

Choose to choose for educational research:

Moving towards an optimistic future or a dead end?

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Abstract

This paper describes a collaborative journey with a group of primary school teachers and principals within a context of curriculum change in Hong Kong. This collaboration, which builds on hope, trust, reflections and authenticity, elicits participants' voices through narratives and ensuing conversations.

An Action Research as iterative, critical and collaborative engages research participants in a research world which celebrates the success of change by improvement, the collaboration by mutual contribution to shared values and beliefs, and the reconstruction of curriculum work by ongoing critique and transformation. Teachers' stories, which are the constructs of their personal lives intertwined with professional lives, are embodied of participants' critical reflections on the place, space, purpose, content and process of teacher curriculum

decision-making at the time of curriculum change. Through sharing and negotiation, ownership and participation as well as agreement and consensus, this Action Research empowers participants to act and talk in reflection about curriculum work for enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Reflecting on this collaborative research journey, the paper further poses a question when choosing to choose for educational research. This question challenges researchers and other stakeholders to critically reflect on educational research whether it is moving towards an optimistic future or a dead end.

I. Introduction

A research study was conducted between late October 1998 and July 2000 in Hong Kong. It was about a critical inquiry of the lifeworld perspectives of a group of teachers and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change. Eliciting these perspectives, which focused on teachers' and principals' underlying beliefs and the way these beliefs shaped their action, incorporated the image of teachers in curriculum making and problematised teachers' curriculum work as introduced by the Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC). With respect to the research design as critical, iterative and collaborative, the first two Action Steps took the shape of a collaborative journey of reflection and empowerment (Koo, 2000a). Both the research question and the methodological approach prompted this study not to remain in the contexts of "*what is*" or "*what may be*" in drawing experience from individual participants.

In Action Step 2, teachers told their stories in individual interviews by giving a detailed account of the constructs of teachers' personal lives intertwined with professional lives. These teachers' stories were displayed and framed within a micro-context shaped by the school's view and the principal's view (Koo, 2000b). Data reduction took place when I summarised the first meeting of Action Step 1 and three individual interviews of Action Step 2 with reference to the emerging ideas of the conceptual framework. Each participant received a full set of the meeting notes as well as a summary from me before the next meeting. Signatures were given each time after member checking.

In Action Steps 3 and 4, all participants moved beyond their personal narratives of curriculum work collaboratively through the ensuing conversations. It was the time for participants to enact their shared vision of primary education and common values on reconstruction of curriculum work within the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making. All this meant that participants would envision an image of "*what could be*" that would result in professional learning and empowerment when engaging in the last two Action Steps collaboratively. But, before envisioning "*what could be*" in the lifeworld perspectives of teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change, two overarching questions appeared at the forefront - '*who am I*' and '*where do we go from here*' - which emerged from the main themes of Action Steps 1 and 2. Indeed these questions carried an air of puzzlement and uncertainty among participants at a time of curriculum change as introduced by the TOC. Fortunately, these questions led to a call for ownership, critical reflection, collaboration and reconstructive action in teachers' curriculum work when considerations were given to (re)create spaces and places for teacher curriculum decision-making. In this light, Action Steps 3 and 4 helped to form a template of supporting and enhancing this call from participants by which the conceptual

framework incorporated the main thrust of collegiality, collaboration and unforced consensus in a democratic way.

II. *Sharing the teachers' stories: 'Who am I'*

The first meetings of Action Step 3 were about member-checking with participants individually about their own stories. This was to ensure that the stories were true and fair records of participants' voices elicited by narratives and conversations in the meetings of Action Steps 1 and 2. The second and third meetings of Action Step 3 were group-based. Upon participants' agreement, the principals of School 1 and School 2 were invited to join in the subsequent meetings. In the second meetings, all six participants (including the principal) at each school were invited to share some parts of their own stories where they felt comfortable. This sort of sharing, which had drawn special attention to power relations in school settings, embodied some main ideas of the conceptual framework, for example, communicative understanding, building trust and collegiality, and mutual agreement within a context of curriculum change. With reference to the conceptualisation of the research study, therefore, participants' decisions on what and how to present the stories were duly respected. At the same time, I (as the researcher) kept the time for each participant. Each of them had fifteen minutes for sharing. I passed them a signal card five minutes before the end. I would then give them another signal card at the last minute. By doing so, participants had equal time for sharing their own stories irrespective of their ranks or positions in the school settings. Participants were also invited to elicit some emerging themes from their stories which they wished to highlight for further thinking about curriculum actions within the context of curriculum change as introduced by the TOC.

The sharing of teachers' stories was summarised in the following. A short heading in bold letters was given to each summary in order to highlight the emerging transformative trust in the lifeworld perspectives of teachers and principals about teacher curriculum decision-making. Two principals' conversations were also included because their changing views might have influenced the reconstruction of teachers' curriculum work.

School 1

Charlie

<Re-positioning in an I-Thou relationship>

"...Regarding my personal growth and work, I have struggled through hardship and overcome many problems...I learn that teachers should be convinced to see positive benefits as a result of change. We need teachers to bring improvement. We cannot let teachers 'totally run away' because of curriculum reform...Teachers are able to bring innovations and promote change...

...Our previous learning experiences shape our beliefs toward child development, education and curriculum work. It is appropriate for colleagues to continue adjusting their views in light of school contextual factors...We are influential to children. It is our responsibility to help children move ahead in their learning journeys...

...I heard that it would be possible for us to have professional development days. I hope that it comes true. Although it is a bit late for us, I am pleased to introduce this change. It is good for us to come together for sharing, isn't it? It is no harm to express our feelings which appear to bear the relationship of 'I and Thou'. By doing so, we learn to respect each other...If we want our students to do better, we need to improve ourselves first...We should be aware that 'listening without re-thinking is useless'..."

Susana

<Educating students free to choose own future>

"I learn when I teach...I wish to do better...I am willing to reconsider curriculum decisions because of my self-awareness of own teaching...I am more happy and satisfied with my work in these few days...Sometimes, what we learn from our teaching is more than what we teach the students..."

...I would let my students understand that I also have emotions and feelings. Sometimes, I am unhappy. I am not almighty. By the same token, I understand and accept my students that they have their inner feelings and emotions...In other words, if I make use of every minute to catch up teaching the assigned content, I will be less concerned about the needs of students. I do believe that I should understand my students who also need to understand me. It is this mutual understanding that makes teaching humanistic...We should not regard our work as merely teaching textbook chapters. We must be alert to student emotions...Students do not learn for the sake of teachers. Teachers should explain the rationale and meanings of learning in appropriate ways. Learning becomes humanistic, too...

...At least, education provides abilities for students at various learning sites to choose their future. I think, knowledge equips us to fight against our fate and be able to make choice...Overall speaking, teachers must understand the meanings of reform so that they could change wholeheartedly..."

Aliza

<A robot metaphor>

"...I always consider the student perspective when thinking about curriculum design...I am not good at drilling. I prefer my students to learn happily. I also wish to teach with joy...If I can choose what I teach, I prefer the knowledge and skills that students can put in use...Many people over-emphasise the role of Information Technology in education that emotional education is often neglected...Our students lack sharing in learning processes...We are in an urgent need of genuine sharing among colleagues. We need heart-to-heart communication about teaching and curriculum work!..."

