School improvement through a university-school partnership: A case study in a Hong Kong primary school

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Abstract:
This paper explores the impact of a school improvement model based on a university-school partnership in a Hong Kong primary school by studying the reactions of the professional staff to the reform initiative and the conditions for its success. Data were collected from multiple sources, including questionnaires, interviews and documents, the descriptive interview remained the major source of data in the analysis of the results. Results indicated that: (a) all the change agents contributed to school improvement; each agent was part of a complex dynamic, interwoven with the others, under the constraints of the school culture; (b) teachers’ capacity in designing and implementing teaching and learning activities were enhanced; (c) good teaching and learning with appropriate implementation strategies had the greatest impact in changing the previous teaching paradigms and techniques; (d) partnership projects should be built on mutual trust and confidence, with a good mix of academic advice and practitioners’ experience.

Keywords: University-school partnership, school effectiveness and school improvement, comprehensive school improvement project
1. Introduction

July 1997 marked a new political era in Hong Kong. The Chief Executive entrusted the Education Commission\(^1\) (EC) to review the aims of education and draw up a blueprint for reform for the 21st Century. This had important implications for school development and improvement in Hong Kong. Change became inevitable as stipulated in the motto of the first chapter of the Consultation Document\(^2\) of the EC: The world has changed, so must the education system. Most schools and teachers in Hong Kong are daunted by the ‘invasion’ of education reform and curriculum innovation. It is not surprising that schools are seeking external help and support in generating school improvement strategies. Cheng (2000) categorises the educational changes and developments in Hong Kong into two waves; the first was generally characterised by a top-down approach with an emphasis on external intervention or increasing resource inputs. The effects of these changes on school improvement were limited because i) there was a lack of knowledge base and research support; ii) over-emphasis on research inputs and iii) ignorance of school-based needs. The second wave is still in progress with special emphasis on a school-based and frontline practitioner-based approach.

In view of the above scenario, the Faculty of Education of the Chinese University of Hong Kong launched a school improvement programme called Accelerated Schools for Quality Education (ASQE) in 1998, aiming at enhancing quality education in Hong Kong through a university-school partnership. ASQE was adopted from the school restructuring model of the Accelerated Schools Project, first launched by Professor Henry M, Levin at Stanford University (Hopfenberg, Levin & Associates 1993). ASQE is a comprehensive approach to school change, encompassing an integrated restructuring of three dimensions, namely, school curriculum, instructional strategies and organization. 50 local schools (26 primary and 24 secondary schools) joined the project for a duration of three years (September 1998 - August 2001). The improvement programme was comprehensive in the sense that it covered the dimensions of administration and management, curriculum and teaching, as well as parents and community resources. The approach was termed organic as only broad principles and general guidelines were introduced and the improvement was interactive and evolving. Strategies used were general and multi-dimensional, sometimes with specific learning and teaching programmes if the teachers were ready. The school studied in this research was one of the participating schools in the above project.

University-schools partnerships based on an extensive school improvement model as in ASQE, are uncommon in Hong Kong, especially when Hong Kong is experiencing a critical stage of educational change. The evolution of a basically subject-bound, teacher-centred and examination-oriented education system to an education reform with ‘student-focused, no losers, quality-driven, life-wide learning and society-wide mobilisation’ as principles (Education Commission 2000a:36) is exciting and worth studying. The improvement programme has its distinguished features in i) the partnership is on voluntary basis, ii) a school-based approach, iii) an

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\(^1\) The highest level of consultative committee in Education in Hong Kong.

experimental and evolving school improvement programme.

1.1 Purpose

The researcher is interested in the study because there has been much improvement activity in schools but little debate about the underlying principles of school improvement. Those within the school improvement field are in a theoretical impasse (Bennet and Harris 1999:534).

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of a school improvement model through university-school partnership in a Hong Kong primary school by studying the reactions of the professional staff on the reform initiative and the conditions for the success of the improvement initiative.

1.2 Research Questions

Research questions are designed to investigate:

Under what conditions has the school improvement project contributed to the improvement of the school?

What sort of professional experience has been acquired in relation to the reform initiative and how has it affected teachers’ perception of their roles as reflective practitioners, their learning capacity and their attitude towards school improvement through school-university partnership?

How have these experiences affected their conceptions of teaching and learning, and what has been the impact of their conceptions of curriculum change in their school?

1.3 Significance

As the improvement project is not a mechanistic instructional approach directly aiming at enhancing the students’ achievement, evidence on changes and developments in the school cannot accurately reflect the positive effects on students’ achievement. Instead, the comprehensiveness of the project and its organic nature provide a thorough understanding of the impact of such a project on a ‘common and normal’ primary school in Hong Kong, which has a standard school structure, curriculum design, textbooks, teaching strategies, as well as assessment procedures. The impact may include: the effect of the work of the school-university partnership, as Fullan (1997:120) claims teacher development and institutional development must go hand in hand; the catalyst effect of external support in the form of intensive site visits of personnel from the university; the changes in teachers’ capacity including the principal, the middle management group and the frontline practitioners; and also the conditions for a school to excel and improve.

If a school-university partnership of this kind is proved to have an effect, it can certainly offer intellectual, motivational and attitudinal benefits to both partners. The school teachers may acquire more expertise and knowledge, whereas the university faculty members may enrich the instructional teachers’ training programmes.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Change, School effectiveness and School Improvement

Change is endemic in education but it does not necessarily lead to improvement (Ainscow et al., 1994, Hopkins, 1994). The interest of the researcher in this study is alerted by reading the question raised by Cuban (1988:341): ‘How can it be that so much school reform has taken place over the last century yet schooling appears pretty much the same as it’s always been?’ Cuban categorises changes into first and second-order, concluding that the effect of the first order changes is not significant as the changes do not disturb the organizational features and the roles of stakeholders. The second-order changes which seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures and roles, are more appropriate. From reading articles on educational change related to school improvement, the researcher is more concerned with effective educational change and meaningful school improvement, through a substantial build-up of teachers’ capacity, rather than those cosmetic and superficial.

The two most frequently asked questions by educators are: 1) Which of the many activities that we do have greater benefits for students? and 2) How can we make our schools better than they are now? The first question focuses specifically on the impact of schools on students’ outcomes and the characteristics of effective schools, whereas the second addresses the implementation of change and school improvement (Stoll & Fink 1992). Nonetheless, the former places emphasis on the product, effect and the final outcomes of what the schools can do, and the latter focuses more on the process that schools go through to become more successful, with improvement sustained (van Velzen 1987, Fullan 1991). For the past three decades, the school improvement literature has been dominated by the above two lines of school effectiveness or school improvement (Murphy, 1992:90). Though the two schools of researchers have increasingly looked towards establishing some kind of synergy in both fields, the attempts have not sufficiently addressed their different perspectives on organisational development and change (Bennet & Harris 1999:533). Numerous research findings on school effectiveness may provide a substantial knowledge base for educational change and school improvement, for example Murphy (1992:91) comments that ‘educational reform via the effective schools model has established a framework that is quickly becoming a necessary component of any school improvement.’ However, Fullan (1991:22) questions the genuine help provided by the ‘effectiveness researchers’ for school improvement and states that school effectiveness ‘has mostly focused on narrow educational goals, and the research itself tells us almost nothing about how an effective school got that way and if it stayed effective.’

It seems that the merging of the two clearly fragmented intellectual communities of the 1980s mentioned above is the only solution for the field of educational change to move on. On one hand, the ‘school effectiveness’ experts may produce a long list of factors and figures accusing the ineffectiveness of schooling, but cannot produce any concrete suggestions help improve learning outcomes. On the other, the ‘school improvement’ professionals have recently been regarded as major players in the field of educational change, and are funded enormously by all governments in the world. Unfortunately, the positive impact of the school improvement programmes on
classroom practices which may lead to fruitful learning outcomes is still not very significant. The experts in the two fields may complement each other through cooperation. Focussing upon the importance on pupil learning outcomes and adopting a ‘mixed’ methodological orientation are two of the key characteristics of the new, merged paradigm (Reynolds, 1998:128).

