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Issues Encountered by Program Facilitators During Comprehensive School Reform: The First Year of the Quality Schools Project in Hong Kong

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At the end of the first year of the Quality Schools Project (a comprehensive school reform project in Hong Kong), the author conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the program facilitators. These 3-hour interviews were done to assess the project's progress at the 40 participating schools, and to identify factors that affected the progress. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common issues. Four dominant themes emerged. The program facilitators perceived the following as important to the progress of school reform: (a) quality of school leadership, (b) misalignment of reforms with public examinations, (c) degree of initial implementation success, and (d) role of pro-

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gram facilitators. These findings are similar to those from other recent studies. Implications for comprehensive school reform program providers, school principals and policy makers are also discussed.

Key words: school-university partnership; comprehensive school reform; change agents

Experiences with comprehensive school reform (CSR) have been highly varied. Some are highly successful while others fail. Even highly trained and motivated teams can have unsuccessful school collaborations. Often, the same CSR team can simultaneously have successful and unsuccessful collaborations with different schools. Sometimes, schools in crisis (decreasing student enrollment, low staff morale) progress tremendously during CSR, while at other times collaborations end with nothing achieved.

The novelty of CSR to Hong Kong may contribute to these variable results. The first large-scale CSR program in Hong Kong—the Accelerated Schools for Quality Education Project (ASQEP)—was only implemented in 1998. This was followed by the University-School Partnership for Quality Education Project (USPQE) in 2000, and the Quality Schools Project (QSP) in 2001.

CSR is a whole-school approach to school improvement. It is different from previous approaches to school improvement in that it emphasizes coherent reform efforts covering all aspects of a school's operation. Although considerable research has been done on CSR in the United States (e.g., Bodilly, 1998; Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan & Wasik, 1993; McCarthy & Still, 1993; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2000), there has been very little written about CSR in Hong Kong. Exceptions are the final reports produced about the ASQEP (Faculty of Education, Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, & Quality Education Fund, 2002) and the USPQE (Lee & Chung, 2002).

This study investigates the issues and challenges encountered by CSR program providers, with particular reference to the first year of the QSP project in Hong Kong. Specifically, this study tries to answer the following questions: Why do some school-university collaborations progress smoothly, while others do not? What are the institutional issues encountered during the implementation of CSR? What are the problems that frequently arise during such collaborations? Knowing the answers to these questions will make project designers and program facilitators more aware of problems that can occur during school collaborations.

The following section presents a literature review about issues encountered during CSR implementation. Next, this study's data collection and methodology are described. Findings from the qualitative analysis are then discussed. The study concludes with a summary of the findings and its implications.

Literature

Previous work about issues encountered during CSR have focused around four major themes: (a) the importance of school context, (b) the role of internal and external change agents, (c) interaction between schools and the reform institution, and (d) obstacles encountered by reformers.

The Importance of School Context

Studies have shown that implementation affects outcomes and that local factors (such as organisational relations, commitment) can dominate the implementation of and responses to change (Bardach, 1977; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Elmore, 1975). Darling-Hammond (1990) reiterated the importance of looking at the local context to understand what affects the success of an instructional policy. In her discussion of policy implementation, McLaughlin (1987) describes implementation as a process of "bargaining and transformations", and suggests that researchers study and exploit the inevitable variability in local settings to further their analysis.

More recently, Datnow (2000) examined the adoption process of externally developed school reform designs in 22 U.S. schools. She found that the adoption process involved either the district, or the school principal pushing school reform. School administrators and teachers were not given time to reflect on how the program would help solve school problems. Without the teachers' commitment to the reform program, many schools underwent only superficial changes. Datnow concluded that "perhaps it is not the particular reform choice that makes the most difference for successful implementation... it is the context for how it was introduced" (p. 367). Bodilly's (1998) study of the New American Schools project also found that a successful implementation of CSR was more likely in schools in which staff felt that they "were well informed about the designs" and "had a free choice among designs" (p. 56).

Roles of Internal and External Change Agents

Fullan (1992) argued that the principal, as a primary agent of change, is central to successful school improvement and reform. This is especially true during periods of many reforms, where focus, coherence and consistency of change efforts must be forged through the critical leadership position of the principal.

Apart from the principal, teacher leaders and external change agents also play an important role in facilitating change. Ainscow and Southworth (1996) examined the roles of teacher leaders and external change agents in a university and school partnership for school improvement. They found that teachers exercised leadership by, creating positive working relations, taking a whole school view, keeping up momentum, monitoring developments, and establishing a climate for change. External consultants helped facilitate change by, pushing thinking forward, framing the issues, encouraging partnerships, providing incentives, and modelling ways of working.

Interaction Between Schools and Reform Projects

Both project and school have to adapt to each other for successful change to

occur. The RAND change agent study concluded that successful implementation was characterised by a process of "mutual adaptation" where project goals and methods were modified to suit needs and interests of participants (McLaughlin, 1976).