...However, we have too few chances. We do have to catch up on the syllabus. The time is too tight...As a result, each student has received little attention from the teachers. The curriculum, I should say, becomes 'inhuman'. We hurry up to finish teaching the syllabus everyday. In the children's eyes, teachers are mechanical devices. We go into the classrooms like robots to assign homework. Students finish the homework not because of their own learning but for the teachers!...Few days later, they have forgotten what they have learned. Students appear to lose the meanings of learning. These students do not think

about their future. Everyday, they go to school to hand in homework because of their mothers and teachers! They have no goals!...

...Reform cannot be too radical. Participants need support and encouragement..."

Teresa

<Perceiving democratic education>

"...The TOC was introduced from top-down that teachers have worked out their own ways of dealing with change...Children do need our respect. They also need democratic education. I respect my own child so I learn to respect my students...Authoritative teaching and classroom management are impractical. I am a judge when teaching and 'a mother' after the lessons. My students do not confuse these roles I have. They behave well in learning. At the same time, they learn with joy..."

Students care for me and my family...The same content transmitted to all students appears to be undesirable. I prefer to tell students my life experiences and how to overcome hardship...They know that I often go to the library for searching. I launched a new web page due to an assignment of my studies. I agree with Charlie that teachers cannot transmit all knowledge to students at school. Students have to know how to learn... I like to introduce my personal experiences to enrich the content and to make my advice more convincing to the students. Positive learning attitudes and interpersonal relationships are very important to primary school students...

I believe that we can show good models to our students of how we keep on learning and how we overcome teaching problems."

Lawrence

<Reflecting on curriculum work>

"...Due to my personal learning experiences, I perceived a formula of learning - authoritative teachers and self-disciplined students...I am now aware that teachers are no longer knowledge transmitters. We are coordinators of learning with students. It is important for me to show students the ways of self-learning...Nevertheless, being a democratic teacher is more difficult...So, I am still on the way of learning to teach. I am confronted with these conflicted viewpoints from which I improve my teaching. In other words, I do not change intentionally. It is these ongoing reflections that facilitate my professional growth...My reflections, I should say, keep me thinking about the role of the teacher in curriculum and pedagogical decisions..."

...I believe that I can improve my curriculum work by taking a micro view...I like to have informal meetings with colleagues for discussing curriculum issues. These chats are ongoing and have reinforced professional sharing..."

Stephen

<Shared joy of learning and teaching>

"...I trust that students learn well when they are actively involved in the learning processes. In the past, I kept talking about the teaching content and regarded students as passive learners. They sat in the classroom to receive knowledge. Now, I believe that students learn better and more happily in groups...Students wrote me letters. I gave them encouraging words in reply. We have developed mutual trust. I keep on having this good practice with the students. We do need to understand our students very well..."

...Students have to finish drilling exercises everyday in upper primary...It will be better for students to have school internal assessment instead of public examination in Primary Six...

...Lawrence said that he was exploring new ways of teaching. I would say that he is very successful indeed. He should carry on with a high morale."

The thoughts expressed by the participants of School 1 provided the basis for recognising their ongoing thinking and action in reconstruction of curriculum work at each school site. The conversations in the sharing reflected House's (1979, 1981) and Hall's (1997) the technological, the political and the cultural perspectives that interacted and intertwined in the overall implementation regime of the TOC. The conversations among participants supported Elbaz's (1983, 1991), Clandinin's (1985), and Connelly and Diennes's (1982) view of teachers' personal practical knowledge inferred from daily practice. The evidence of teachers' curriculum work as value-laden necessitated not only personal narratives but also conversations among participants for achieving consensual agreement on harmonising the action plans in the reconstruction. The transformative thrust emerging from the sharing of teachers' stories pointed to a need for authentic and professional participation within a critical and reconstructive framework at a time of curriculum change that could lead to different forms of teacher empowerment as Smith (1993) elaborated. At the end of the meetings, all participants of School 1 were invited to express their feelings about the sharing.

Susana: "We are all very frank. We talk more candidly than I expected."

Teresa: "I value genuine sharing. I sincerely hope that we will have more chances of genuine communication."

Stephen: "I learn a lot in this sharing. I learn a lot from colleagues."

Lawrence: "We understand each other better. In the past, I did not know what colleagues thought about education."

Charlie: "Yes. I encourage colleagues to interact with students. You may write letters or other useful means for communication. In this meeting, I have a chance to learn from all of you."

Aliza: "It is a very useful sharing. It is a very valuable chance to have conversations."

Listening to participants' feelings at the end of the meetings linked to the ethical consideration that there was no doubt that each of them was comfortable and willing to proceed as a group as planned in the Action Step 3. The sharing processes also contributed to building trust in teachers as autonomous yet inter-reliable professionals who had a desire to seeking improvement and work meaningfully. In Action Step 2, I did my own interpretative analysis and elicited a number of themes about teacher curriculum decision-making within a context of curriculum change. These themes, then, provided me with a context in order to understand better the conversations which teachers had about teacher curriculum decision-making at each school in Action Step 3. It is not surprisingly that the themes emerging from these conversations show considerable similarity with the themes which I identified from individual stories in Action Step 2. In a sense, then, the themes identified in the conversations became a collaborative refinement of those themes which were elicited and interpreted at the end of Action Step 2. All participants agreed to the analysis of the emerging themes from the sharing meeting and accepted for data display after member-checking the details with me.

| Themes | Research Participants | | | | | |
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| | Charlie | Aliza | Susana | Teresa | Lawrence | Stephen |
| Implementation of policy initiatives, for example, TOC | <i>Teacher's habitual curriculum practices</i> | <i>Group preparation of teaching kits</i> | <i>Teacher understanding of policy initiatives through professional learning</i> | <i>Teacher reconsidering curriculum decisions</i> | | <i>Existence of high-stake assessment</i> |
| Curriculum reform from top-down | <i>Teacher reluctance to implement the reform: dilemmas and tensions</i> | <i>Curriculum superficially implemented</i> ; | <i>Meanings of curriculum reform to individual teachers</i> | <i>Absence of support from parents;</i> <i>Teachers react to reform in their own ways;</i> <i>Teachers experience tensions and dilemmas</i> | | <i>Teachers experience reality shock in teaching when meeting the demands of public examination (e.g .SSPA)</i> |
| | | | <i>Teachers</i> | | | |

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| <p>Teacher as change agents</p> | <p><i>Admittance of teachers to bring innovations and change</i></p> | <p><i>Teacher qualifications ; Teacher culture ; School culture</i></p> | <p><i>have personal emotions and feelings</i></p> <p><i>Mutual respect between students and teachers</i></p> <p><i>Taking the view of 'education to fight against a person's own fate'</i></p> | | <p><i>Teacher perception of effective learning</i></p> <p><i>Teachers experience conflicted views</i></p> | <p><i>Building trust between students and teachers ;</i></p> <p><i>Encouraging students of their quality work and creative ideas</i></p> |
| <p>Changing conceptions of learning</p> | <p><i>Implications to teaching ;</i></p> <p><i>Teaching is to interact with students by useful means (e.g. letter-writing)</i></p> | <p><i>Learning with joy</i></p> <p><i>Introducing alternative student assessment apart from copying</i></p> | <p><i>Students should see the meanings of learning</i></p> | <p><i>Teachers need extra time and effort to deal with student learning problems ;</i></p> <p><i>Teachers being role models as life-long learners</i></p> | | <p><i>Teaching is to interact with students by useful means (e.g. letter-writing)</i></p> |
| <p>Meaningful learning</p> | <p><i>Learning link up with student daily experiences ;</i></p> <p><i>IT as a means to achieve meaningful learning</i></p> | <p><i>Learning link up with student daily experiences ;</i></p> <p><i>Collaborative learning with classmates</i></p> | <p><i>Learning contributes to future living of students</i></p> | <p><i>Learning how to learn</i></p> | | |
| <p>Teacher curriculum</p> | <p><i>When making curriculum decisions, teachers need to consider education both to meet</i></p> | <p><i>Considering the views of</i></p> | <p><i>Self awareness to change and improvement of professional practices ;</i></p> <p><i>Limited space of</i></p> | <p><i>Place of TCDM in</i></p> | | |