The discussion of the two lines of research in school effectiveness and school improvement is essential as the study of the improvement project in this particular case in Hong Kong belongs to the school improvement model possessing the features listed in Creemers & Reezigt (1997) and Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber & Hillman (1996).

2.2 School Improvement field

The most frequently quoted definition of school improvement is ‘a systematic sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively’ (van Velzen et al., 1985 International School Improvement Project ISIP). According to Hopkins and Reynolds (2001:459), the history of school improvement has passed through three distinct phases.

In the late 1970s and early 80’s the field emerged as a distinct body of approaches. Hopkins & Reynolds (2001) say the first phase of school improvement was epitomized by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) International School Improvement Project (ISIP). Unfortunately, many of the initiatives associated with this phase of school improvement were ‘free floating’, but not a systematic, programmatic and coherent approach to school change. School self-evaluation and the ‘ownership of change’ by individual schools and teachers are absent and these initiatives were loosely connected to student learning outcomes, both conceptually and practically; they were variable and fragmented in conception and application. Hopkins and Reynolds (2001:460) classify the second phase as the period of the early 1990s which resulted from interaction between the school improvement and the school effectiveness communities. The school effectiveness community provides a knowledge base for this intellectual enterprise and the school improvement tradition was beginning to provide schools with guidelines and strategies for implementation that were sufficiently powerful to begin to take educational change into classrooms. The third phase of school improvement was around mid- to late 1990s. Evidence shows that the contributions of the school improvement communities of many countries may not have been particularly successful, especially in their impact upon overall level of student achievement, though some programmes appear to be effective, like Slavin’s Success for All (Slavin & Fashola 1998, Slavin & Madden, 2001) or The Halton Project (Harris, 2000).

The strongest criticisms of the work of the school effectiveness/improvement field come from Thrupp (1999, 2001) and Slee, Weiner & Tomlinson (1998). Thrupp (1998: 160) also fires at school improvement writers like Barber, Hopkins, Fullan, Stringfield, Stoll and Gray saying that the picture they portray so far in school improvement is not very clear about the social limits of reform and the likely impact of neo-liberal and managerial policies.

2.3 School Improvement Projects
Numerous school improvement programmes have been implemented in the past two decades. They have had objectives of different kinds; some were shown to be effective in terms of students’ achievement in a particular subject or domain, others were reported bringing changes and innovations to the schools in areas like the internal capacity of the teachers, leadership, school culture and others. The researcher will review from the literature some of the large scale educational reform and school improvement projects with special reference to the United Kingdom and North America.

Fifty nine school improvement initiatives practising in England are listed in the paper by Reynolds, Sammons, Stoll, Barber & Hillman (1996), but they are broadly conceptualised as school improvement and school development. According to the above researchers, two-thirds bear the same aims as the school effectiveness tradition, using similar factors in measuring outcomes. Some of the distinguished examples are the ‘Improving the Quality of Educational for All” (IQEA) project at the Cambridge Institute of Education (Hopkins et al. 1994); the Lewisham School Improvement Project (LSIP) commencing in Spring 1993, a partnership project between the Lewisham Local Educational Authority and the London Institute of Education (Stoll, Reynolds, Creemers & Hopkins 1996); the Schools Make a Difference project established by Hammersmith and Fulham LEA in early 1993 (Myers, 1995); and other improvement initiatives like the value-added analysis service (Monitoring ALIS, YELLIS, PIPS) (Fitz-Gibbon 1996, Fitz-Gibbon & Tymms, 1996); the High Reliability Schools Project which include effective training programmes and standardized operation procedures (Stringfield, 1995a; Reynolds, Bollen, Creemers, Hopkins, Stoll & Lagerweij, 1996); and the National School Improvement Networks at the Institute of Education in London (Reynolds et.al. 1996). For school improvement projects, the early pioneer works of Hopkins (1987) in the International School Improvement Project (ISIP) is important as it had major influence on British school improvement work (Frost, Durrant, Head & Holden, 2000:5).

In the United States, The American Institute for Research (1999) examined the 24 school-wide approaches in educational reform (ranging from the 1960s to 1990s), but only a few approaches have documented positive effects on students’ achievement. Among them, only three projects are reported to have had strong evidence of positive effects on students’ achievement, namely the Direct Instruction (DI) introduced in late 1960s (Becker & Gerstein, 1982; Ashworth, 1999); High Schools That Work (HSTW) and Success for All (SFA), both launched in 1987 (Herman R. & A.I.R. 1999). It has to be noted that due to the nature of the American Institute for Research’s review, quantitative achievement measures are highlighted, like the measurable achievement outcomes of test scores, grades and graduation rates. This may not be fair to those programmes which are comprehensive and organic in nature, with a longer period of research in which qualitative data can be interpreted and actualised. The costs of each approach make a lot of differences as well, e.g. the first year costs for the named effective approaches, DI, HSTW and SFA were $244K, $48K and $270K respectively. For the programmes like Accelerated Schools, with around 1000 schools practising (equivalent to SFA and Coalition of Essential Schools), the first years cost was only $27K, and is rated to have had marginal evidence of positive effects on student achievement.

Michael Fullan and his colleagues’ efforts in Canada have contributed
significantly to the school improvement field. The Learning Consortium work of Fullan and the others at the University of Toronto and the Effective Schools Project in the Halton and Durham Boards of Education in 1986 are very promising, which is originally an attempt to bring effective research results in Britain into the school practices of Canada (Mortimore, 1998). In Australia, Caldwell & Spinks (1988) adopted a self-management approach with a management cycle of six phases to school improvement, which has been widely disseminated.

To clarify the nature of the school improvement project, Alma Harris (2000) gives an extremely comprehensive and in-depth analysis of what works in school improvement. Using Hopkins and West’s categorisation (1994) of school improvement field into organic or mechanistic approaches, and general or specific strategies, the wide range of school improvement projects currently operating around the world is classified and evaluated. The classification is adopted and re-arranged and presented in Figure 1 by the researcher of this study as a framework for reference in discussing a case study of the school improvement project in the primary school in Hong Kong. Harris (2000:1) explains:

*School improvement that is organic suggests broad principles, or general guidelines within which schools are likely to flourish. Conversely, school improvement projects that are mechanistic provide direct guidelines about exactly what to do in a ‘step-by-step’ way. In some cases, these approaches are highly prescriptive in both content and instructional approach.*

*A number of school improvement projects have been formed on the basis that they promote a particular philosophy ……… a sort of school improvement club where admission is dependent upon agreeing to a set of project rules and guidelines. Another group of contemporary school improvement programmes have taken a more dynamic approach to school improvement………..place the school at the focal point of change and engage them in a process of school growth planning that is similar to school development planning.*

For projects which are organic in nature, the ISIP (Van Velzen et al.; 1985, Hopkins, 1987) laid the cornerstone for other similar school improvement. Projects organic in nature but dynamic in approach such as the Halton Project (Fullan, 1992; Stoll and Fink, 1992, 1996) have had a positive impact upon schools, with special emphasis on a process of school growth planning, clear decision making structures and building a collaborative culture within schools; and the IQEA project outlines a number of propositions which are important for developing a school’s capacity for sustained improvement (Ainscow et al., 1994, Hopkins & West 1994).
Figure 1: Analysis of School Improvement Programmes

- multi-level perspective on school development & change
- improvement does not make progress unless the strategy impacts at the same time at different levels within the school (teacher, working group, whole school)
- without an equal focus on the development capacity or internal conditions of the schools, innovative work quickly becomes marginalised

