodied a view that curriculum leadership within a context of school-based management may be seen as opening up an agenda of common interest in teachers, students and parents to change the world of school for better. This paper then addresses the second phase of the study investigating how cultural aspects impinging on the practice of shared decision-making and how managerial aspects opening up new structures within each school and across sites. The second phase, which was conducted in 2003, focused on the ways of sustaining curriculum conversations and actions within and across school sites when seizing global ideas and agendas into local contexts. While situated in Hong Kong this sort of pilot work will be of interest to those who are engaged in addressing the issues and problems of curriculum change and curriculum leadership in other contexts.

Conceptualising the study and some methodological issues
After a four-year collaborative research study, I have come to a point which the interactions of people, context and curriculum together display a three-
dimensional space that opens up new possibilities for people involved in envisioning and enacting teacher curriculum decision-making as both the means and ends leading to new conceptions and practices of curriculum leadership (see Koo, 2002a). In view of this, retiming, reculturing and restructuring appear to be three main strategies for engaging teachers in curriculum leadership within a context of curriculum change. My view informed by the research study is that the emerging ideas from a traditional approach, a humanistic approach, a democratic approach and a neo-democratic approach are understood with respect to the purpose, process and product of teachers’ curriculum work. These four approaches to theorise teacher curriculum decision-making (see Koo, 2002b) present a theoretical framework for me (as a researcher) which are useful for investigating curriculum issues and problems in the first phase and second phase of the study reported in this paper. As a matter of fact, the four-year collaborative research study with a selection of teachers and principals provided spaces and places for participants to improve practice toward a neo-democratic approach to theorising teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change.

Based on the assumption that teachers’ curriculum work is increasingly challenging in four aspects (the challenge to the curriculum traditions of “old wine, new bottle”; the challenge to the reform temptations of being “unauthentic, huge and vague”; the challenge of curriculum making; and, the challenge for democratic curriculum leadership), this research study then explores how those three main strategies (retiming, reculturing and restructuring) would take the shape of curriculum leadership in individual school sites. It is important to note that theorising curriculum leadership, according to the research results of the first phase of the study, foreshadows a shared agenda of leading educational partnerships. The essence is the changing conception of position-authority and decision-making in the context of school-based management upon which the emerging themes focus on the inter-connectedness and paradoxical challenges between leadership and partnership. It is also important to recognise that research collaboration and change efforts are not only needed from within but also across the societies in the world. It is not so much to do with external changes and policy initiatives imposed by the government agencies or social change arising from globalisation and knowledge economy. In this study, the attempt to investigate the cultural and structural conditions of engaging significant others in curriculum leadership is due to authenticity from teachers and principals about (re)gaining a sense of satisfaction and challenge in the interest of students, parents and other major stakeholders with reference to teacher curriculum decision-making and curriculum change. After working with me in continued collaborative research study more than five years, the research participants have the inner desires and high aspirations for changing the traditional view of curriculum leadership from within. This is the impetus upon which school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing in terms of curriculum critique, transformation and reconstruction are considered. This also marks the difference with the traditional view of school administration
and management about school restructuring as a reform strategy due to worldwide technological, political, social and economic developments (see Woods, Jeffrey, Troman & Boyle, 1997). In other words, the orientation of this study to explore school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing could be seen quite different from the Education Commission (2000)’s motto: “the world has changed, so must the education system!” (p.5).

With reference to the research assumption and the research focus, the research question of this study hereto consists of three parts: what is the interface of curriculum making and educational partnership from the principal’s perspective? What are the cultural politics of everyday life in school with a view to curriculum leadership? What might be the structural conditions and school culture within which the underlying interpersonal and intersubjective relations among the principal, teachers, students and parents capture the essence of curriculum leadership in a changing curriculum context? This paper, therefore, is structured within these three parts of research question in order to explore the strategies of retiming, reculturing and restructuring in curriculum leadership. Apart from gleaning through a wide variety of literature listed in previous collaborative study about education reform, curriculum change, teacher curriculum decision-making, curriculum leadership, and school-based management (for example, Koo, 2002a, 2002b, 2003), the second phase of this study particularly focused on a body of literature about restructuring, reculturing, cultural politics, curriculum leadership, and school-based management.