It is important for the schools to know and consider the theories of action of school improvement projects (the assumptions, values and beliefs on which improvement strategies are based), and whether those beliefs are congruent with their own. And if the schools want to introduce more than one program at a time, they should consider whether the beliefs and strategies of the programs are complementary with one another. Hatch (1998) analysed the first two years of the ATLAS Communities Project [1] and found that many school improvement project collaborations failed largely because the participating organisations had different theories of action.

Finnan (2000) argues that when reform is initiated in public schools, it is important to understand the interplay between the culture of the reform model used and the school and classroom cultures. Drawing on her own experience implementing a CSR project (the Accelerated Schools Project), she concludes that "where a match between the cultures exists, or is desired by the majority, the reform is more likely to be successfully implemented." (p. 5).

Obstacles Encountered by Reformers

Almost all researchers agree that educational reform is a very difficult process. True reform takes time, and many issues and problems arise to impede change. Many of the problems encountered are political in nature. Muncey and McQuillan's (1993) case study of the Coalition of Essential Schools project reminds us that reform is not neutral; power and politics are inevitable in the process of school reform. They found that reformers were often naïve about power and politics within the school.

Data Collection and Methodology

This study draws from data collected in interviews that were originally con-

ducted by the author as part of a larger study for the QSP. The QSP is a two-year (2001-2003) CSR project that seeks to implement comprehensive, interactive, and dynamic school improvement in participating schools. It is funded by the QEF, in line with the comprehensive educational reforms outlined by the Education Commission.

The aim of the QSP is to help schools pursue ongoing self-improvement, to provide a quality education for their students. In order to achieve their goals, the QSP developed a series of programs and activities to be implemented in the schools. These programs fall into two domains: "Macro" programs (related to school organization and culture) and "Micro" programs (related to teaching and learning, discipline, guidance and counseling, and action research).

At the end of the first year of the QSP, the author carried out a series of one-on-one interviews with the School Development Officers (SDOs), who are the program facilitators of the QSP. These SDO interviews were carried out to ascertain the progress of the school improvement work, and to discover what factors helped or hindered the implementation of the project.

Participating Schools and SDOs

Forty schools participated in the QSP in the first year. Thirty-three of the schools voluntarily applied to join the project, the rest were referred by the Education Department. Of all the schools, 23 are primary schools, and 17 are secondary schools; 65% have students from a low socio-economic status (SES) background, 30% from lower middle SES, 2.5% from upper middle SES and 2.5% from high SES.

There are ten full-time SDOs, each of whom is primarily responsible for four participating schools (they are the "primary SDOs" of those schools). The SDOs are also assigned a supporting role in eight other participating schools (where they are "supporting SDOs"). Most of the time, the SDOs work on different teams for different schools. Each participating school is assigned a team consisting of one primary SDO, two or three supporting SDOs, and some project assistants.

Of the ten SDOs, six had previously participated in the ASQEP, the antecedent of the QSP, four were exemplary teachers transferred from either primary or secondary schools, and five had previously worked in tertiary institutions.

Interviews

All ten SDOs were interviewed using the "general interview guide approach" (Patton, 2002). A list of issues was used as a guide to ensure that all relevant topics were covered. (The interview guide is shown in the Appendix.) Each SDO was asked to describe and judge the development of the project in the four schools for which they were responsible. The SDOs discussed each school in turn. They were also asked to describe the situation in the schools where they played a supporting role. These interviews were used to triangulate the data collected from the responsible SDOs, to understand the schools' development from the perspectives of various SDOs.

Each SDO was interviewed for about 3 hours. All interviews were audio taped and then fully transcribed verbatim.

Apart from audio taping, "scratch-notes" were also written during each interview and rewritten into a more elaborated journal. Important ideas, issues or questions arising from the interview were noted in the journal. Issues and questions that emerged were probed during the subsequent interviews. This gave a better understanding of the variation in issues and themes that arose in different schools.

Data Analysis

An initial coding scheme was developed from the conceptual framework and the research questions. For the pilot stage of the data analysis, I selected an SDO who had very different case experiences (some schools with good progress and others with no progress). Strauss and Corbin (1998) talked about using the "Flip-Flop Technique," looking at opposites or extremes to bring out significant properties. The differences in the schools helped test the practicality of the coding scheme. The data from this one SDO were coded into different categories using the initial coding scheme. The coding

scheme was then revised to fit the interview data from the selected SDO (as described in Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Next, data from all the SDOs were analyzed using the revised coding scheme. This was done by first coding all the interview data according to the issues being discussed. The coded data were then sorted into various categories. Each category was analyzed to see if any themes emerged from the data. Each school was then looked at, in turn, to find common and recurring themes. These recurring themes were then scrutinized to make sure that they were important to many of SDOs, and that they cut across many schools.

Limitations

This study is based on data obtained from the SDOs, to the exclusion of the other parties involved (e.g., school principal, teachers, students, parents). The results presented rely on self-report data from a single data source, the SDOs themselves. It would be interesting to triangulate the findings of this study by interviewing the other people involved.