Strategies

General

Specific

Organic

- International School Improvement Project (OECD)
- School Development Programme (Comer)
- Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer)
- Self management approach (Caldwell & Spinks)
- High Reliability Schools Project (Stringfield)
- focus more closely on classrooms and utilize discrete instructional strategies
- include effective training, programmes, concentration on a few goals, standard operations
- Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA)

Mechanistic

- Halton Project (Fullan)
- Success for all (Slavin)
- Models of Teaching (Joyce)
- a more dynamic approach: focus upon school growth planning, clear decision making structures and building a collaboration culture within schools

- six-steps approach:
  - goal-setting, policy making, planning, preparation, implementation, evaluation
- do not take into account the variability of schools and school context

Reviewing the effectiveness of these improvement projects is essential to the researcher in explaining the approach of the school improvement project in Hong Kong, involving the university and a school partnership, and its impact. The approach of the experimental project in Hong Kong is organic and comprehensive, but dynamic in nature, more inclined to the Halton Approach (Stoll & Fink, 1992), than to Slavin’s Success for All Project (Slavin & Madden 2001). The improvement project in Hong Kong is more inclined to take an organic and comprehensive approach to school improvement, as Sarason (1990:33) argues that reform efforts would fail if the components of the reform efforts were not addressed as a whole. The researcher is also fully aware that the comprehensiveness of the school improvement approach makes it too difficult to track all school improvement outcomes; and sometimes methodologically too weak to measure the outcomes quantitatively, but it is
nevertheless still valuable to extract more information on the conditions for success in school improvement by studying in details the changes generated in primary schools in Hong Kong.

Although the school improvement projects cited above have increased knowledge about the process of school improvement in general, there is still a shortage of evaluative evidence, especially for those taking the comprehensive approach. In a most recent meta-analysis on comprehensive school reform and achievement study by Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown (2003:163), where 29 widely implemented Comprehensive School Reform models in USA were studied (including most of the above quoted models like DI, SFA, ASP, HSTW), clear limitations to the overall quantity and quality of studies supporting its achievement effects were reviewed.

All these reform models for school improvement have their impact in one way or the other (Borman et.al. 2003), and at a time when the claimed success will bring ‘funding’. ‘What works’ and ‘what doesn’t’ are still very confusing. Reynolds (1998:1275), after an analysis of the researches on school effectiveness and school improvement, makes the following policy recommendations on school improvement: i) importance of school context; ii) avoidance of reinventing the wheel; iii) increase in international orientation; and iv) the necessity to intervene at ‘levels below that of the school’. Calhoun & Joyce (1998:1286) compare two major school reform paradigms: the external-driven Research and Development approach in the late 50s through to the early 70s and the site-based school improvement approach most prominent lately, and say neither have worked as well as they might. They conclude that the success of these improvement programs is dependent on the establishing of sustainable staff development in the work place and action research enquiry on teaching and learning. Fullan (2000:21) also comments on the attempt of the return of the large scale reform that reform will not happen or sustain in the absence of a strong teaching profession and correspondence infrastructure like the development of professional assistance agencies, assessment and accountability units, and the strengthening of institution training education personnel.

By citing the evidence of large-scale reform efforts, Hopkins & Reynolds (2001:473) conclude that unless central refo rms address issues to do with teaching and learning, as well as dealing with capacity-building at the school level, within a context of external support, then the aspirations of reform are unlikely to be realized. Hatch & White (2002:117) also argue that the knowledge needed for successful school reform goes far beyond what is currently available and accessible, after drawing examples from the Authentic Teaching and Learning for All Students (ATLAS) Communities Project, a collaboration among experienced reform organisations in the United States, including the Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer,1996), the School Development Program (Comer, 1988), Education Development Centre and Harvard Project Zero (Comer, Gardner, Sizer & Whita, 1996). West (2000:43) draws upon the work of the ‘Moving Schools’ project, a small group of selected IQEA schools for further study and also concludes that while the school improvement field has begun at least to delineate the key areas for support, the understanding of how support ‘works’ remains partial.
3. The Project and The School

3.1 The Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) and Accelerated Schools for Quality of Education in Hong Kong

The Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) launched at Stanford University by Professor Henry Levin was a comprehensive approach to school change, designed to improve schooling for children in at-risk communities. It started in two pilot elementary schools in 1986, and was extended to the middle schools in 1990 (Hopfenberg, Levin & Associates 1993). The approach was developed in the belief that at-risk students should have the same rich curriculum and instruction typically reserved for the ‘gifted and talented’. The model is not a set instructional or curriculum ‘package’, but a philosophy about children and learning accompanied by a process of change.

The Accelerated Schools for Quality of Education in Hong Kong (ASQE) started as a pilot study in two primary and one middle schools in April, 1997 and surged up to 50 in September 1998. ASQE aims to enhance quality school education through an innovative and dynamic university school partnership model of comprehensive school change (Lee & Chiu, 1999). Apart from the time spent in the logistic arrangements for the improvement project, the duration of the project was about two and a half years. Originated from ASP, ASQE also adopted the three cardinal principles of ASP, namely, 1) unity of purpose, 2) empowerment coupled with responsibility and 3) building on strengths, and placed the schools at the focal point of change. Engaging all the stakeholders in the process of school-growth planning and building collaborative cultures within schools were some of the major objectives. Some of the major differences between the two projects were:

a) ASQE aimed to establish trust and confidence between the two parties in the beginning stage of the collaboration; the staff development workshops conducted by the school development officers from the university were seen as essential;

b) The stock-taking exercise was conducted by the university staff in order to provide academic advice. A kind of ‘expert-led growth’ approach was taken at first, in which data and findings were explained but left for further exploration to the school teachers, whereas the staff of ASP schools in USA had to conduct all stock-takings themselves;

c) Teachers in USA are more familiar and accustomed to develop and design powerful learning curriculum according to the philosophies of constructivism, but the university staff in ASQE understood that the teaching staff in Hong Kong were uncomfortable and inexperienced in designing curriculum all on their own. Therefore, a ‘pragmatic’ kind of constructivist approach was adopted in designing learning experiences, e.g. some of the textbooks and curriculum materials teachers often use were also made use of. They also worked more closely with teachers in the design and delivery of teaching, giving appropriate guidance, advice and even demonstration.

The development team of the improvement project of the university faculty
comprised eleven professional staff called school development officers (SDO), and six supporting administrative staff. The researcher in this study was the programme coordinator responsible for overseeing the implementation of a project involving 24 middle schools and 26 primary schools, monitoring the school coaching system and mentoring the school development officers. The school development officers possessed vast experience in teaching different subject disciplines, in curriculum design and in school management. Some were experienced lecturers in colleges of education and some were school heads. The aim of the school development officers was to guide the school community in the transformation process in school improvement. Some of the major tasks were:

- to liaise with the partner school, build school capacity for change and take stock for schools;
- to train the school community to internalize the systematic self-improvement process of accelerated schools;
- to conduct staff development workshops;
- to facilitate the teaching and learning strategies;
- to meet regularly with members of the partner schools;
- to provide an on-site trouble-shooting service and telephone assistance whenever necessary.

(Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong: Hong Kong Accelerated Schools Project Bulletin Vol. 1-3, 1999, 2000)

3.2 The Framework of the School Improvement Project

Relating the findings of US research to the cultural background of schools in Hong Kong, three questions have to be addressed in implementing the improvement projects:

- What model of school improvement is appropriate for each school in the project? Are there any general principles for school improvement generated from the case studies?

- Could confidence and trust be established, so that the improvement project will be beneficial to the partner schools? How acceptable are the academic advice and judgement, and the staff development workshops in developing a professional community and the innovative curriculum programmes introduced into the school?

- What will be the impact of the project on the school management, the teaching curriculum and strategies and especially, the educational outcomes of the students?