In the 90’s, reform agendas were often related to decentralisation of centralised power and authority to schools via management and administrative initiatives. Herman (1993) points out that school-based management reallocates and redistributes decision-making authority in many areas, from the central district level to the individual school level. It involves representatives of teachers, parents, and sometimes community members and students in making decisions in some or all of the areas of budget, personnel, instruction, policy, student services, and governance (p.24). While this might be acknowledged as a way of moving toward democracy in terms of shared decision-making and devolution of power, the images of leadership and position-authority within the school systems and curriculum work seemed to align with status quo (see Porter, 1998, for example). This might be worsened when restructuring is gendered in its re-formation of social, political and economic relationships in a number of ways. Educational restructuring has produced specific dilemmas for women in educational leadership (Blackmore, 1999). As far as the definition of restructuring is concerned, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) claim that restructuring initiatives introduce substantial departures from conventional practice. New configurations of power and authority challenge educators, students, and parents to perform new roles that require new skills and attitude (p.1). On the other hand, Murphy (1997) contends that restructuring has a lack of definition yet it is almost widely accepted as a reform strategy. Although systematic change is at the heart of the restructuring movement (Smith & O’Day, 1990), educational
restructuring does not necessarily lead to a romance of success. Rather, it is a
danger to those involved as they either lose meaning or lose sight on the core
principles of restructuring (Murphy, 1997, p.36).

Given that reculturing a learning organisation is much more of a challenge
than simply restructuring it, identities of curriculum leadership must focus on
personal (see Aspland, Macpherson & Elliott, 2003). In this respect,
methodological issues in relation to cross-cultural investigations and gender
awareness could have a role in researching about different issues of
restructuring and/or reculturing (see Koo, 2002c). Shotter (1993) is
concerned with human culture in the widest sense, with ideas of personal
relationships, civil society, social ecology, identity and belonging. He argues
for individuals having a ‘voice’ in civil society that they can play a part in the
shaping and reshaping of their lives – the strongest and most creative forces
known to man other than the forces of the market (p.202). In the field of
curriculum inquiry, Bourdieu’s concept, cultural capital, calls attention to the
power dimension of cultural resources in market societies (Swartz, 1997). In
this study, school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing are concerned
with various sorts of resources, power and authority in the interest of
politics in education is not only about the complex issues of what and whose
cultural capital becomes official knowledge...cultural politics is also, and
profundly, about the resources we employ to challenge existing relations to
defend those counterhegemonic forms that now exist, or to bring new forms in to
existence. As I note in my concluding chapter, this is part of a conscious collective
attempt to name the world differently, to positively refuse to accept dominant
meanings, and to positively assert the possibility that is could be different (p.21,
original italics)” (p.19). Thus, Henderson and Thomas (2003) remind that

cultural change is impossible without the cultivation of a broad political base
(Sergiovanni, 1992, 2000; Lieberman, 1995). Despite the paramount
importance of understanding the lifeworld perspectives of teachers and
principals about teacher curriculum decision-making, it is also worthwhile for
researchers to look into the cultural politics of teachers’ everyday life in
curriculum work and how all this affects the underlying interpersonal and
intersubjective relations among the principal, teachers, students and parents
within a changing curriculum context. One of the major concerns should be
on the politics of identity and belonging in schools. This is well explained by
Aspland, Macpherson and Elliott’s (2003) statement that “building on the
assumption that identity is marked by difference, the identity of curriculum
leaders is constructed through images of leadership that are different from
those of traditional images of leadership. Our concept of curriculum
leadership is not confined to those persons who are assigned to recognised
positions of leadership in schools. It does not align with a more traditional
view of educational administration and management” (p.7).

This study was conducted in a primary school which had developed trusting
working relationships with me (as a researcher) after our five-year research
collaboration. This prolonged period of school participation in researching the
topics of teacher curriculum decision-making and curriculum change is evident of demonstrating the authenticity as one criterion of the data collected. A principal, a deputy principal and a teacher from the same school were involved in individual interviews. In viewing that the first phase of the study was a case study in cubic form (which involved six teachers, six parents and six students in both individual interviews and group conversations), this second phase of the study was then unfolded to be a case study with multi-layers in which the research participants’ aspirations for school restructuring and reculturing were interpreted. Moreover, the data were interrogated by the broad framework of a more general view of curriculum leadership discourse (see Macpherson, Aspland, Elliott and Brooker, 2002). The purpose of interrogating the data was to provide a reflexive lens for this study.

