

School-Based Curriculum Development: An Interview Study of Chinese Kindergartens

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This study aims to investigate how school-based curriculum development (SBCD) was interpreted and implemented in a Chinese context like Hong Kong whose educational system is highly centralized and bureaucratic. Altogether 118 teachers and 34 principals reported their beliefs and practice in SBCD, and four principals were interviewed in individual sessions. The majority of the principals and teachers admitted that they adopted one of the learning packages provided by local publishers. The dichotomies of approaches to SBCD found in Shanghai studies (Yan, S. J., Gao, J., & Jiang, Y. (2004). Theoretical framework of school-base curriculum development (in Chinese). In Shanghai Education Commission (Ed.) *Developing kindergarten-based curriculum: Theoretical and practical studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishing House; Zhu, J. X. (2003). *Kindergarten curriculum* (in Chinese). Shanghai: East China Normal University Press) were strongly evident in Hong Kong kindergartens: the approach of 'school-based developing of original curriculum' and that of 'school-based implementing of chosen curriculum'. The latter was widely used by most of the kindergartens. Implications for those who work with young children as well as those who work in teacher education programs are discussed.

KEY WORDS: school-based curriculum development; early childhood education; Chinese studies.

School-based curriculum development (SBCD) emerged as an international trend since 1970s, departing from centrally determined curriculum decision-making to that determined by individual schools and teachers (Eggleston, 1980; Marsh, 1989, 1997; OECD, 1979; Sabar, 1985; Skilbeck, 1984). This trend first came to the forefront in some decentralized educational systems where teachers had a stronger degree of professional autonomy such as Australia and the Great Britain, and later turned to be influential in other centralized systems such as Hong Kong and China. This trend towards decen-

tralization was primarily based on the assumption that teachers' involvement in curriculum development would enhance their level of professionalism and result in more relevant and workable curriculum innovations. It was widely believed that SBCD was associated with greater teacher autonomy, professionalization and the pursuit of curricula better designed to meet the diverse needs of children and communities (Lo, 1999).

The educational authorities in Hong Kong and China appreciated the benefits of SBCD and attempted to adopt this kind of decentralized curriculum strategy in schools and also kindergartens since last decade. However, both the educational systems in Hong Kong and China are highly centralized and bureaucratic and do not have a strong tradition of teachers' involvement in curriculum development. Hence the major problem that this

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paper addresses is how the SBCD was interpreted and implemented in a Chinese context like Hong Kong. In addition, while there is a very large body of literature promoting the value of SBCD, there are relatively few studies which show evidence of its genuine implementation in early childhood settings. This study might therefore be important for our understanding of how SBCD is implemented in Chinese kindergartens.

School-Based Curriculum Development in Hong Kong

In the 1980s, concerns about whether schools were meeting the diverse needs of children emerged in Hong Kong and there was a growing dissatisfaction with the reliance on central syllabi. The educational authority in Hong Kong invited a panel of international experts to review the educational system, thoroughly and systematically. The *Education Commission Report No. 3* (1988: 80) submitted by the international panel commented: "The centrally devised syllabuses cannot meet the special needs of individual schools". Accordingly, the *Education Department* introduced the *School-based Curriculum Project Scheme (SBCPS)* into the educational system in 1988. The implementation of SBCD was further supported by the *Education Committee Report No. 7* (1997: 57) which recommended as follows: "*Education Department should examine in collaboration with front-line education workers the overall development of curriculum; and how school-based curriculum can be developed by schools.*"

In Hong Kong, however, curriculum development was the task of the *Curriculum Development Council (CDC)*. As a response to the *Education Commission Report No.3* (1988), the CDC was transformed into *Curriculum Development Institute (CDI)* in 1992. It is a central agency operating under the direction of the *Education Department*, which is now upgraded and renamed as *Education and Manpower Bureau*. The major responsibility of *CDI* is to develop and revise all the curricula provided for Hong Kong schools, not including kindergartens.