Figure 2 shows the framework of the improvement project drawn by the project coordinator. The framework presents a clear picture of the improvement project by
listing the characteristics, the strategies, the support of the faculty members and the changes expected in the collaborative partner school. Trust had to be built on the sincerity of the school development officers, the professionalism demonstrated and the effectiveness of the interactive staff development workshops. Confidence had to be established through academic advice and judgement with strong knowledge-based evidence. Demonstration and introduction of effective teaching and learning programmes aimed to win the respect and appreciation of the teachers. Subsequently, it was hoped that the teachers’ capacity would grow and the students would benefit as the teaching force became more competent. The improvement model emphasizes strongly the mutual trust and understanding of both parties, and the arrows in Figure 2 represent the interactivity of the programmes and the responses, effects and evaluation in the process.
3.3 The School for the case study

The School is a long-established Christian primary school in the Eastern District on Hong Kong Island. It is in its 43rd year of operation at 2001. The school building is sub-standard with insufficient space and room for organising extra-curricular activities or any other innovative teaching and learning programmes. With reference to the improvement framework in Figure 2, Table 1 is a summary of the major tasks accomplished in the schools.
### Table 1: Summary of the major tasks of the improvement project in the school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of work</th>
<th>Objectives/themes</th>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Impact/Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Development workshops (Jan. 1999 to June 1999)</strong></td>
<td>Transformation in school and teachers’ culture – workshops on themes like school change, vision building, priorities setting and school plans</td>
<td>All teachers</td>
<td>Evaluation of the effectiveness of the workshops collected, conditions of the school team and the working culture identified, a continuous reflection of the needs of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conducting stock-taking exercise (Oct. 1998 to Jan. 1999)</strong></td>
<td>Qualitative interviews with various stakeholders and questionnaires issued to both teachers and students for quantitative analysis</td>
<td>All teachers and all primary 4 to 6 students</td>
<td>Initial Stock-taking report was produced, for formative evaluation of the school and for development purpose only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conducting powerful learning programmes and innovative curriculum activities (Sept. 1999 to June 2001)</strong></td>
<td>- Staff development workshops on powerful learning&lt;br&gt;- Organising powerful learning activities for all P.4 students&lt;br&gt;- Conducting powerful learning activities including lesson demonstrations, learning and assessment days&lt;br&gt;- Two powerful learning activities were conducted in P.2 and P.4&lt;br&gt;- Thinking skills programmes in the subject of mathematics</td>
<td>All teachers&lt;br&gt;ASQE core group teachers and all P4 teachers&lt;br&gt;All P.4 teachers and students&lt;br&gt;All P.2 and P.4 teachers, students and some parents&lt;br&gt;All Maths teachers in P.3</td>
<td>The appreciation and understanding of learner-centred approach of learning (constructivism)&lt;br&gt;Understanding of the instructional design and internalising the philosophies of the learning initiatives&lt;br&gt;Students’ and teachers feedback were recorded&lt;br&gt;The learning activities for P.2 were designed and conducted by the teaching staff themselves, parents were invited and trained to help in the learning process&lt;br&gt;Voluntarily innovative programmes from the maths teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other major activities:</strong></td>
<td>- Study tours to Shanghai (April 1999) and Taipei (Dec. 2000)&lt;br&gt;- Widening the perspectives of core teachers on curriculum reform and effective teaching strategies</td>
<td>Head-master and three core group teachers</td>
<td>Strengthening the capacity of core teachers and better alignment of school vision</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Numerous meetings and contact  
Establishing good relationship, trust and collaboration  
Head-master, core group teachers and subject teachers  
Academic judgement and professional input were recognised

4. Methodology

4.1 Methods and Procedures for the study

This study is a case study employing a holistic approach and a descriptive research design. It ‘evolves around the in-depth study of a single event or a series of linked cases over a defined period of time’ (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995).

(a) Setting

A list of potential interviewees was developed, maintaining anonymity. Nine individuals categorised into five groups were selected as interviewees They were selected because of their potential in illustrating the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 1990). All the interviews of the school teachers were conducted in the school. All participants were guaranteed that they would not suffer from any discomfort as a result of the research, and were assured protection of ‘informant confidentiality’ (Merriam, 1988, 1998).

(b) Data collection and procedure

Data collection from multiple sources was used in an effort to obtain in-depth information and to provide a basis for triangulation of information. Table 2 below provides an outline of data used in this study. Data collected specifically for this study were mainly gathered in the year 2001. In addition, selected documents and some other supplementary quantitative data were collected during the collaborative period of the project (Sept. 1998 to August 2001). Procedures for collection of data are explained below.

Table 2: Data Collection Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Tools</th>
<th>Sources/Group</th>
<th>Time Frame for Collection</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Summative</td>
<td>school teachers</td>
<td>July-Sept. 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>university faculty members: SDOs</td>
<td>July-Sept. 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selected Documents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>partner school</td>
<td>Sept. 1998 - Aug. 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students’ learning logs</td>
<td>students</td>
<td>March 1999 - May 2001</td>
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<td>Meeting minutes</td>
<td>school teachers</td>
<td>Sept. 1998 - Aug. 2001</td>
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<td>Tapes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>university faculty</td>
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<td>Questionnaires</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>focus group of partner</td>
<td>May 2001</td>
</tr>
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Though multiple sources of data were collected and discussed, the descriptive interview remained the major source of data and most significant in the analysis of results.

**Interview framework**

All the interviews were taken individually, lasting one hour each. Throughout the interview, dialogue was encouraged. With the consent of the participants, all the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for inductive analysis. Four interview domains, including knowledge and vision of school improvement, impact of school improvement project as a whole, impact of individual teaching and learning activities and the long term effect, were constructed along the guiding research questions as stipulated at the beginning of this paper. Nine individuals categorised into five groups were selected as interviewees, namely, i) the principals (P1 and P2); ii) the core group of teachers responsible for the partnership project (C1 and C2), C1 was the teacher leader and internal coach in this project; iii) the middle-management group of senior teachers (S1 and S2); iv) a teacher from one of the curriculum development cadres (D1); v) teachers from the group of frontline practitioners (T1 and T2). Two school development officers were the project team members from the university. One was the chief contact, giving intensive guidance and consultative services, and was responsible for all activities in the collaborative work of the project (SDO1). The other was responsible for the introduction and adoption of an innovative learning programme brought to the ‘cadre in the teaching of Mathematics’ of the school (SDO2).

**Interview questions**

The first set of questions asked the respondents about their knowledge of educational change, the improvement projects and their involvement with the partnership projects. The second set dug into the impact of the school improvement project on the school as a whole. The third set of questions asked the interviewees if their experiences of this kind of partnership with the university had influenced their teaching, through which evidence of changes in teaching and learning programmes could be collected to see how external consultants worked in enhancing such changes. The last set were rounding up questions aiming at identifying the sustainability of the improvement project and allowed the interviewees to make other comments about their experiences.

(c) Other sources of data

**Documents**

Documents provide another source of information for the study. Annual school plans, annual school evaluation reports, minutes of meetings, teaching and learning programmes, and quarterly newsletter to parents were collected.
Log

Students’ learning logs recording their attitudes and achievements in attending the learning programmes were collected and studied. Journals and reflective logs of school development officers and school teachers were transcribed and studied. Some were comments, reflections, concerns and conversation from the partners.

(d) Data analysis

The major data source in responding to the three guiding research questions came from the interviews. The interview transcripts were descriptive and in narrative form. Interviews were coded by numbers and alphabetical letters. After identification of tentative themes, the data would be re-studied and recorded to determine the significant emerging themes by counting the number of interviewees referring to the specific themes and the quantity of the referrals. Other sources of data were used as back-up information to collaborate and add clarity to the findings from the in-depth interviews.