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| decision-making | <i>the needs of the society and to change or transform the society;</i> | <i>students and parents</i> <i>Re-timing</i> | <i>TCDM</i> <i>Considering the principal's views of TCDM</i> | <i>School-based curriculum development</i> | | |
| Teacher's views of curriculum work | <i>The influence of teacher's early educational experiences and family education;</i> | <i>The influence of teacher's early educational experiences and family education;</i> <i>Evaluation of teaching</i> <i>Due to examination syllabus, teachers as robots and become 'curriculum-chasers'</i> | <i>Teachers need to transform curriculum work to become more satisfying and challenging;</i> <i>Commitment to continuous professional development</i> | <i>Curriculum evaluation;</i> <i>Catering for individual learning differences</i> | <i>Teacher self-initiation to extend curriculum work (e.g. lead some programs after school upon principal's permission)</i> | <i>The influence of teacher's early educational experiences and family education;</i> |
| School curriculum | <i>The importance of activities outside school syllabus (e.g. after school activities) for students to develop positive self-esteem;</i> <i>Reconceptualising subject curriculum (e.g. content of General</i> | <i>The balance of IT in education with emotional education</i> | <i>Not confine to textbook materials (e.g. General Studies)</i> | <i>Over emphasis of examination-oriented curriculum</i> | | |

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| | <i>Studies, Mathematics</i> | | | | | |
| Collegial support and professional sharing | <i>Very important;</i> <i>An attempt to introduce school-based staff development (e.g. school camp for staff)</i> | <i>Very important: 'heart-to-heart communication' as conversations;</i> <i>Collaborative teaching;</i> <i>Personal practical knowledge of teachers</i> <i>Support and encouragement</i> | <i>Frank communication between teachers and the principal and amongst colleagues</i> | <i>Very important;</i> <i>Genuine sharing;</i> <i>Seeking more chances to have communicative understanding with colleagues</i> | <i>Teacher ongoing reflections</i> <i>Emphasis of informal meetings with colleagues</i> | <i>Learning from colleagues in sharing</i> |

Table 1 Emerging Themes from Conversations among Participants of School 1

Same as School 1, the second meeting of Action Step 3 began by reading a sheet of "I and Thou" (Buber, 1970). Most of the participants put it on the table after reading to each other. They kept looking at the words. The principal and some teachers shared both their personal and professional lives openly with colleagues.

Michael

<Standing up again>

"...I do not mind telling students about the problems I encountered in my former education. In the first school, I was promoted to higher positions. I was a deputy-head. Nevertheless, I had a wish. I wished to have university studies because I was not satisfied with what I should have in higher education. I decided to study part-time...The professional knowledge teachers possess is my major concern...Schools here are too standardised. Teachers in other places have greater professional autonomy...Our education is influenced by business ideas. The education system of Hong Kong, I think, has served the needs of the business sector. Teachers do what business people ask for...

...The recent education reform, for example the Information Technology policy initiatives and the TOC, has lost direction. People try to introduce measures to remedy the lowering

standards of students. However, no such measure is workable. If we are not suffering from economic downturn, we may not need education reform, do we?...In Hong Kong, social hierarchy strongly exists. Educational achievement reflects a person's social status. Schools are hindered by parents' views in the way to push students to achieve higher results...

...I followed the old practices of the former principal in my first school...Perhaps, because of my working style and social change, colleagues have had too much pressure. Teachers work under stress. I will try to reduce teacher stress by various ways..."

Nancy

<Making curriculum work alive>

"...I never followed step by step what teachers had told me...I was born to be a teacher. It was my fate that I became a teacher..."

Education helps people grow. In the past, I believed that I had to teach students everything...I changed my beliefs in the last trip. I understood myself better. Reasons do not exist outside. Rather, they are inside our hearts. God planned to have these students around me so that I knew who I was. In the meantime, it seems that I do not have frequent contact with my students. I am too far away from them! It is because I am busily engaged in administrative work. It seems that I am not engaged in teaching. Therefore, I hope that I can stay with the same class from Primary One to Six...It is true that teaching must continue to change...I think that my teaching is better today. Tomorrow, I will understand that my teaching does not fully consider social change as I realise today...I am considering how students can stimulate me to have evolutionary change. In this sense, students help me rather than I help them...

In the past, I always had this question in mind. I queried whether teaching would become boring...Now, I have been a Primary Five teacher for five consecutive years...This year, the students and I sang songs in Mandarin lessons!...We have to keep on changing. To me, I do not feel it is boring at all...I do not waste time for corrections and teaching workbook...

It is my sincere wish that students know the importance of self-learning...They can learn everywhere provided that they are alert to the things around them. It is often a dilemma to me how to guarantee parents that their children will have good results without covering all textbook content..."

Susan

<An ever-evolving story>

"...I was confused with some ideas because I was brought up in a different educational environment in Macau. At that time, education was heavily influenced by the ideas of mainland China...All people in my primary school were very involved...I ran around and climbed trees in Macau. After I came to Hong Kong, it seemed that I lived in a cage..."

...After marriage, I spent a lot of time to look after the family...Nevertheless, I was confused with some ideas...I felt uncomfortable with my living between work and family...I was so

eager to read and learn more so that I could make my mind clearer...I had to take care of family, work and part-time studies. Time management was very important to me...I was a very involved person. I would not be easily distracted by other circumstances...

...It seems that we define learning as merely getting a course certificate...Being interested in learning is very important. The degree qualification was not so important. It was meaningful to me to better understand myself and to clearly understand about the environment, nation and my future...It appears that education is highly institutionalised...Educational issues are very complicated. Some practices have become our working habits...Having said this, educational practitioners must be very clear about what they wish to achieve. Being a panel-head of the General Studies, I have a sense of satisfaction when devoting effort and contribution to new ideas..."

Catherine

<I'll not be alone>

"...In primary, I felt free. I had a lot of satisfaction...Everyday was about 'eat, drink, play and fun'...I think that children should play a lot...

...It seems that the Education Department does not know exactly what the changes are about. The fact is that some topics should be learned but not taught. We spend a lot of time to teach a chapter. I wonder to what extent our students understand the teaching content.

...I do not have a professional qualification. I do not know much about teaching. In the first school, we seldom shared about teaching. I did the work alone. I was not clear about many things. It was unlikely to ask colleagues questions...When I came to this school, I searched for new ways of teaching...I have improved each year...If I am not successful in this class, I'll try a new way in another class.

Now, I am studying a Postgraduate Diploma of Education course part-time..."

Helen

<'Small' is nice>

"...My primary school really looked like 'a family'. It was very small. I felt warm since I knew everyone from Primary One to Six. All students were neighbours to each other. The principal and teachers nearly knew each student's family...

...I did not receive family support when considering to be a teacher...I was very messy in work in my first year of teaching...Now, I am studying part-time for a degree course. I am a person who likes to be concentrated either in studies or in work...It is always happy as a full-time student. So far, I have not felt the joy of studying part-time...

...We as teachers enjoy teaching when students learn with joy...I am alert to introduce new and relevant content to students..."