Facilitated by the *CDI*, primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong began to implement a new project entitled *School-based Curriculum Tailoring Project (SCTP)* in 1994. Later, SBCD was gradually introduced into the sector of early childhood education. Early childhood settings tried to meet the varying needs of children and to improve the overall professionalism of curriculum development. This

initiative was part of a broad pattern of reform which aimed to promote greater decentralization in Hong Kong prior to its return to the sovereignty of the *People's Republic of China* in 1997. Two years later, the educational authority in mainland China also decided to establish a three-tier educational system for the nation (Yuan, 2002). The three levels of curricula were therefore defined as the "National", "Local" and "School" curriculum. This system highlights the importance of SBCD and has become one major mission of the ongoing educational reform in mainland China (Li & Li, 2004).

School-Based Curriculum Development in Mainland China

SBCD has been a topical issue and led to many controversies in the field of early childhood education in China since late 1990s (Yuan, 2002). The major argument was about whether it was necessary to introduce SBCD to Chinese kindergartens. The supporters tried to implement SBCD in kindergartens, whereas the opponents even refused to use the concept of SBCD because in their perspectives early childhood curriculum should be school-based by nature (Li & Li, 2004).

Leading the economic growth and also educational reform in China, Shanghai has launched this venture since the turn of millennium. Zhu (2003) found two models of SBCD in Shanghai kindergartens: (1) "developing school-based curriculum on their own": a kindergarten designs and develops its own curriculum according to the mission, educational philosophy, children's profiles, parental demands and community needs; (2) "deciding school-based curriculum on their own": a kindergarten selects from several existing curricula and confirms its own curriculum according to the criteria established from the mission, educational philosophy, children's profiles, parental demands and community needs.

Similarly, Yan, Gao, and Jiang (2004) found that two approaches to SBCD had been employed in Shanghai kindergartens: (1) school-based developing approach: Principals and teaching staff, basing on the local curriculum guidelines and existing resources, design and develop a specific curriculum for their children (with or without curriculum expert's guidance); (2) school-based implementing approach: Principals and teaching staff, basing on the local curriculum guidelines and existing resources, choose between the already developed curricula and treat with the chosen one through full participation.

The dichotomies of Zhu (2003) and Yan et al. (2004) are different in name but identical in nature. Both the “deciding on their own” and “school-based implementation” approaches are inviting kindergartens to select from several existing curricula and implement the chosen one, whereas both the “developing school-based curriculum on their own” and “school-based developing” approaches require the full participation of kindergarten staff to explore, design, develop and implement a new curriculum. Within each dichotomy, the two approaches differ greatly in the difficulties of implementation, for example, the “deciding on their own” (or “school-based implementation”) approach is easier than the other one. Zhou (2004) found that the major difficulties of using “school-based developing” approach in Shanghai kindergartens were the lack of qualified teachers, curriculum experts and their guidance, and educational resources. Therefore, Zhu (2003) suggested that “deciding on their own” should be the prevailing approach to SBCD in Chinese kindergartens, as the Chinese teachers might be able to appreciate and choose good curriculum although they were not qualified to design their own curricula.

As a consequence of the interactions among its colonial history, educational system and teacher training policy, early childhood teachers in Hong Kong have typically attained lower professional and academic qualifications than their counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai (Li & Rao, 2000; Li & Li, 2004). Do Hong Kong kindergartens share the same difficulties found in Shanghai studies? Could the Shanghai dichotomies be observed in Hong Kong early childhood settings? What is Hong Kong teachers’ preferred approach to SBCD? The present study set out to throw light on these questions by using a multi-method, multi-source data collection strategy.

METHOD

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in this study to provide valid and reliable data to answer the above research questions. The research methods include document analysis, questionnaire, and semi-structured interview.

Participants

Altogether 118 teachers and 34 principals participated in this study. The participants were early childhood educators with enough teaching experience

such as 2–5 years (22.1%), 6–10 years (29%), 11–15 years (24.1%), more than 16 years (17.9%) and 0–1 year (6.9%). Their educational attainment varied from high school to postgraduate level: Form 5 (11th grade in US) (76.4%), Form 6/7 (12th grade in US) (16%), Bachelor (6.3%), Master and above (0.7%). Their qualifications could be classified into five levels: Bachelor of Education (BEd, 4 years of professional training) (4.2%), Certificate of Education (CE, 3 years of professional training) (22.4%), Higher Diploma (2 years of professional training) (2.1%), Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (1 year of full-time or 2 years of part-time professional training) (QKT) (68.5%), and others such as Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (120-hour part-time training) or being trained (1.4%). In addition, 57.5% of the samples reported that they did not take any courses related to curriculum design.