5. Analysis of qualitative data on interviews, journals, observations and other documents

Content analysis to answer the research questions posed for this study reveals three dominating domains. Under each domain, there are emerging themes encompassing the data. They are: 1) the contextual factors at the initial stage: the school setting and the crisis facing the school, the readiness of the staff, and the teachers’ culture; 2) critical human factors leading to the change: leadership, external support, internal core group of teachers, other stakeholders; and 3) teaching and learning programmes leading to the enhancement of teachers’ capacity: the implementation of powerful learning, innovative teaching and learning programmes in thinking skills, the effect on teachers’ professional development and the effect on school curriculum planning. A categorization of domains and the impact is summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: A categorisation of domains emerging in the partnership process
The context and situation at the initial stage
- The school setting and the imminent crisis of class shrinkage
- The readiness of the staff
  - Teachers’ culture, strengths and weaknesses

Leadership: dedication, personality & empowerment
- School development officers: trust & support
- Internal core group: collaboration

Critical human factors leading to school improvement

Programme-led changes in teaching and learning
- Powerful learning: external support and community resources
- Effect on Teachers' Professional development and capacity enhancement
- Teachers-initiated curriculum changes: Thinking skills programme and P2 cross-subject integration and other innovations
This paper will focus on the discussion of the second and third domains, data on the first domain and some teaching and learning programmes conducted are not discussed.

5.1 Critical human factors leading to school improvement

(a) Leadership

Principal’s dedication and personality

For any improvement achieved in this school, credit should first be given to the dedication and drive of the principal. The following are representative of the quotations from the teachers:

_The development of our school is very rapid these years. I think the critical factor is when the new Principal took charge in 1995. The school has the drive to develop. [The principal] gives 100% effort ............ He has his ideals and aspirations, working for the ‘good’ of the students._

_(interview, S2)_

_He has ideals, strong vision, but wanted to do too many things._

_(interview, C1)_

_Definitely some of the changes in the schools were due to the leadership of the new principal since 1995……[He] has a deeper understanding of educational development._

_(interview, P2)_

SDO1 recalled:

_I was fortunate to work with him. I thought his positive attitude was extremely important for a school to grow._

_(journal notes, SDO1)_

_He is a very people-oriented person, he values highly his relationship with teachers and pupils. Teacher-pupil relationship is generally very good. The teachers are caring but firm at the same time. The cultivation of a humanistic and caring culture is successful._

_(Interview, SDO1)_

The principal in this case possessed the personal qualities characteristic of an effective leader: not just advocating the vision, but doing it with self-commitment, directly involved in and exemplifying the change. The staff was ‘moved’. The importance of the personality of the leader in the initial stage of the school improvement process is genuinely reflected in this case study.

Trust, support and empowerment

The principal confided that the most impressive and marked improvement
in the school was the team spirit of the staff. He gave a lot of credit to the external support from the university. He said, “The most influential external factor is the cooperation with the ASQE of the Chinese University of Hong Kong; it is lucky that I had the chance of hearing the philosophies and principles of the project. The more experienced teachers really felt the changes in the few years the project was taking place.

The principal introduced to us some new concepts and methodologies, he never forced us to follow what to do, we had to work harder and tried something new, but when we saw the achievements of the students, we tasted the sweetness of teaching.

(interview, P2)

The principal initiated a lot of action plans and started a number of teaching and learning activities. He gave us support and most important of all was to join the university partnership project, the largest scale of all changes.

(interview, S2)

He is everywhere, always asking us how he can help.

(interview, C1)

Discussion on leadership

In the case study, the principal possessed a mixture of each: transactional (in allocation workload and resources); instructional (in planning curriculum with the core teachers); transformational (in empowering the less experienced); and even what Sergiovanni (2000) described as ‘Stewardship’. In this particular case the researcher judges that the leadership style of the principal is one based on a transformational style, with love, care and ethical components. Having said that, the researcher is reluctant to label a ‘transformational leader’ as the necessary or the most important condition for improvement in this case study. The evidence from teachers suggests that change can be attributed to multiple leadership styles, corresponding to the culture and history of the school, the professional knowledge of the teachers, the socio-economic-status of the students’ families, and some other related factors. While the leadership of the principal is a necessary factor in school improvement, it remains insufficient for sustained school improvement. The other qualities of leadership such as shared leadership roles and responsibilities at other levels within the schools have been shown to be just as important (Harris, 1999).

(b) School development officers: Trust and support

The principal described the relationship between the SDOs and the school teachers, “At first, my teaching staff are like outsiders, not very involved. But upon the instruction and guidance of the SDOs, they really change, maybe …er….because of the series of workshops, they change from cool to passionate. Now, the SDOs and some of the staff become old pals.”
vice-principal, who was deeply impressed by the partnership project, always gave supportive comments, “All the workshops are beneficial to the teachers and most objectives achieved. The SDO is excellent, very positive, extremely good attitude and really wants to help us.”

Some other comments from the teachers were quoted below:

[They provide] support, definitely yes, in resources, consultation, reference materials......With the external support, I can work better in all aspects, and at the same time, the learning of the students is greatly enhanced.

(interview, S1)

The SDO brought in new teaching strategies. We were enlightened.

(interview, C1)

The coaches (SDOs) are very important, I am not flattering you people, but it is true. We were all very scared in the beginning, but we feel the support and appreciate the way you guide us. Authority is very important as well, if we ask our colleagues to do such and such, we are on equal par, the pushing effect is not as strong as the people from the university. They [the school teachers] think that you are very professional, with good persuasive power.

(interview, T1)

From their perspective, the school development officers also valued the mutual relationship and appreciated the ways the school staff treated them.

I feel that they consider us very professional, and not forceful or threatening, we share the responsibility and work with them. They could see that we are full of enthusiasm and energy, these are the qualities of the SDOs that impress them.

I saw our relationship as partners, 30% as expert and 70% as partner.

(interview, SDO2)

Almost everyone knows me, greets me and shows appreciation. I love to visit the school.

(journal notes, SDO1)

Discussion on external support: school development officers

From the data collected, the school development officers, as the major source of external support, were of utmost importance in the partnership project. The SDOs have to play different roles in the encounter, as a ‘salesperson’, a ‘doctor’, a ‘model teacher’, an ‘expert’, a ‘facilitator’ in order to be able to secure trust, to provide support, to release tension, to mediate and to collaborate with the teachers. The data cited above reflect well on the establishment of trust and confidence between the two parties of the university and the school, but the professional development of the teachers could only be enhanced if they practised, reflected and implemented the learning and teaching programmes
introduced in the project. Nevertheless, the SDOs were not all-round experts who could satisfy all the various needs of the school. The optimal size and critical mass of a school development team could be further investigated.

(c) **Internal core group of teachers (cadre)**

We could assess the attitude of the core members from the interviews:

*I try to understand the partnership project. I am very positive, I read from books, journal articles and newsletters mentioning the project.*

(interview, C1)

*We have the confidence and are willing to work.*

(interview, P2)

*In the beginning, I have much doubt about the project, too much work to do. I am already the coordinator of the activity approach and responsible for all computer records in schools.*

(interview, S1)

*We had a lot of meetings, my involvement was not as great as the core group. After all, we had to start the task from zero; to me, it was challenging and complicated.*

(interview, T2)

Without experiencing the joy and pain, the ups and downs, the process and the product of a collaborative task, the professional abilities of the core group could not be enhanced. Without witnessing the achievement of the students after the hard work, the teachers will not value the worth of the effort made.

**Discussion on internal strength: core teachers**

As an initiator of school change, the core group accomplished an important task, but the researcher found that the group was not as strong in professional knowledge and interpersonal skills. For a traditional small school with its existing human resources, the principal had already done his best to encourage change.