Lisa

<A burning desire of seeking improvement>

"...My road of learning was flat and not exciting. Or, I could say that it was traditional...I was a so-called 'a standardised student'. It seemed that everything was not special to me. I imagined that 'a standardised student' was expected to get good academic results by finishing assigned homework on time...It was a big problem to me in secondary forms. In Form Four, I did not know how to initiate self-study. It appeared that the teachers did not teach us ways of searching for information. I merely listened to what teacher said...

...I was not interested in learning educational theories in College. I forgot them all...Although I received teacher education, I was unable to apply theories in classroom practices.

...I became a teacher here. I had my goal that I wished to improve education and school administration. When I was young, I had many wishes. I wished to do this and that. I wished to have new challenges. I made many new attempts...I do wish to study part-time. But, I temporarily put it aside. I have to cater for other work first...I do wish to keep on studying because I hope to improve my teaching. Once I am devoted to this teaching profession, I do not want to have poor performance.

I sincerely hope that I can keep on studying when I have time in future..."

In the sharing meeting, participants of School 2 critically examined the impact of the introduction of the TOC on teachers' professional lives. Teachers mostly perceived the main feature of their curriculum work as an expression of shared joy of teaching and learning. However, the introduction of the TOC from top-down left participants with feelings about curriculum work similar to Brubaker's (1994) comment on the pitfall in curriculum development as a technical matter, rather than a creative artistic challenge. The conversations indicated that the central role of teachers was not properly recognised in curriculum making. Initially, there appeared a strong sense of frustration and helplessness among participants because the traditions of 3T's (textbook-oriented, test-oriented and teacher-oriented) teaching were not critically examined but taken-for-granted common beliefs and behaviors in the school context. In sharing the stories, teachers continually reviewed the learning needs of individual students in daily practice with regard to the issue of life-long learning across subjects. Teachers' enthusiasm and expressed desire to seeking improvement in curriculum work corresponded to Guskey's (1986) concern on the change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the effectiveness of teaching and learning as well as changes in the learning outcomes of students. Teachers aspired to develop by themselves and with others in curriculum work in the same way as Thiessen's (1992) argued for considerations of teacher professional development. All this showed considerable evidence and positive signs that the participants had high purposes and aspirations for themselves and teachers' curriculum work.

| Research Participants | | | | | | |
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| Themes | Michael | Nancy | Lisa | Susan | Helen | Catherine |
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| <p>Early educational experiences</p> | <p><i>Lack parental guidance in learning;</i></p> <p><i>Experience of failures in examinations</i></p> <p><i>Working hard to overcome learning problems</i></p> | <p><i>Joyful learning experiences;</i></p> <p><i>Difficult to follow teacher instructions</i></p> <p><i>Born to be a teacher</i></p> | <p><i>Being 'a standardised student' before junior secondary;</i></p> <p><i>A flat road of learning;</i></p> <p><i>'Unfair treatment' of the SSPA; disappointed to study in a secondary school of her lower priority;</i></p> <p><i>Eager to learn many things but lack financial support from the parents;</i></p> <p><i>Lack initiative in self-learning; not acquainted with searching information</i></p> | <p><i>Being too idealistic in Macau primary education;</i></p> <p><i>An urgent need to improve English when studying in Hong Kong;</i></p> <p><i>Learned to be unselfish and to make contribution when offering voluntary services in upper secondary;</i></p> <p><i>Part-time degree studies clarified own thinking and beliefs;</i></p> | <p><i>The primary school which was a village school looked like 'a family';</i></p> <p><i>Enjoyed the close relationships with classmates, teachers and the principal in primary;</i></p> <p><i>Liked reading;</i></p> <p><i>Alienated from communities of the secondary school;</i></p> <p><i>Influenced by a teacher who was regarded as a leader;</i></p> <p><i>Learned communication skills when working with people;</i></p> | <p><i>Enjoyed primary learning as 'eat, drink, play and fun';</i></p> <p><i>Keep on studying as requested;</i></p> <p><i>Lack confidence in learning due to inadequate mastery of English in secondary and early years of university studies;</i></p> |
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| <p>Teacher education</p> | <p><i>The importance of lecturers to introduce quality teaching</i></p> <p><i>The low priority of many secondary school graduates to study teacher education</i></p> | <p><i>Familiar with the learning content of some academic subjects;</i></p> <p><i>Feel boring;</i></p> <p><i>Some practical skills useful e.g. blackboard writing;</i></p> <p><i>Spent time in leisure activities, e.g. knitting...</i></p> | <p><i>Very low priority of becoming a teacher</i></p> <p><i>Unforgettable when praised by lecturers about a Science project</i></p> | <p><i>Involvement in Student Union activities</i></p> | <p><i>Determined to become a teacher;</i></p> <p><i>Active involvement in Student Union activities in the College;</i></p> <p><i>The importance of lecturers to introduce quality teaching</i></p> | <p><i>Receiving part-time teacher education</i></p> |
| <p>Teacher curriculum decision-making</p> | | <p><i>Retiming</i></p> <p><i>Less emphasis on routine teaching, for example doing corrections and teaching homework;</i></p> <p><i>The importance of own thinking</i></p> <p><i>Introducing new content to arouse learning interest</i></p> | <p><i>Reality shock in the first year of teaching</i></p> | <p><i>Gaining work satisfaction by making new attempts, for example the General Studies;</i></p> <p><i>Examination-driven curriculum hinders other areas of child development</i></p> | <p><i>Reality shock in the first year of teaching;</i></p> <p><i>Not solely rely on textbook content;</i></p> <p><i>Able to include interesting content for the sake of students;</i></p> | |
| | <p><i>Reform driven by economic</i></p> | <p><i>Teachers as facilitators of</i></p> | <p><i>Stakeholders shoulder their own</i></p> | <p><i>Education has hope when each school and each</i></p> | | <p><i>Curriculum design and educational</i></p> |



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|--|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| <p>Education reform (including curriculum reform, e.g. TOC)</p> | <p><i>rationalism</i></p> <p><i>Lost direction in reform</i></p> <p><i>Policy initiatives failed to remedy lowering standard of students</i></p> <p><i>Not solely rely on teachers</i></p> | <p><i>learning</i></p> <p><i>Inappropriate to give too much homework</i></p> <p><i>The influence of high stake assessment (e.g. public examinations) to curriculum work</i></p> | <p><i>responsibility;</i></p> <p><i>Teachers must work conscientiously</i></p> <p><i>Recognition of 'flesh and blood' of teachers within systems</i></p> | <p><i>educational practitioner work to the best</i></p> | <p><i>Change for the sake of students;</i></p> <p><i>Teachers do not know how to change</i></p> | <p><i>aims influence the effectiveness of English learning;</i></p> <p><i>Inappropriate to use English across subjects as a medium of instruction</i></p> |
| <p>The purpose of education</p> | <p><i>Query of education to serve the society;</i></p> <p><i>Education being asked to meet the needs of business field</i></p> | <p><i>Students be highly aware of the things nearby</i></p> <p><i>Learning is universal</i></p> <p><i>Reasons inside people's hearts</i></p> | | <p><i>Development of a sense of 'Self' in life-long education</i></p> <p><i>Education is highly institutionalised</i></p> <p><i>Educational goals of the government are not clear</i></p> | | <p><i>Primary students should learn with less pressure;</i></p> |
| <p>The Hong Kong Society</p> | <p><i>Social hierarchy of differentiating people into classes</i></p> <p><i>Academic results may push students to higher social status in future in terms of salary and living</i></p> | | | <p><i>Less emphasis on the development of positive relationships with parents and children, and teachers and students</i></p> | | |