According to Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau (2004), there were 777 kindergartens in Hong Kong in the 2003–2004 year. There were 7007 kindergarten teachers altogether and among them, 79.5% had gained QKT, 3.8% had got QAKT and 16.7% were being trained or had not been trained.

Procedures

A comprehensive investigation on the reality of SBCD in Hong Kong kindergartens, the present study conducted sampling in three stages as follows:

Stage 1: There were 777 kindergartens in Hong Kong in 2004, when this study was conducted. One hundred and eighteen kindergartens were chosen from the registration list of 325 local kindergartens that participated in a public seminar on early childhood education in January 2004. Each kindergarten was asked to send a teacher to complete the questionnaire and return it to the researcher before leaving the seminar. One hundred and eighteen kindergartens were randomly located in the three districts of Hong Kong.

Stage 2: among the 118 kindergartens, 34 were repeatedly chosen because their principals were attending a short-term training in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Each principal was asked to complete the same questionnaire and returned it to the researcher via mail or fax.

Stage 3: among the 34 kindergartens, 4 were chosen because they were familiar with the researcher and were willing to allow the researcher to conduct this study.

Data Analysis

Survey

The survey aimed to investigate the beliefs and practices of kindergarten teachers in SBCD. The questionnaire was designed and validated for the present study to elicit the following information: (1) school background, demographic information, the curriculum or learning package they adopted; (2) teachers' beliefs about SBCD; (3) the problems and difficulties in SBCD; and (4) the strategies and approaches they used (See Appendix 1). Thirty-four principals of the 118 participating kindergartens were asked to complete the same questionnaire and the data were used for verification and triangulation. The correlations between principals and their teachers' data collected from the four identifying questions ranged from .67–.90, which indicated that the instrument is reliable and acceptable.

Semi-Structured Interview

Research assistants, trained by the researcher, conducted a semi-structured interview with each principal of the four participating kindergartens. The four principals were interviewed in their own offices, in individual sessions (For details, see Appendix 2). The interviews were transcribed by the trained research assistants, and were analyzed by the researcher to identify how the SBCD was initiated and administered, and their perceptions towards the implementation.

Document Analysis

The aims of document analysis were to examine the intentions of SBCD and to identify the features of SBCD projects conducted by the kindergartens. Two main types of documents were collected from the four participating kindergartens. These included the formal documents about SBCD produced by the kindergartens and the teaching materials prepared by their teachers. The researcher analyzed these documents to verify the findings from the semi-structured interviews.

RESULTS

This section will analyze the multi-source data collected in the present study to ascertain whether our assumptions about the SBCD in Hong Kong kindergartens are evidence-based.

Approaches to Developing School-Based Curriculum

The majority of the principals (88%) and teachers (94%) admitted that they adopted one of the learning packages provided by local publishers. Based on the chosen package, the teachers had to design educational activities for their own classes (17%, 20%), or the principal and head teachers developed learning activities for their kindergartens (17%, 11%). Only 6.8% kindergartens did not adopt any of the learning packages, instead, the school management developed the curriculum and according to it the teachers wrote their daily teaching plans.

In addition, four models of SBCD emerged from the analyses on the quantitative data: (1) tailor learning package into school-based curriculum: most (68%) of the Hong Kong kindergartens prefer selecting a favorite learning package from the local publishers and tailoring it to transform into school-based curriculum; (2) develop school-based curriculum for a group of kindergartens: a task force is established to develop the school-based curriculum for a group of kindergartens (13%), and teachers in each kindergarten are trained by the team to use the school-based curriculum for daily teaching; (3) develop school-based curriculum for small-sized kindergartens: principals and head teachers develop the curriculum outline for their kindergartens (6%) and accordingly, class teachers write detailed teaching plans for their classes; (4) develop school-based curriculum for profit-making kindergartens: very few kindergartens (3%) fully rely on class teachers to design, develop and implement the curriculum.