(d) **Summary of discussion on critical human factors**

The establishment and maintenance of a good relationship between the university and the school staff was essential for school change. A university-school partnership project should be built on mutual trust and respect. Members of both parties should treat each other as equals and work together as partners. Whether such a relationship can be established depends on a number of conditions, but the attitude (enthusiasm, patience, human relationship) of the SDOs, the readiness and willingness of the school staff and the leadership of the principal are the most important. SDO1 voiced the essential qualities of an expert consultant in the interview:
The best way is to become one of them, so that you could feel how they feel, only then your tone would be entirely different. I always remember the painful lesson that I learnt from the first workshop. When I criticized them, I was talking as an outsider, comparing their performance with that of other teachers. Of course, they should be unhappy. Who was I to criticize them, knowing nothing about them, we were not friends then................. But as the frequency of my visit increased, their perception gradually changed especially when I volunteered to take up some work that they disliked or feared. I even went into the classroom to teach. Gradually I won their trust and I also developed some special liking for the school, the pupils and the teachers. A sense of belonging also emerged as a result of close contact and collaboration. You cared about the well-being of the school and you felt being liked and welcomed by the people in the school. That really made you feel so good! When you become a member of the school, you wouldn’t complain. If you alienate yourself, the feeling would be different.

(interview, SDO1)

5.2 Enhancement of teachers’ capacity and professional development through programme-led changes in teaching and learning

The core group of the school and the SDO jointly decided that in order to show the teachers what was meant by enhancing teachers’ capacity through introducing a teaching and learning programme: Powerful Learning. The preparation began with staff development workshops on powerful learning. Thus, the teachers had the chance to experience the activities based on the constructivist concept and interactive activities designed by the SDOs. The teachers enjoyed the workshop very much. The feedback from the evaluation of the workshop was 100% positive. Below were some of the comments:

- the arrangement is excellent, not boring, can promote colleagues’ relationship;
- like to learn from games and simulations;
- I have not been treated as primary students for a long time, it is wonderful, I like the activities and the learning, thank you;
- No bluffing, it is powerful;
- The activities can be adapted to teaching writing;
- I am exhausted, time is short;
- Happy, satisfied, cooperative, support, sense of belonging, love, swift;

(Comments collected after the powerful learning workshop on 21-12-1999)

The teachers experienced their first taste of “Powerful Learning”. As shown by their written feedback, they did not only enjoy the workshop but also began to appreciate the learner-centred approach of learning. An initial framework of the upcoming Powerful Learning event scheduled for April was also established.

(SDO’s report in the weekly meeting in January, 2000)
The Powerful Learning programme in the case study involved cross-curricular thematic learning for primary four students. The learning programme was not a one-off activity; instead, it lasted for two to three months (refer to Table 3). In the course of designing the lesson plans, SDO consciously played an active role to change the teachers' habit of just focussing on the logistics.
Table 3: The Schedule and Content of the Powerful Learning programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (in 2000)</th>
<th>Learning Activities</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jan-Mar.</td>
<td>Preparation: whole learning programme designed, discussed and revised</td>
<td>Teachers were very active, positive involvement, reflective, sharing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 10/3          | All the students went to visit Law Uk Folk Museum, as tourists. The upper six secondary school students (who had received leadership training from SDO) in the same district served as tour guides and demonstrated to the primary school kids how to be a competent tour guide. The students learn about the changing land use, the past and the historical development of the area through observation, interview and studying the exhibits in the museum. | ● peer learning and cascade learning  
● secondary school students serve as role models  
● interface between secondary and primary schools  
● community involvement  
● parents’ involvement and assistance in learning |
| 17-31/3       | Instructional design of classroom teaching in different subjects concerning the central theme were developed:  
● In the Chinese Language class, the students reflect on the qualities required of a competent guide. They also learn to design name cards and itinerary, taking into account the characteristics of different places.  
● Data collected from the interviews would be processed in the Mathematics lessons.  
● Learn to sing songs around the theme of Hong Kong in Music lessons  
● Learn to make souvenirs in Art and Craft lessons  
● Learn to introduce the scenic spots in English and Putonghua in language lessons | ● Teachers had to collaborate well, willing to contribute some of the lessons for collective use and for integration of learning  
● Teachers learned to be patient and applied the values of powerful learning, high expectation on students  
● Students had a lot of self-practice, much more creative work, became active learners |
| 31/3          | Final training-sessions for students (parents, teachers and other stakeholders were invited to observe)  
● Time tunnel (Mathematics and social studies)  
● Welcome to Hong Kong (English)  
● Why is Hong Kong full of Fun (Putonghua)  
● How much do you know about the itinerary (Chinese Language) | ● An integrated learning day to capitalize on the students’ multiple abilities and intelligences  
● A wide range of learning activities: games, observations, role plays, small group discussions, data analysis, application of information technology |
| 1/4           | Practical session of a little tour guide (3 parts):  
● Small group quiz on what had been learnt  
● Acting as little trilingual tour guides  
● The visitors from other schools, the parents and the secondary school students would act as tourists and assessed their performance  
● Extending from a study of the past and present, students are led to discuss the future e.g. in the areas of land use and design of housing. ‘Create the future’ activities led by the secondary school students | ● A totally new attempt for the students, they were anxious, eager and nervous, they also loved to perform well  
● Communicative skills and the sense of ‘I can do it’ were stressed |
The Powerful Learning Programme

The powerful learning programme implemented jointly between both parties was a distinctive example of organizational learning. The programme lasted for three months. More than 2/3 of the teaching staff was involved in the teaching and learning programme. Stakeholders including teaching staff, facilitators from the university, community members including museum staff, government officials, teachers and students from neighbouring schools, students and their parents, were all involved.

The Programme's Effect on Teachers' Professional Development and Capacity Enhancement

For the teachers to make ‘genuine’ change in their teaching paradigm, they would need to observe changes in their students. Some good teachers are accustomed to the ‘traditional’ way of teaching because they believe those are good for their students. Such views are grounded in hundreds of years of Chinese philosophical thought. The core group managed to conduct a comprehensive review right after the final activity and solicited views from different stakeholders: teachers and parents. The overall evaluation was very positive. The teachers' views, both from the evaluation meeting and the later interview showed signs of paradigm shift as they assessed the programme's effect on their own belief and practice as well as its effect on students' learning.

Teaching strategy:

- There is certainly a need to change the traditional teaching strategies;
- From visiting Law Uk Folk Museum to the practice day, the students changed a lot, we can see the importance of the teaching objectives and strategies;
- We have to accept new philosophies, there was no direction in the beginning, through gradual exploration and improvement, we can design a satisfactory programme;

  (evaluation meeting notes from teaching staff on 1st of April)

Beliefs about students' learning:

- Before teaching, we under-estimate the abilities (creative) and cooperativeness of the students. To support and trust the students is important;
- Students were happy in the activities, so they put effort, and in return, derived more satisfaction, we can see the effectiveness;

  (evaluation meeting notes from teaching staff on 1st of April)

Understanding of 'good' teaching:

- Time, space and resources are what good teaching needs;
Visitors responses were very good, good teaching was not confined to classroom;

The preparation period was very labouring, but the response was very good;

The related learning activities could be extended.

(evaluation meeting notes from teaching staff on 1st of April)

**Reflection on their own practice:**

The most impressive work was the visit to the museum, one of the activities in powerful learning, because I really went there and learnt outside the classroom.

The children were extremely happy. In the process of the journey, the parents helped. The arrangement was smooth and the children did learn. They had been to the Law Uk Folk Museum before, but the visit was different this time, [they] had learning objectives. Before we just asked them to look at the statues or the other things, and recorded what they saw, the effect was not that good. There were objectives and other assisting materials like worksheets, discussions, reviews and evaluation. I learned much deeper myself.

(interview, S1)

I have very personal feeling on the project. I do not have much new ideas in teaching. When I saw that the project introduced the games and activities to raise the learning interests, it was very encouraging. And now I always think what kind of games and activities can be used for this or that lesson to consolidate learning.

(interview, P2)

I was very satisfied after the powerful learning and didn’t want to leave it. There was sort of satisfaction and encouragement. The effect was rather good, some parents praised us and I found that I had some contribution in the whole event. I want to try the powerful learning in the second year.