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| | <p><i>standards</i></p> <p><i>Insufficient social security to people in need</i></p> | | | | | |
| Teachers as professionals | <p><i>Lack professional autonomy</i></p> | <p><i>Lack frequent contact with students;</i></p> <p><i>A wish to become the same class teacher for several consecutive years</i></p> | <p><i>Taking up administrative duties easily create interpersonal conflicts</i></p> | <p><i>Questions of 'insiders' or 'outsiders' to lead teaching profession</i></p> | | <p><i>Awareness of continuous improvement in teaching even though without recognised professional qualification</i></p> |
| Teacher appraisal | <p><i>In PRC, recognising the contribution from teachers and principals to educational research and quality teaching</i></p> <p><i>Possibility of school transfer in viewing performances</i></p> | | | | | <p><i>Experience does take into account</i></p> |
| | <p><i>Hindered by parents' views</i></p> <p><i>Diminishing school size due to fewer residents in public estates after</i></p> | | | <p><i>Female teachers may be ready to</i></p> | | |

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|--|--|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>School improvement</p> | <p><i>several years</i></p> <p><i>Teachers and principals may lack inertia to change for better due to instability of student population</i></p> | <p><i>Everything is changing;</i></p> | <p><i>Tremendous work in setting up a new school;</i></p> <p><i>Make new attempts</i></p> | <p><i>make significant contribution to work after children have grown up</i></p> | | <p><i>Whole-hearted devotion to work from each teacher</i></p> |
| <p>Professional sharing and support</p> | <p><i>The importance of communicative understanding among colleagues;</i></p> <p><i>Emphasis on genuine sharing in collaborative work</i></p> | <p><i>Difficult to tell own story</i></p> | <p><i>Developed harmonious relationships with former colleagues;</i></p> <p><i>In the first school, am and pm schools had power conflicts which influence collegiality;</i></p> <p><i>Awareness of working with colleagues in collaboration</i></p> <p><i>Learned from other teachers' stories;</i></p> | <p><i>Enjoy genuine sharing;</i></p> <p><i>The importance of mutual understanding among colleagues</i></p> | <p><i>Lack sharing among colleagues due to time constraints in work;</i></p> | |

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|--|--|--|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Teacher and principal professional development</p> | | <p><i>A desire of ongoing learning;</i></p> <p><i>Teachers grow everyday when striving for meaningful change</i></p> | <p><i>Having own goal in mind;</i></p> <p><i>Availability of time</i></p> <p><i>Committed to studying for the sake of self and school improvement</i></p> | <p><i>The importance of time management</i></p> <p><i>The balance of family, work and study</i></p> <p><i>Clarify the goal of ongoing studies</i></p> <p><i>Able to achieve free, satisfactory and successful part-time degree studies</i></p> | <p><i>Part-time studies are not enjoyable due to time constraints;</i></p> | <p><i>Self reflections are very important for change and improvement</i></p> |
|--|--|--|---|--|--|--|

Table 2 Emerging Themes from Conversations among Participants of School 2

The emerging themes contained both common concerns on and individual voices of participants about curriculum issues and problems elicited through conversations. At the end of the meeting, participants shared both personal feelings about the first meeting and reflections on the hope of education.

Michael: "I merely know my role in work. This time, I heard genuine words from each of you. This communicative understanding helps to know ourselves better when working together in future. The hope of education cannot rely solely on teachers. It is important for considering the opinions of the community at large on education."

Nancy: "What am I thinking?...We are not enough. Therefore, we need to unceasingly read books when we want to know more about education...I found it difficult when you asked me to tell my story. I could not. I did not know the reason. I was unable to repeat what had happened. I was active thinking when each of you was talking on your own...I found it difficult to talk about my past circumstances. I could not. I did not know the reason."

Susan: "We have been colleagues for many years. So far, we have not had enough time and opportunities to have genuine sharing. The meetings provide us an invaluable opportunity of

mutual understanding. We can know each other better when in work. If each colleague and each school can do their best work, education has hope."

Helen: "It is good to have this meeting because we lack sharing. We usually do not have time for sharing. We talked about our past learning experiences. It is timely to change for the sake of students. But, we do not know how to change."

Catherine: "It will be better if each of us is able to reflect on our own. It is because many people in Hong Kong do always think that they are right and other people must be wrong. It is important for us to have self-reflections and to devote ourselves to work wholeheartedly. If so, it is not only the hope of education but also the hope of many things."

Lisa: "I was very happy to hear several stories. I learned from them. The society, parents or teachers should not shift their responsibilities to each another. We must shoulder the part of the responsibility we have. We must work conscientiously. Education is hopeless when you are told that it is the demands of the system in which your life and death have been neglected."

Sharing teachers' stories laid a preliminary foundation for establishing a collective force of reconstruction of teachers' curriculum work at each school site. Listening to and telling the stories helped each participant to critically reflect on the question of 'who am I' within a context of curriculum change. Clearly, the sharing processes encouraged participants not only to position themselves by living 'in' their stories and by owning the authorship as in Action Step 2, but also 'out' of their own stories by keeping distant from and reflecting on the written words when retelling them. This phenomenon was evident in Gadamer's (1993) ideas that the meaning of a text is never fixed, but always changing in and through its interpretations. Revisiting written stories enabled the teachers and the principals to see the meaning of storytelling.

Sharing participants' reflection on the hope of education had a similar purpose as Fullan's (1993) reminder on other major stakeholders to critically examine how far their own prescriptions for change either rebuild teachers' and children's hopes, or destroy them. In this regard, the elicited data clearly indicated a call to each person who has a stake in education to reflect upon himself/herself. Education reforms should not put teachers and students at risk without proper recognition of the impact on their personal factors. The themes emerging from the previous meetings, which are related closely to the main ideas of the conceptual framework, resulted in a transformative thrust in participants with courage and mutual support in the way ahead of Action Steps 3 and 4.

III. Improvement of Curriculum Work: 'Where Do We Go From Here?'

Participants gained some initial ideas of reconstruction of teachers' curriculum work by reviewing the main themes that emerged from the stories. The next question that appeared in the minds of the participants was about "where do we go from here" - in what direction they could proceed in ongoing thinking and action of teacher curriculum decision-making. A list of short statements were attached to my letter and distributed to each participant before the third meeting. Each statement served as a check-point or a guidepost for participants in seeking the direction and locating the outcome of the reconstruction of teachers' curriculum work within a context of curriculum change (see Appendix I).

In viewing the corresponding functions and strategies of each Action Step, my role as a researcher was shifted from that of facilitator and orchestrator in the first two Action Steps to

become a Critical Friend in Action Steps 3 and 4. I gave supportive yet alternative views in the third meetings when new ideas emerged so participants were able to gain new stances to review their own ideas and to formulate Action Plans together. In essence, their emerging ideas about the improvement of curriculum work became action-oriented.

In mapping the direction of curriculum change within the schools, extractions of conversations were taken into account by referring to Grundy's (1995) view of providing evidence for making judgments and further planning, and three criteria of constituting trustworthiness of this research study as truth, appropriateness and authenticity. The elicited data of School 1 and School 2 is listed below:

School 1

Charlie: "...My colleagues and I have set tomorrow as a professional development day. This decision was not made a long time ago. We made up our mind last Wednesday...Colleagues said that both teachers and students were exhausted in using published TOC task sheets. In other words, we were likely to have 'double effort but half success'.