Major Barriers on the Way to SBCD

When responding to the open-ended question "what are the major barriers on your way to SBCD?" the principals and teachers, respectively, made their list of barriers as follows: (1) lack of curriculum experts and their guidance (62%, 52%); (2) shortage of resources for curriculum development (27%, 46%); (3) teachers being under-qualified to develop school-based curriculum (50%, 25%); (4) kindergarten management's overlook on SBCD (3%, 18%); and (5) others (6%, 6%). This result indicates that currently Hong Kong kindergartens are in urgent need of curriculum experts, qualified teachers and related resources.

In the semi-structured interview, the principals commented on their school-based curriculum as follows:

“I think that the most difficult thing to our teachers is to design a fun and balanced curriculum.....for example, how do you interpret child-centered? How would you design a child-centered activity?.....How to keep a balance between teacher-directed and child-centered? I think this is very difficult, no matter to new teachers or to experienced ones.” (Interviewee A, Paragraph 28 of the Transcription)

“Our teachers are very weak in providing various learning experiences to children...they have difficulties in designing a balance and integrated curriculum.” (Interviewee B, Paragraph 23 of the Transcription)

“There are many things to be improved...our teachers could not realize these problems when writing teaching plans. Only till they put them into practice in their classrooms, could they figure out. So, the major problem is that they are not able to express themselves explicitly and accurately with the written language.” (Interviewee D, Paragraph 30 of the Transcription)

DISCUSSION

The present study found that the majority of Hong Kong kindergartens adopted one of about a dozen learning packages provided by local publishers; few kindergartens did not do so. In addition, four models of SBCD were found: (1) tailor learning package into SBCD: This is the prevailing model widely used by Hong Kong kindergartens; (2) develop school-based curriculum for a group of kindergartens: This model will be cost-efficient only if the group is large enough; (3) develop school-based curriculum for small-sized kindergartens: This is the most challenging approach demanding highly qualified teachers and effective school management, which are few evident in Hong Kong kindergartens; (4) develop school-based curriculum for profit-making kindergartens: This model may cause either wonderful or terrible results, depending on teachers' qualifications. Unfortunately, most of the teachers reported that they were not qualified enough to develop school-based curriculum on their own, and the reality of this model of SBCD has been described by Cheng (2004) as “every family produces steel in the backyard and re-invents wheels for private car”. This actually means that individual kindergarten should not work in isolation to develop the same simple product. Without expert guidance and other input, it might be impractical to ask kindergarten teachers to develop school-based curriculum on their own. Instead, principals, teachers and experts should

work collaboratively to develop school-based curriculum.

Interestingly, the first model found in the present study is very similar to the Approach I in the dichotomy of Zhu (2003) (‘deciding school-based curriculum on their own’) and that of Yan et al. (2004) (‘school-based implementation’). This model (or approach) has been widely used by Shanghai kindergartens. The other three models found in the present study are variations of the Approach II defined by Zhu (2003) (‘developing school-based curriculum on their own’) and that of Yan et al. (2004) (‘school-base development’). This approach (or model) has been found so difficult to be accepted by most of Shanghai kindergartens. Similarly, our findings indicated that Approach II was not used by most of Hong Kong kindergartens. Accordingly, we suggest that kindergartens with limited resources do not use this approach; otherwise, the results might run counter to their desire.

Thus, the practicable approach to SBCD for Hong Kong kindergartens, for the time being, should be the Approach I: a kindergarten selects the most appropriate learning package from local publishers, tailors it to match with her own conditions and needs, and out of this will grow school-based curriculum. Fortunately, there are more than 10 sets of learning packages provided by local publishers and the 700 kindergartens have enough choices to get their most-fit one (Li & Li, 2004). However, one may argue that the long-term gains of giving teachers increased authority to make decisions would be more preferable than to simply maintain the status. This necessitates a longitudinal study on early childhood curriculum development and school improvements.