(interview, T2)

The children were very excited in the powerful learning, whether the effect can last or not depend very much on the teachers. If the teachers expected better outcomes, they will try hard and the achievement will be better.

(interview, T1)

**Effect on students' learning:**

The children wrote weekly journals after the visits, they wrote a lot more than usual. They wrote down the process of the visit and their emotion in great details. In the past, they found it very difficult to think about the content of the journal, but this time [it] was much easier and relaxed.

(interview, S1)
The students were very involved, especially in the oral speaking in English, they might be wrong in grammar, but ready to speak was a good start.

(interview, P2)

The most impressive activity was the powerful learning. In the interaction of the learning activities, the teachers were very involved and enjoyed the communication with the students very much. In the process, the students learned a lot in the process, including hands-on experiments, information gathering and communication skills.

(interview, S2)

Not all the interviews or the evaluation showed positive comments. One of the teachers worried about whether the effect could last long. She (C1) said, “The impact on students is difficult to follow, it is very effective on the powerful learning activities, but I don’t know whether the learning atmosphere can be extended …I can’t observe their lessons afterwards.” Another core group member (C2) in the cadre of powerful learning shared a similar view:

[We] do not have systematic evaluation on the effect or impact on students. From [my] observation, the students really enjoyed the period of powerful learning. But I don’t know once the teachers go back into the classroom, will they teach like before. I think this must be a long long road [to change].

(interview, C2)

Effect on home-school cooperation:

All of the teachers being interviewed admitted that powerful learning had some effect on the parents. The teachers were a little surprised when they heard the comments from parents who seemed to appreciate more the teachers' and the students' efforts:

- Some students were not active enough. This was normal because they did not have ample opportunities to develop confidence. In the learning process, the students were improving, so we have to build up their confidence, encourage them;

- We could see that the students lack confidence, the activities improved their self-confidence and enhanced their motivation;

- The activities were effective, the students were eager to practise their English and Putonghua, they asked their parents to listen to them;

- The parents learned as well, the observations, the collection of materials, the skills;

- For the students, teachers and the parents, this activity was a very good experience;

(evaluation meeting notes from parents on 1st of April)
The dedicated parents came and helped in preparing teaching aids and conducting students’ activities. The parents knew the school better and their sense of belonging was raised.

The SDO was more cautious about the changes in the teachers not directly involved in the teaching process of powerful learning.

Not everyone appreciated our effort, I guessed the principal and the core group, and maybe some senior teachers appreciated more because individual frontline teachers didn’t need to demonstrate their competence as an individual teacher. I felt it was a matter of ownership.

(interview, SDO1)

Effect on the school's curriculum development

To cope with the change in teaching paradigm, the teachers revisited and studied the existing curriculum and designed new programmes afterwards. Some structural factors such as timetable and teachers’ workload were altered and rearranged accordingly.

The support of the principal was prompt and ready.

Right after the powerful learning, we had a thorough discussion on next year’s school plan, a few cadres were established, each led by a member of the core group in powerful learning. We had focused learning programmes for each level, powerful learning for P.4, thinking skills for P.3, subject integration for P.2, project learning for P.5 & P.6, and whole language learning for P.1.

(interview, P1)

Even though we have no similar support as in last year, we will try to continue and draw in community resources to help us. Even if we have no resources, we will evaluate what is useful and beneficial in the activities, what are the problems, how can we learn through the experience and make better the future outside-classroom learning.

(interview, S1)

Personally, I want you people around, I don’t have enough skills and techniques to design and implement the innovative curriculum. The principal wants the support as well. He has established a new cadre called curriculum development group and hope that the effect of ASQE can be extended.

(interview, T1)

The implementation of powerful learning was an important step forward for the university-school partnership project. It stirred up the entire staff. To conclude, the programme had its effects on the following:

1) Teachers’ professional discourse became more focused. For a few months, the
discussion among the involved teachers centred around the ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘context’ of the learning programme.

2) A platform for curriculum innovation was established. The evaluation of the programme afterwards demonstrated the desire of the staff in transferring and adapting the programme to ‘normal’ classroom teaching and learning.

3) Peer observation and collaborative teaching were promoted in disguise. For a traditional primary school like the case school, peer observation in teaching had never been practiced before. The powerful learning programme provides chances for teachers to observe, discuss, reflect and revise the lesson plan as well as the delivery methods. Team teaching and mutual support are therefore practiced in an unintentional way.

4) To face the challenge, team spirit and the ideas of collaborative working were gradually built up; this was essential for the growth of a learning organization.

Networking of all stakeholders of the school including the school supervisors, the principal, the different levels or groups of teachers, the secretarial and janitor staff; the external professional support; and the teachers & students of neighbouring schools was made possible. Community resources were drawn in as well.

A detailed study of the interview transcripts shows that most interviewees gave positive comments on the partnership project. The analysis of the interview data shows that teachers’ professional development progressed from working as an individual to working as a group.

Before, the teachers mind their own business, they just teach their ‘own’ students (my class), they don’t care what is happening in other classes, now they prepare the lessons together and discuss the pros and cons in the teaching.

(interview, P2)

Before, everyone did their own work, without any collaboration and there was no discussion on how to improve teaching qualities, the sharing of teaching experience was minimal. With the assistance of the university in conducting a number of workshops, they know how to cooperate and discuss the action plans.

(interview, P1)

There are a lot of cooperation afterwards, more discussions and more collaborative work and working together becomes more natural, accepting each other, like starting whole-language teaching in level one.

(interview, C1)

The teachers are more ready to try and transform new ideas into teaching. The vice-principal had the following comments:

The experiences so far are important for professional development, we cannot have collaborative lesson planning all the time as we cannot afford the time and
resources, but the good teaching ideas and material can be accumulated.

(interview, P2)

Last year was a large-scale project, but this year the teaching and learning approaches were transformed into small-scale curriculum designed by the teachers.

(interview, S2)

In the SDO’s journal, it was recorded that:

Everyone became more relaxed in the second year of the programme. Another batch of teachers would conduct the programme for another group of students. This was deliberately planned by the principal because he wanted every teacher to go through the experience.

(journal notes, SDO1)

The principal also agreed that the greatest impact was on the teachers’ capacity, he said, “If there is no ASQE, I don’t think the teachers will try different teaching and learning models, or will inquire about the effectiveness of their own teaching.”

Involvement in the project helps teachers to change themselves, not to teach according to books, but how to teach well and how to help students to learn effectively.

(interview, P1)

Two teachers agreed that the change in teachers had deepened.

There are a lot of academic and functional groups in the school, after we join in the groups, the colleagues are very positive in giving suggestions, and work cooperatively. There were quite some noises before, saying that there were too much work, but not now; they think that they should do it.

(interview, S2)

I should say that it has a great impact on teacher development; the project makes the initiation and we follow, but later we will do our own. I have to agree that we won’t develop that fast or that big if we do it ourselves, the staff involvement in the school development is more comprehensive and much deeper with your presence.

(interview, D1)

The implementation of the new action should be a product of collaborative effort. The group dynamic helps the inquiry process to run smoothly and to ensure the product is of a certain quality. Positive feedback from the students and other stakeholders keep the staff moving. Evaluation and reflection afterwards set the foundation for a ‘further go’. The experience will be adapted to the local contextual situation, for example in normal classroom practice, and
another innovative design is born. The school becomes a learning organisation as more and more innovative teaching and learning cadres are formed and more teachers are involved.

6. Lessons and Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the findings of the case school

1) The interview data reviewed that though the teaching staff was not at all positive at the initial stage, a combination of external policy directives, the dedication of the leader, the core group of teachers and the external support could change their attitude. Therefore, school improvement efforts in a school should not be attributed to simple technical and linear considerations. One context is connected with another context, and actions taken in one context may generate the actions for the next context. This was particularly true in this case study as staff development workshops gave rise to the first powerful learning programmes, and subsequently to thinking skills programmes and changes in classroom teaching.