Some ideas of school initiatives of reculturing and restructuring
The individual interviews with the principal (Charlie), the duty principal (Aliza) and the teacher (Christine) were structured around the three parts of the research question of this study. The narrative content in display was then related to firstly, the principal’s theorising of curriculum leadership; secondly, the interface of principal’s and teacher’s curriculum work; thirdly, the cultural traditions of everyday life in school; and fourthly, the relations between curriculum change and school-based management in individual school sites. Three narrative accounts were summarised from the individual interviews in the following.

Extracts from Charlie (the principal)’s narrative account
“I see myself as the one to support fellow colleagues; they could acknowledge me as the ‘bridge’ between their aspirations and their implementation.

Throughout a year, there are some fixed curriculum work that must be implemented as told…The newly introduced school position by EMB (the job title as PSMCD) is for both monitoring various sorts of curriculum work in school and problem solving. Who is going to take up this post will reduce half workload.

I think about EMB when curriculum leadership is mentioned. But, not only EMB but also teacher education institutions (academic) could be “the sales agents”. We are learned from previous policy initiatives that some central agencies have lost their reputation to promote new reforms. In fact, we have a lack of mutual trust…Nevertheless, we should move away from a management point of view toward a proactive stance in education.

I don’t know whether there is a wide sense of community in each school district or not. In our everyday life, school competitions are very keen. Our way of survival is that each school is always highly
competitive with another one nearby! Our ‘reality’ is that each school is compared with another in many ways.

We need support from our school board. We need understanding and support from the parents. I really trust that teachers in this school are rational enough in giving their ‘voice’ – this is in fact our school culture. For restructuring, it is timely in our school to take the first step that allows teacher representatives and/or parents to be members of our school board. It is not my concern whether each staff has one vote or not. It is surely my concern that we must improve our relationships between the school, teachers and significant others. This is indeed a matter of respect.”

Extracts from Christine (the teacher)’s narrative account

“Schools always follow what are told. There is often a sense of urgency in schools. It seems that teachers do work for the sake of some people, but not for the interest of students. We do too much paper work. In result, there is not enough communicative space between teachers and students. All this, I think, is the school culture.

I see curriculum leadership as some sort of collective decision-making with a group of people. Curriculum leadership has to do with innovative ideas in order to meet the (changing) needs of the society. Leadership is also in relation to direction. We need colleagues to lead the change, not the SBM. Principals should have the direction in their minds when educational reforms are considered. In this regard, these principals should work closely with fellow colleagues. I think they should not see themselves as followers.

I would say that curriculum leadership could be realised in our work through Action Research. Why? I think all this is related to reflection, feeling, sharing, context and so on. I imagine that sharing is the interface between the principal’s and the teachers’ curriculum work.

In a hierarchical school structure, teachers are only receivers because of our ‘innocence’. We often listen to announcement. We are then seen as passive and unwilling to change. I urge teachers to be more self-open. We need a common vision. We should be more proactive (tears in Christine’s eyes). We do need curriculum feedback and evaluation in many ways.”

Extracts from Aliza (the deputy principal)’s narrative account

“Curriculum leaders are those who know thoroughly the ideas of school-based management and school-based curriculum development. Curriculum leadership involves visionary strategic planning. I mean long-term planning by stages. Self-autonomy and self-consciousness
are very important in the processes of reflection on school-based development. Nonetheless, curriculum leaders are active listeners. I mean these people have the direction in mind. They also need other people’s support to implement the consensual agreement.

Curriculum leadership also implies (human and physical) resource allocation which is crucial for the monitoring of ongoing feedback/evaluation and reflection. In this regard, school structure should be no longer hierarchical. I mean both the top-down and bottom-up forces. I imagine the school structure to be cyclic, more interactive, fluid and lively. Inter-connectedness of various parts of the structure is very important. This is to avoid fragmentation in school participation. Inter-subject linkage is my key concern. Evidently, all this needs coordination, planning and mutual understanding. I would say that all this actually leads us to a learning community in school.”