Now, it is urgent to make such a decision because it is no longer from the top-down. Rather, it is a bottom-up request. There is an air of concern that teachers want to discuss this issue now rather than to delay the matter until after the academic year...

...The colleagues are going to discuss the subject syllabuses of the second school term. Before the professional development day, we encouraged teachers to use their remaining courage to examine the syllabuses thoroughly at nights. We hope that teachers can suggest which parts are suitable for a tailor-made curriculum.

It is timely, I think, to consider a tailor-made curriculum. In case we are unable to finish the task, we can make it this July and August. We will rearrange time for teachers to have curriculum discussions instead of leading summer programs...

The space of teacher curriculum decision-making is very limited...Teachers make adjustment to the principal's views...Now, the power of curriculum decision-making is decentralised...Teachers are now free to choose what is desirable for teaching and learning."

Lawrence: "It appears to be in a hurry due to short notice."

Teresa: "...We will have a lot of discussions through communicative understanding on the professional development day. I do agree that we are a bit in a hurry to fix up the date...We wished to coordinate colleagues for such an event. Now, it appears that there is a bottom-up request for improvement. In this sense, colleagues are ready to be committed to change and to receiving challenge. If we neglect their needs, it is just 'to pour cool water over their heads'.

Now, the school gives us a chance. Regardless what the outcome will be, it is a good start to all of us. Having said this, we have a long road. We should understand that we are not going to do it once and then fold it up. It is a very long road to make successful. We accept if we could not do it very well tomorrow. It is just a beginning...However, unless we have 'a go', we cannot see the outcome. I am very pleased to see that all of us have this chance. Teachers always strive for professional autonomy. We want to initiate some changes. In fact, this is

part of our dream. It is our ideal goal...I learned from Aliza and Charlie that we should not have short-sightedness in education...

As a teacher, I am very delighted and satisfied to exercise professional autonomy when having such a chance...If the direction of change is right, we must need adequate support...When our hearts are together, we already have the strength...In fact, what we have to do is to put our students in front of our eyes..."

Stephen: "It seems that we are helpless in curriculum reform. It also seems that we have no choice. Now, I am very pleased to know that we may have a tailor-made curriculum...I have an urge for change from my heart after several years of teaching...I will try to find out a way of improvement...I lack experience so I want to learn from experienced colleagues. I will learn while I make my contribution.

Curriculum change requires high abilities of teachers."

Aliza: "I think that it is not an issue of top-down or bottom-up. Both directions are important. It is impossible when teachers alone initiate change but people at the top do not change their fundamental beliefs...Now, it seems that both sides (the top and the bottom) have similar views to fix up the professional development day as we wish...Anyway, we need to try...It needs a beginning. It doesn't matter whether it is a quick decision or not..."

I mentioned that teaching was very lonely for me. Now, it is good to introduce such a change. I am always not very confident. When we talk and share with other people, some innovative ideas may emerge. These ideas may not come out from other people. They, sometimes, appear suddenly in our minds...

Stephen did not want to do what he was having in curriculum work but he could not. I agreed with Charlie that teachers were not autonomous. We have been 'slaves' in teaching for many years. Not only students but also teachers are passive and seldom think. Teachers are also not creative and have no ideal goals or momentum. We have lost the ability to change. We try to follow traditional practices...After so many years, teachers are really passive...In fact, we are not allowed to be creative because we merely have very limited space in 'our little garden', that is inside the classroom...Not only does education need reform but also parents and employers need to be educated...Parent education is indispensable at a time of curriculum change."

We do need to know what other people are doing so we are able to reflect and evaluate. We need the spaces and power for change..."

Lawrence: "I think that we may need some kind of support. For the sake of students, we need a few people to come to give us advice so that we can avoid making mistakes."

Charlie: "...There are two principles we must have in working out a tailor-made curriculum. First, it is the appropriateness of the selected content. Second, it is very important to cater for the individual differences of each student...Tomorrow, teachers must take an initiative. They will be more active, I hope. This is the 'I' to think and do...In the past, we just listened. We merely 'talked but no action'..."

Aliza: "...I need 'people on the same road'. If I could have collaborative teaching, I would surely enjoy it more...To me, tailor-making a curriculum is not equal to reducing the content...Not only teachers but also parents find difficult to understand the concepts related to a tailor-made curriculum."

The conversations reflected the willingness and authentic involvement of participants in ongoing change of teachers' curriculum work. This was perhaps best expressed by a powerful comment about the readiness of the participants and their colleagues to initiate some school-based curriculum changes. It was, "...colleagues are ready to be committed to change and to receiving challenge. If we neglect their needs, it is just 'to pour cool water over their heads'...Having said this, we have a long road. We should understand that we are not going to do it once and then fold it up. It is a very long road to make it successful'. This comment is not simply a connotation to introducing curriculum change initiated from the school within. The teacher who made the comment and other participants who supported and reinforced the point were not expressing a desire, but rather to show sincerity, courage and commitment to the hard work or challenge in result of curriculum change from an inside-out perspective. The call for collegial and professional support was prevailing in the conversations among participants. Support as expressed in the conversations carried the tone and message of 'shared decision-making and shared responsibility' in reconstruction of teachers' curriculum work. The voices elicited, here, reflected both the problems and aspiration that arose from teachers' perceived exclusion from significant curriculum decision-making processes that is also noted in Macpherson, Proudford and Aspland's (1997) position in viewing curriculum leadership.

In this sense, support is to be embedded in acknowledging the value, importance, and contributions of those teachers who have been involved in previous curriculum initiatives and are involved in ongoing change. At a time of curriculum change, teachers expressed their need to consolidate strengths and to develop identifiable strengths within the self and the collective school community. It was the necessity of working out how to 'transform dangers into challenges' within a context of change.

All of these potential needs cry out that forming alliances or 'finding persons on the same road' who have similar beliefs, values and attitudes contributes to initiate change of teachers' curriculum work. Much can be learned from sharing teachers' innovative ideas with the school authority, colleagues and parents that in turn help to 'find persons on the same road'. Keeping parents 'out' at a time of curriculum change is a serious issue, clearly connected to the "support" theme, for despite the possibility of inclusion of parents in (re)creating places and spaces of teacher curriculum decision making.

School 2

Nancy: "...It seems to be our habitual choices to follow the curriculum guidelines. It appears that we are used to following the same set of teaching materials"

Michael: "...reform needs a freezing period. People need time to gradually change their old beliefs and practices before implementation of new ones...As a result, we have wasted many resources but receive little effect..."

Susan: "...It appears to be unfair to comment on teachers as 'unwilling to change and textbook-oriented'. Teachers are trapped in a situation where we lack resources and time...Cows also work very hard but what for?"

I think that education tends to be business-oriented. Putting in administrative terms, education is quantified rather than qualified. We work a lot. We continue to submit many reports but to what extent has the effectiveness of work been achieved?..."

Michael: "...Education has not yet been emancipated. Reform is still centrally administered and controlled...If teachers are asked to create and innovate, it seems that they will lose the direction. They do not know how to do it..."

Helen: "Our feelings to education reform are contradictory. If we are allowed to change something, we are afraid to have too many changes in a wrong direction. In this sense, teachers are unlikely to have self-initiated change. They may merely follow the traditional practices and 'the old path'. As a result, there is little change but teachers have added both new and old practices together. I would say that it is not a real change. Teachers' workload just increases. It is not a fundamental change..."

Nancy: "...I was not sure whether we have learnt about Curriculum Studies at College. Anyway, I forgot them all. I don't know what to do. I wish to change but I don't know what to do."