2) Thanks and appreciation expressed by the school practitioners towards the external helpers indicated the importance of mutual trust and relationship between partners, but the genuine change could only be seen when the collaborative learning programmes and activities were in place. The emerging learning outcomes of the innovative programmes, though not in the usual form of academic subject scores, urged the teachers to move on.

3) All the change agents including the school development officers from the university, the principal, the core group teachers and the teaching and learning cadres contributed to the school improvement in the sense of continuing professional enhancement. Each agent was part of a complex dynamic, interwoven with the others, under the constraints of the school culture.

4) The role of the school development officers in providing external support was crucial. Once trust and confidence were established, the advice was taken and the suggested actions were implemented. The appreciation felt by the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents towards the SDOs was very clear to the researcher. The study showed that a team of dedicated and sensitive school development officers was essential for the success. Their multiple talents, their sharp and prompt responses, their collegiality and the commitment to providing good education were required for forming an effective team with the school staff.

5) The relationship of the school development officers (facilitators) with the principal and the teachers was nevertheless very delicate. Invariably, reform facilitators encounter some obstacles due to the power and peer relations existing in the school. Facilitators have to establish themselves as a trusted authority. An important finding for school improvement is that the university staff should work in a group, with multiple contacts and providing multiple forms of assistance. The critical mass for an improvement team in a university school collaborative project should be explored in further project of this kind.
6) The Principal’s leadership was certainly a crucial factor for school improvement in the case study school. Being a single case, it was impossible to generalise the findings to other cases.

7) The teachers in the core group served as teacher leader and internal coordinator. They occupied an important position in the successful implementation of school improvement. The core teachers in the case study were sometimes reluctant to challenge the norms that characterized the professional lives of teachers because of their positional power. They were anxious about antagonising older colleagues and tried not to alienate them. The heavy workload and the tensions related to role ambiguity reduced the effectiveness of the leadership of the core teachers.

8) Communication among teachers in the case school generally improved and changes in teachers’ understanding and attitudes to powerful learning were recorded. There was more collegial and collaborative work. The qualitative data also showed that there had been changes in the school’s professional culture throughout the course of the project. The staff focused more on the processes of teaching and learning, with more professional discourse about the effectiveness of learning. The practices of shared work, peer support and classroom observations became more natural and common. Though the concept of professional community received markedly increased attention as teachers tried to promote improvements in instruction and students’ learning, the principal and the university staff felt that there was still a long way to go before. Only a few of the elements embedded in a learning organization, like collaborative effort, distributive knowledge, learning from each other, could be found in the case school.

9) The greatest impact on the case school was certainly the teaching and learning activities introduced to the staff. Both the teaching paradigms (understanding students’ attitude towards learning) and the techniques in conducting lessons changed. An impact on classroom practice in the form of adoption of new practices or improvements in the operation of existing practices was slowly established. The introduction of new practices at each level in the school brought changes in classroom practice, though it had to be admitted that an effective measure of students’ academic achievements in quantitative terms was not obtained. Hopkins (2001:7) also explains that ‘one cannot be over optimistic about whether current reform initiatives will lead to dramatically enhanced levels of achievement. Nevertheless, the powerful learning programme provided a platform for the staff to work together for the good of the students, to have lively discussion in the staff room, to try out new ideas and methods, to identify the strengths and different abilities of students, and to accept and acknowledge the assistance of parents in learning.

10) The interviews with frontline practitioners indicated a positive change in both their personal and interpersonal capacity. They talked about the development of personal attributes such as self-confidence and a sense of re-invigoration and fresh commitment.

6.2 Lessons learnt on improving primary schools in Hong Kong
1) The curriculum reform in Hong Kong primary schools must be school-based, knowledge-based and inquiry-based. The experience gained from the case school shows that change efforts have to be mobilised at the level of the whole organisation in order to improve school performance. The effect of a school improvement project should not only be seen at the school management level, but also in the outcomes of teaching and learning.

2) More intensive external support as a school improvement strategy is crucial at the beginning of the project. The focus on teaching and learning, rather than other distant factors like school management strategies, organisational development, external inspection or teacher appraisal, is more appropriate as it appeals more to the immediate concern of the teachers.

3) Undoubtedly, the leadership of principal in the case school plays an important role in improving the school, as could be illustrated in the interview data. Though a transformational form of leadership is often advocated by academics (Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), it may not be entirely applicable to the situation of primary schools in Hong Kong, taking into account that most teachers are still rather receptive to didactic teaching. The long tradition of the hierarchical structure in an eastern culture philosophy slows down the rate of democratic transformation in schools. Hence, leadership styles should vary according to the stages of growth in schools. At the same time, while the leadership of the principal is a necessary ingredient in the school improvement process, it remains insufficient on its own to sustain long-term and continuous school improvement.

6.3 Implications for educational policy and research in Hong Kong

1) The recognition and adoption of the innovative programme of powerful learning and thinking skills reminded the researcher of the failure of the 1994 large scale curriculum reform (TOC) in Hong Kong. In order to force all primary schools to implement this centrally controlled curriculum, the policy-makers and the government officials contrasted the pre and post implementation of TOC as the extreme ends of a continuum: the ‘black and the white’, ‘the worst and the best’, ‘the passive teaching and the active learning’, portraying only the inadequacy of some teachers and causing negative effects in schools. In contrast, collaboratively devising new learning and teaching programmes under the umbrella of a university and school partnership may be more appealing and acceptable to teachers in schools.

2) School change should be comprehensive and interactive. Cultural renewal within the school lies at the heart of school improvement. The IQEA work has demonstrated that without an equal emphasis on the development capacity and internal conditions of the school, innovative work quickly becomes marginalised (Harris & Hopkins, 2000:9). Though change efforts have to be mobilised at all levels of the organisation, teaching and learning should be emphasized and focused.

3) Allocation of resources to schools should be based on professional knowledge and research evidence, rather than on the equity principle alone. For those schools situated in areas with a lot of students with poor family background, a
policy of positive discrimination should be employed. More resources should be provided for the under-privileged, but resources ought to be spent on providing effective learning and teaching programmes.

4) Ongoing development for teachers, including training of internal school coaches to enhance capacity building, training of school principals to become effective and transformational leaders and training of curriculum leaders to foster effectiveness in teaching and learning is needed.

5) Further research should focus on:
   - The effect of external support on classroom level;
   - More fine-grained analytical case studies on selected schools in the project;
   - Longitudinal studies on the life cycles of improving schools;
   - The sustainability of school improvement after the exit of external support;
   - Effectiveness of different aspects of university-school collaboration projects in school improvement.

6.4 Conclusion

Harris & Young (2000:31) comment that “the process of school improvement, still remains something of a ‘black box’. While there are ample descriptions of different approaches to school improvement, there is less analysis of what works and why. Clearly, this is a difficult area to traverse as there are no universals, no recipes for success.” Working in the school improvement field for a few years in Hong Kong, the researcher could only aim that his case study should contribute to knowledge and understanding of school improvement at a time of major reform. It aimed to:

- Establish an evidence-based approach to improvement;
- Provide strong external support based on trust, confidence, professional knowledge and practical experience;
- Offer leadership based on genuine care and concern for the school, its teachers and its pupils;
- Empower the core group of teachers to handle school improvement tasks;
- Focus on teaching and learning;
- Work with a small unit first;
- Enable the staff to plan together, to develop consensus, to agree on policies, priorities, values and vision;
- Allow process time and implementation dip;
- Involve parents, exhibit evidence of learning and teaching, and celebrate success;
- Maintain a high professional, moral and ethical standard.
- Establish a learning organisation and transform teachers’ and school culture through the above.
References


London: Cassell.