In the midst of new challenges emerging from curriculum leadership, each of these accounts reflected various concerns on power, position-authority and responsibility derived from the infra-structure of the Start and Smart school (the school name used in Koo’s AERA 2003 paper). As the deputy head, Aliza’s image of curriculum leadership with reference to school restructuring and reculturing is toward visionary move, strategic planning, teacher positioning and resource implications. As the principal, Charlie’s theorising of curriculum leadership was more in terms of democratic participation, civic quality and responsibility. As a front-line teacher, Christine’s image of curriculum leadership with reference to school restructuring and reculturing is rooted in the principles of teacher professionalism, self-autonomy, self-consciousness and the value of educational research.

At this stage, the above-mentioned personal narrative accounts reveal the complexities, paradoxes and dynamicity of curriculum leadership in which it operates. In many ways, the data of this study has demonstrated the intimate relations of the emerging image of curriculum leadership with the issues of school-based management.

Interrogating the data from a more general view of curriculum leadership discourse
In order to address the three parts of the research question more fully, a more general view of curriculum leadership discourse was adopted to provide a broad framework for interrogating the data from this small-scale study. The broad framework was actually extracted from the theoretical background of Macpherson, Aspland, Elliott and Brooker (2003)’s AERA paper. This broad framework was noted as:

“Any process of change (or curriculum reculturing) is characterised by a multitudinous mix of paradoxes. It is not so much an “either/or”
response that is called for, rather a “both/and” response. We identified a number of these that were evident at each of the sites. We then noted that in addressing these paradoxes, we saw personnel at the sites invoking principles associated with a COMMITMENT to a shared vision about the learning journey; COMPETENCE and CONFIDENCE in working with, talking about, and reflecting upon productive pedagogies in the journey towards worthwhile learning outcomes; COLLABORATION in a “learning journey” culture of distributed curriculum leadership; CONSOLIDATION and CELEBRATION of the learning journey through appropriate support mechanisms; COMMUNICATION from the inside out of professional learnings and implications for ongoing support and action; and (RE)CONSTRUCTION(S) of the ongoing journeys.

We also identified that an inclusive and transformative discourse for curriculum leadership

- is contextualised in a strong sense of community;
- values the multiplicity of voices from within a school community;
- relied on the development of a shared curriculum vision amongst a school community;
- is best promoted through a common curricular language;
- juxtaposes broader curriculum initiatives with local aspirations;
- is nurtured in flexible school and curriculum structures;
- promotes the reconstruction of curriculum practices;
- is underpinned by a process of authentic engagement of voices within a school community; and
- positions teachers as lifelong learners.

This discourse, of course, was incomplete we promised that further instances of curriculum leadership would be reported and that the discourse would be shaped and reshaped by the dynamic interplay between the above factors with those that would continue to emerge” (Aspland, Macpherson and Elliott, 2003, p.8-9, original italics).

Within the three parts of the research question of this study, the three (Charlie’s, Aliza’s and Christine’s) narrative accounts were corresponded to a set of ideas in the above-mentioned broad framework. However, the processes involved were not much to do about using this broad framework as an evaluative checklist. The interrogative processes were about critically examining the data of this study with a more general view of curriculum leadership discourse. A set of questions listed below was actually this result of critical examination and evaluation. This set of questions was also the result of analysis moving between the phenomenological interpretation of this study and the transformative and reconstructive approach of another one. By doing so, it may delimit some boundaries of this case study with a very small selection of research participants and within an interpretative paradigm.
A set of questions is listed in the following. These questions are useful for generating further insights of how curriculum leadership is envisioned and enacted through school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing.

Re COMMITMENT to a shared vision about the learning journey,

How could we envision the learning journey within a changing landscape of curriculum leadership? Who should be involved in working through this shared vision about the learning journey?

What are the protocols of (re)cultivating a sense of commitment to a shared vision about the learning journey?

Re COMPETENCE and CONFIDENCE in working with, talking about, and reflecting upon productive pedagogies in the journey towards learning outcomes,

How are confidence and competence related to the overall strategy of empowering teachers/the school?