Further, the present study found four major barriers on the way to SBCD in Hong Kong kindergartens: lack of curriculum experts and their guidance, short of resources for curriculum development, under-qualified teachers, overlook on SBCD by school management. These findings are identical with those found in Shanghai study (Zhou, 2004). Moreover, both Hong Kong and Shanghai findings are consistent with Wu’s (1999) analyses on the four challenges caused to Chinese schools by school-based curriculum. Wu (1999) has summarized the real challenges of SBCD to China educational system: (1) the highly centralized Chinese system and decentralization needs of SBCD are constitutionally opposite to each other; (2) schools and their teaching staff lack

of professional consciousness and abilities for SBCD; (3) the shortage of curriculum experts will be an unsolvable problem in a short time; (4) poor school resources and weak teacher qualifications will inevitably put a ceiling on the SBCD in China. The fact that these two Chinese societies share the same barriers and challenges in SBCD might reflect that they have the same underlying problems in kindergartens, teacher qualifications, educational system and social environments.

In brief, it was found the overwhelming majority of Hong Kong and Shanghai kindergartens had employed the approach of 'school-based implementation of chosen curriculum' (deciding school-based curriculum on their own). This might reflect the operational difficulties of developing school-based curriculum in Chinese societies such as Hong Kong and Shanghai. Strictly speaking, the approach of 'deciding school-based curriculum on their own' is neither really nor fully school-based, and its product could not be entitled "SBCD". It's a quasi-SBCD approach per se. Could this Chinese approach to SBCD be attributed to the fact that the educational systems in Hong Kong and Shanghai are highly centralized and bureaucratic in nature? Further studies and analyses are needed to answer this question.

Many of the teachers and principals in the present study claimed that they did not possess the required knowledge and skills in curriculum development. This implies that providing on-the-job training is not only in urgent need but also vital to the success of SBCD. In addition, SBCD emphasized decentralization and was an educational policy in Hong Kong which aimed at achieving educational improvement. Its intentions were positive but its operationalization greatly limited its impact (Lo, 1999). In future, educational policies should be selected not solely with reference to their desirability but also to their practicality. This therefore necessitates a substantial consideration of local context and the ecological features of its educational system. Interestingly, the United States has been promoting packaged—even scripted—curriculum models to ensure attainment of academic standards and program consistency. When Chinese early childhood educators are departing from a 'national curriculum', their counterparts in the United States are likely moving towards it. This controversy deserves a further study and could be addressed with a comparison of the early childhood curricular between two societies.

APPENDIX 1

Examples of the Questionnaire

1. Did your kindergarten adopt one of the learning packages provided by local publishers?
2. If yes, how did you design educational activities for your own class basing on the chosen package?
3. If not, how did your kindergarten develop the school-based curriculum?
4. Which level of education plans did you need to write for your class? (Four choices: daily teaching plans, themes and thematic webs for each semester, 5-day learning experience for each week, others)
5. What is the mechanism of curriculum development and evaluation in your kindergarten?
6. Who is in charge of curriculum development in your kindergarten?
7. What are the problems found in your school-based curricular?
8. What are the difficulties encountered in SBCD in your kindergarten?
9. What should be improved in your school-based curriculum?
10. What are the major barriers on your way to SBCD?
11. Please nominate the most important factors influencing on SBCD in Hong Kong kindergartens.

APPENDIX 2

Questions for the Semi-Structured Interview

1. Did your kindergarten adopt any specific curriculum model or have any related concerns?
2. Have you taken into account the six influencing factors we found in the survey when conducting SBCD in your kindergarten?

Probe: If yes, how?

Probe: If not, why?

3. What do you think about school-base curriculum development?

Follow Up: how did you conduct SBCD in your kindergarten?

4. What are the preconditions of developing school-based curriculum in your kindergarten?

5. Do you think that your teachers are able to design a school-based curriculum?

Probe: Why or why not?

Follow Up: What are the major difficulties?

6. From your perspective, what might be the major difficulties challenging other kindergartens in Hong Kong?

Follow Up: Please prioritize them according to the degree of difficulty.

7. What do you think about your staff's capacity in curriculum design and development?
8. Have they encountered any obstacles in implementing the school-based curriculum?

Probe: If yes, what are they?

Probe: If not, why not?

9. What should be improved in your school-based curriculum?

Follow Up: How to improve?

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