Catherine: "...Teachers are very passive because we have limited freedom. Very often, we follow the Curriculum Guideline in which teaching content and pedagogy are introduced. We are quite passive...Teachers may not wish to take an active role. It is partly because teachers are not equipped well enough for change. They do not have abilities to cope with change. Or, they are not sure what is the direction. They are afraid that they will make mistakes."

Michael: "...Perhaps, the policy initiatives were introduced because they were the requests from one or two persons in the way to turn things upside down...However, did we have a detailed planning of introducing gradual change? I as a person in the front-line did not see any..."

Catherine: "Yes. It lacked detailed planning. Things change because of change. New initiatives were introduced because someone wished to do something. After several years, these initiatives looked problematic. So, they were stopped from going further. Initiatives come in and out. We did not have a clear direction."

Susan: "...We just mentioned freedom. Democracy, for instance, requires people's contribution...Some colleagues and I have worked very hard for the school-based curriculum development of the General Studies. However, not all colleagues understand what it is about. Then, it relies on a few colleagues who take up additional workload. Other colleagues who do not understand very well the school-based curriculum development merely regard it as a job or a task. They are not clear why they have to do it."

Lisa: "...We are used to superficial learning and practice. We improve our curriculum work through daily experiences. In fact, we have inadequate knowledge to build up resources and introduce new teaching pedagogy...I am having in-service studies at the Institute. At least, I now have many new ideas in mind. It is a matter of how to put them in practice..."

...I prefer fun reading. Students and I read books together. Less homework. It's better to have interaction with students. Now, we're giving students as much as we can and as fast as we can."

Michael: "On one side, teacher's abilities are important. On the other side, are there enough spaces in our school curriculum for teachers? The education reform does not come in like tides and waves. It looks like building sandcastle at the seashore...It is not solid..."

...We always 'come faster this way and go faster that way'. Teachers lack the spaces."

Nancy: "...The school should make use of teacher's talents, potentials and abilities so that one may compensate one's own weak points..."

Michael: "Eastern education operates like a factory. Students are educated as standardised persons. China had a long history where all students were regarded nearly the same. Divergent thinking was suppressed...We have deep-rooted beliefs in our minds. These beliefs are not easy to change."

Helen: "...Do people know that curriculum reforms come in like 'falling mountains and rough sea'? We are not having a single change. We have had many. We could not handle all changes at a time!...Not only do teachers find it difficult to cope with change but also students cannot make it as well. In the end, all of us 'are working very hard but other people are not pleased by our work'."

Nancy: "...I really wish to handle the whole lesson by myself. I want to make their own decisions. I do feel very happy to do so...However, we need to follow the official requirements. In the end, I cannot make the both ends meet...I will plan my teaching in the next few years. Now, I am doing such work at the Institute's library when having my in-service studies. I am very happy to do so."

Michael: "...I hope teachers give students more chances to make own decisions...However, teachers' decisions are often confined by traditions. I don't know the reason. If teachers themselves have no desire to change, there is no point in mentioning education reform."

Susan: "...If other circumstances do not change accordingly, we cannot change a single event alone."

Helen: "...Old ways do not change but new ways come in. We merely use different ways to present the same content. The basics have not been changed yet. 'All changes are not apart from the central'."

Michael: "There is no reform to reduce teacher's workload...I trust when teachers can realise the real benefits of change, which include enhancing the effectiveness of learning and teaching, they are still willing to change. Now, teachers are scared because they cannot recognise where the real benefits are..."

Nancy: "Change is not a problem. There are some teachers who have made a lot of effort in the implementation of the TOC. Now, there are new policy initiatives of curriculum change. We are then told that the TOC is not used any more!...If it is different from the TOC, teachers may need to throw away the old stuff and make new ones. It is too difficult for these teachers."

Michael: "So, you should rely on your professional judgement...Do teachers continue to be afraid of all the things?...Meanwhile, there are two groups of people in the education sectors. One group is to take part in any education reform initiatives regardless of the life and death of teachers. Another group is to reject any kind of reforms. It handles the work at the last minute when requested by the Education Department. However, this group is mostly advantaged...There are few people who are the modest."

Nancy: "...It is better to have informal sharing...I believe that each teacher has their own qualities...I believe that each teacher is changing gradually. I hope that change should not be too sudden. Every one has their own personality."

While current education reform was almost in the top agenda of the government and widely raised public concern, one participant commented it as "*building sandcastle at the seashore that it was not solid*". It was not difficult to understand why such a comment arose from the conversations when referring to Fullan's (1982), Ruddock's (1991) and Stenhouse (1975)'s ideas of celebrating the centrality of teachers' work in curriculum decision-making and their sense of ownership within it. Perhaps, their ideas and the aforesaid comment helped to explain why another participant felt frustrated about the introduction of curriculum initiatives as "*all changes not being apart from the central*". Teachers were often regarded as transmitters or tools in the implementation of policy initiatives, and to lack time for reflecting where to go or in what direction of change as "*cows work very hard but what for*". Tensions and dilemmas were evident in conversations among participants who were being marginalised in important curriculum decision-making processes, for instance, the TOC and the General Studies within a context of curriculum change. Consequently, these teachers seldom gave their voices or their voices were minimally heard at the planning and implementation stages of the TOC.

Action Step 3 showed evidence in participants' conversations that the intensification of teacher's work resulted from an outside-in perspective and marginalisation of teachers in curriculum decision-making brought to light the importance for inquiring into teachers' and principals' lifeworld perspectives at a time of curriculum change. Within the context of massive change and rapid education reform, several questions pertaining to the doubt of 'where do we go from here' remained to be continually addressed by participants in their ongoing thinking and action of teacher curriculum decision-making. These questions appeared to be as follows:

- Do teachers need to take an active role in initiating changes in curriculum work? Why do teachers need to be autonomous? Why do they need to be emancipated and empowered?
- How should the school be positioned within the context of curriculum change? How can the school pick up the momentum again?
- What is the direction of the school? Will the school move along as the way of current education reform? Do teachers need to wait for the instructions from the central government agencies that they implement what are told in curriculum initiatives? Does the school have a certain degree of professional autonomy to set a direction which teachers and the principal can follow? Is it necessary for the school to find a way out and to have a clear direction?
- Who should make the decisions? In whose interests? For whom? With whom should teachers work collaboratively within the context of curriculum change?

Certainly, these questions are inter-related in the way that they connect to the first two parts of the research question and are contextualised in the research study. Anchoring these questions to each school's ethos and within the policy contexts such as recommendations from the Education Commission's Report No.7 (Education Department, 1997) minimises teachers' and the principal's opportunities to make messy or quick steps in change. Each step forward on the road of change is therefore more likely to become powerful and steady.