What do “competence” and “confidence” actually mean to teachers in democratic school governance? In what concrete ways could teacher personal theorising of curriculum leadership be acknowledged when school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing are engendered?

Re COLLABORATION in a “learning journey” culture of distributed curriculum leadership

Is there any community sense in school/school district? What is the dominant school culture? How is all this shaped and reshaped by a broader social culture?

What are the cultural barriers of achieving collaboration amongst a learning community?

Re CONSOLIDATION and CELEBRATION of the learning journey through appropriate support mechanisms

Who are we? And, where are we now? What should we consolidate and celebrate in the learning journey?
What would these appropriate support mechanisms look like? How are they related to school personnel, administration and management systems?

Re COMMUNICATION from the inside out of professional learnings and implications for ongoing support and action,

How could “voice” be valued and respected? Or, is it just a superficial claim for democratic leadership?

What is the implicit meaning of “time” to female and male teachers in school? How could retiming create communicative space in the context of curriculum change?

Arising from professional learnings of curriculum leadership, what sort of ongoing support and action could be done to minimise bureaucracy and change the hierarchical structure in school?

Re (RE)CONSTRUCTION(S) of the ongoing journeys,

What could be the “hope” in curriculum leadership? Where is it now? And, where it will be?

Reflecting on these questions would give some emerging ideas of changing the cultural and structural conditions in school with reference to the new conception and practice of curriculum leadership. Of course, this does not mean at all to impose radical reforms or a revolutionary agenda in school. The importance of authenticity and the changing views and attitude from an inside-out perspective must be emphasised within a context of curriculum change. The research “findings” reflect that school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing have to be strongly grounded on a set of core principles. In this study, those involved in initiating any change of school structural and cultural conditions should not lose sight or meaning to the emerging ideas of curriculum leadership.

Widening curriculum conversations
The research results of this study show that those engaged in curriculum work have their aspirations of changing the school world to be better. Then, the next question in mind is to consider how these aspirations could become an affordable dream from those inside and outside the school. In future, one of the challenges in the Smart and Start School will be to juxtapose broad curriculum initiatives with local aspirations and how all this could address teachers’ tensions and dilemmas in curriculum work.
Within the three parts of the research question of this study, the factors impinging upon the principal’s image of curriculum leadership, cultural politics and structural conditions in school appears to be community sense, confluence of communication, and ongoing policy critique. These three factors may contribute to convert those main strategies (retiming, reculturing and restructuring) into plans of action in future. Collective and transformative effort is necessary to recultivate a community sense in school/school district – a learning community that has the shared vision in curriculum leadership journey. Confluence of communication is necessary that could capture the essence of spaces and places for teachers in curriculum leadership. It also reflects the interface of cultural and structural concerns on widening curriculum conversations across sites. Ongoing policy critique is able to transform broad initiatives into insightful ideas for creating curriculum innovations in local arenas. Giving ‘voice’ is therefore an important way of addressing these issues in a curriculum leadership journey - the emerging voice about school structure and teacher culture rooted in the historical traditions, values, and assumptions of curriculum leadership!

Above all, it may still sound a bit awkward to many audiences when considering school initiatives of restructuring and reculturing in the face of curriculum leadership. It may be also frightening to many people who are positioned wherever in the hierarchical school structure and historical school culture. After a prolonged period of collaborative research journey over five years, the Start and Smart School has come to a place where almost one third of the staff have been involved in investigating teacher curriculum decision-making, curriculum change and curriculum leadership. How this school could initiate various attempts of restructuring and reculturing in the face of curriculum leadership is in no doubt interesting and worthwhile. As a matter of fact, the research ‘findings’ of this sort of study could be taken as a useful platform/base upon which authentic curriculum change is initiated and penetrated through the school systems of administration, management and curriculum programs holistically. Widening curriculum conversations, therefore, is seen to be a collective struggle for addressing wholly the three main strategies of retiming, restructuring and reculturing in the curriculum leadership journey. Widening curriculum conversations may also be seen as a strategic move for dealing with the limits of time and cultural constraints in various discourses of curriculum leadership. In summary, widening curriculum conversations is adjacent to deepening our understanding of curriculum leadership that together display dimensions for continued curriculum change efforts.
References