IV. Summary

The stories shared among participants at each school echoed with the question of 'who am I' and highlighted the self-identity of each participant in terms of their lifeworld perspectives of teacher curriculum decision-making within the context of curriculum change introduced by the implementation of the TOC. Participants negotiated the direction of curriculum change within the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making through conversations. Five teachers and the principal of each school responded to the question of 'where do we go from here' by giving their inputs and sharing their insights so that the coming Action Step 4 would become a collaborative and reconstructive phase in action. The processes of arriving at consensus were not by counting vote or obeying the authoritative decisions; but, by making sense and further making meanings of teachers' voices embedded in narratives and ensuing conversations in Action Steps 2 and 3. In the end, both School 1 and School 2 had identified several overarching principles of mapping the direction of curriculum change at each school site (see table 3). These principles were acknowledged within the consensual agreement of participants (see table 4). In this connection, the overarching principles identified in Action Step 3 became "navigators" which contributed to take the conversations about and reconstructions of teachers' curriculum work into action in Action Step 4.

| Identified Principles | Schools | |
|---|----------|----------|
| | School 1 | School 2 |
| Enhancement of levels of student thinking | x | x |
| Emphasis on quality rather than quantity of student assignment | x | x |
| An innovative tailor-made curriculum to cater for student individual difference and to address the appropriateness of learning content | x | x |
| Teacher's professional judgement to make significant curriculum decisions | x | x |
| Seeking mutual agreement from the school authority, teachers, parents and/or students when working out parameters of the tailor-made curriculum | x | x |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Retiming and reculturing at a time of curriculum change | x | x |
| Long-term and short-term plans of professional development for all teachers and the principal to improve curriculum work in contexts | x | x |
| Reasonable teachers' and principals' workload and sensible curriculum change | x | x |
| Empowering teachers | x | x |

Table 3 Identified Principles of Guiding School-based Curriculum Change

| Consensual Agreement | Schools | |
|--|----------|----------|
| | School 1 | School 2 |
| An urge for the shared joy of learning and teaching | x | x |
| Independent and creative views by critical reflections of teachers; the aim is to enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching | | x |
| A bottom-up momentum from teachers to involve in curriculum change when addressing the notion of teacher curriculum decision making | x | |
| 'Go deeper' by critical reflections of own beliefs, attitudes and values both from 'the top' and 'the bottom' about the centrality of teacher curriculum decision making | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| within the context of curriculum change | x | x |
| 'Go wider' by moving beyond the classroom - enlarging 'the little garden' of teacher curriculum decision making through formal and informal sharing | x | x |
| Curriculum change is a long road with commitment and support | x | x |

Table 4 Consensual Agreement on Reconstructions of Teachers' Curriculum Work

All participants shared their views in regard to the research problem while some of them openly shared with others their personal lives in Action Step 3. Nonetheless, their individual inputs in Action Step 2 were particularly important when unfolding the scenarios of 'the secret garden' of curriculum work in Hong Kong through the windows of teachers' stories in a collaborative journey of reflection and empowerment.

Notes from the Researcher's ongoing reflections

Susan put a piece of her writing (in Chinese) in my office on 7 July 2000. It was about her reflection on the relation of her work and her educational belief that shaped her understanding in the contexts within which it operates. The following piece of writing drew my further thinking of Stenhouse's (1975) and Macpherson's (1998) statements on how teachers could change curriculum and the schools for the better.

Susan's reflections

3 January 2000

...I could hardly imagine that I was inspired at the last day of the year 1999. I understood better what I had been striving for over the last thirty years; I understood better the motivation of my personal endeavor; I understood better where my personal ideal aroma would be located.

...Professor Chan Lung-an...showed us a picture of "a duck in a bottle" in which I understood better the relationship between aroma and reality. It was exactly the Zen aroma of "bo-dhi not a tree"; it was exactly the energy source of the breakthrough by which I continuously strove for in both learning and work.

The aroma in my heart was the sort of love, caring, passion, ideal, rhythm,

enrichment and dedication I experienced in my primary school; it was the same as I had experienced for four years in the "Association of Students" over twenty years ago. All this created an impact on my heart - a search for ideal, authentic expression, impartial dedication, enthusiastic involvement and so on - which then motivated me to shape, construct and design bits and pieces of activities, themes and curriculum. My wish was to re-create the prospect I had within the context of rigid realities. I saw no difference of my wish from the expectations of the contemporary education reform in Hong Kong? Was I right?

Information technology gave me both a road and a key...Was it the prospect that I had been wishing to have by seeing the aroma the same as reality?

It was meaningful to me in the last Christmas of the 20th Century because I transformed the ideal into reality. Within half a year, I, who had been a computer illiterate, could make four or five pieces of Power Point software for the classroom practice. Although all this was hard work, I had a sense of satisfaction. The energy source originally came from the outcome of my search of aroma.

Oh! The people around me did not hold expectations for education any more. They went further away from the teaching career. At the interface between two centuries, I was able to narrate the inner feelings from my heart. Simultaneously, I was deeply touched by the oblivion of children's imagination and their aroma. Children found nowhere to express their emotions. Both the children and the teachers themselves also found school lives repugnant. Sea-like education reform, top-down curriculum change and external-driven environment - slaves of economy!

Where can we find the energy source when asking children and adults to pursue life-long learning? Although I was very busy, the ideal aroma, emotions and caring in my heart motivated me to continue searching. I attempted to build up my aroma within a non-ideal environment - 'an ideal educational but real prospect'.

When it appeared that there was 'no way to go' in curriculum work due to illusionary, blurred and clouded scenes around the participants, the 'voices' elicited by and images emerging from the lifeworld perspectives of the teachers and the principals solicited a collective and coherent force in making clear 'where we go from here'. The teachers and the principals were going to 'find the way out' in the collaborative research journey!

Having said this, I remembered a statement from some of the teachers as below:

Those who can do, do;

Those who cannot do, teach;

Those who cannot teach students, teach teachers;

Those who cannot teach teachers, do educational research.

The cynicism and a sense of negativity toward teaching, teacher education and educational research were prevailing in the above-mentioned statement. So, what is educational research for? Who can do educational research? How can it contribute to teaching and teacher education?

This research study was intended not only to free from the thinking within "a square box" (by teachers' stories and envisioning 'what could be' through ensuing conversations) and the operation inside "a black box" (by involvement of Critical Friends and constant member-checking the data and data analysis with participants throughout the four Action Steps). It was designed both conceptually and methodologically to free *to* choose and be responsible for a better future of our education. In Action Step 4, the participants were going to continue their stories in action by transforming the emerging ideas from Action Step 3 into reconstructions that formed a solid base of moving ahead collaboratively.

So, I would invite readers to engage in conversations about a question: is this Action Research approach as critical, iterative and collaborative moving towards an optimistic future or a dead end in our education?

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Appendix I

21 February 2000

Dear ,

...Enclosed please find the draft report of the last meeting. Please spare some time to read it. We will meet again on 15 March. The purpose of the meeting is to highlight the main themes emerged from teachers' stories from your perspectives and to map your further thinking of curriculum work **collaboratively**. It is hoped, firstly, to identify some principles of guiding the school's curriculum work. Secondly, these guiding principles will inform participants conceptually and broadly about ways of transforming curriculum practices into actions.

The following short statements and questions of thinking further about teacher curriculum decision-making were mainly extracted from the meetings of Action Step 1 and 2 in which you might have given your views. In the forthcoming meetings of Action Steps 3 and 4, it is possible that these views will be shared together in light of new meanings 'constructed' by participants together.

1. *Knowing where you are coming from - values, beliefs and assumptions about education and curriculum work*
2. *Deriving principles/criteria for translating your value (or philosophical) position into curriculum practice*
3. *Elaborating implications of your position for elements of curriculum work (e.g. curriculum design and development)*
4. *Reflecting on and reconceptualising your curriculum practice*
5. *How might you sharpen these reflections by thinking about and analysing them with reference to contemporary curriculum theories and policy initiatives (e.g. TOC, General Studies, Curriculum Adaptation, School-based Curriculum Development, 'A Holistic Review of the Hong Kong School Curriculum: Proposed Reforms')?*
6. *What sorts of issues emerged for the notion of teacher curriculum decision-making within and beyond classrooms?*
7. *How are you rising to the challenges of these issues in primary school learning?*
8. *What can you do? What can we do? What may colleagues do together? ...*