It should also be noted that any reference in this study to the success or progress of the project, refers to success or progress as perceived by the SDOs. Of course, SDOs are hardly impartial observers, as it may be in their interest to see success or progress where others might not. On the other hand, any reports of failures (especially due to the SDO's own inadequacies) are more likely to be accurate.

Findings

Four cross-cutting issues emerged from analyzing the data obtained from the SDO interviews. These issues are (a) school leadership, (b) incompatibility with public examinations, (c) initial implementation success, and (d) role of program facilitators. These were the common issues the SDOs faced when carrying out their work at the various participating schools. However, one should keep in mind that these issues were not present in every school,

Table 1 Factors Affecting Project Progress

School Code	School Level	Student SES	Referred by ED (✗)	School Leadership Effective (✓) Problematic (✗)	High Reputation (✗)	Initial Success (✓) or Failure (✗)	SDO Role Effective (✓) Problematic (✗)
Exceptional Progress							
6	Primary	Low		✓		✓	✓
9	Primary	Low		✓		✓	✓
11	Primary	Lower middle			✗	✓	✓
12	Primary	Low	✗	✗		✓	✓
13	Primary	Low	✗	✗		✓	✓
16	Primary	Lower middle		✓		✓	✓
20	Primary	High		✓	✗	✓	✓
23	Primary	Low		✓		✓	✓
24	Secondary	Low	✗	✗		✓	✓
30	Secondary	Low		✓		✓	✓
37	Secondary	Lower middle				✓	✓
38	Secondary	Low	✗	✓		✓	✓
Good Progress							
5	Primary	Low		✗			✓
14	Primary	Low		✓		✓	✓
18	Primary	Lower middle			✗	✓	✓
22	Primary	Low		✓		✓	✓
25	Secondary	Low		✗			✓
35	Secondary	Lower middle					✓
40	Secondary	Lower middle			✗	✓	✓
Slow Progress							
1	Primary	Low	✗	✗			✗
2	Primary	Low		✗			✓
3	Primary	Low		✗			✓
4	Primary	Lower middle		✓		✗	✗
7	Primary	Low					
8	Primary	Low				✗	✗
17	Primary	Low	✗				
19	Primary	Lower middle				✗	✗
21	Primary	Low					
26	Secondary	Low		✗			✓
29	Pri & Sec	Low		✓		✗	✗
33	Secondary	Lower middle		✗	✗		✓
34	Secondary	Lower middle					✓
39	Secondary	Low		✗			✗
No Progress (Relationship Established)							
10	Primary	Low	✗				✓
27	Secondary	Low		✗			✓
28	Secondary	Lower middle		✗			✓
36	Secondary	Higher middle			✗		✓
No Progress (Collaboration Failed)							
15	Primary	Low		✗		✗	✗
31	Secondary	Low		✗			✗
32	Secondary	Lower middle		✗		✗	✗

[✓] indicates factors that facilitate the progress of the Project
[✗] indicates factors that hinder the progress of the Project

nor were they a concern with every SDO. Table 1 shows the distribution of the factors affecting project progress across the various schools.

Of these issues, school leadership appears to have been the most important. However, these issues should not be considered independently as they interacted with one another to determine the particular situation at a school. For example, a strong SDO role and initial implementation success could mitigate somewhat the lack of strong school leadership.

School Leadership

From the SDO interviews, it is apparent that school leadership is crucial to the process of school change. Leadership can either facilitate or hinder the implementation of a school improvement project. In most of the schools participating in the QSP, it was the principals who played a leading role in school change. In others, the middle managers were the leading internal change agents. The schools with strong leadership from both the principal and the middle managers were the most likely to succeed initially during the implementation of the project.

Effective Leadership

According to the SDOs, eleven of the participating schools had principals that actively and effectively helped facilitate school reform. These principals usually had a positive and close relationship with their staff. They would consider the receptiveness and capability of the teachers before initiating any changes in the school. They also effectively presented their visions for school development to their staff. Furthermore, these principals all focused on the professional development of the staff. Nine of the 11 schools showed significant progress in implementing the reform. Two strategies were particularly helpful to the collaboration between the schools and the QSP and to the implementation of the project: (a) the principals worked to increase teachers' readiness before the adoption; and (b) the principals had a clear idea of the role the project would play at the school.

Increase teacher readiness before the adoption

The principals in three of the participating schools (Schools 16, 20 and 30) that had volunteered to participate in the project paved the way well before the adoption of the project. They were particularly concerned about the receptivity of their staff. Before participating in the project, the principals arranged for the staff to learn about the QSP and to observe what a school improvement project can achieve.

For example, the principal at School 16 brought his staff to observe activities in schools participating in the ASQEP, the antecedent of the QSP. At School 30, the principal arranged for the staff to attend a conference organized by the ASQEP. As the SDO described:

> There was a school-wide exchange conference when we were working in ASP. At that time, the principal brought his staff to listen. His planning [about the project] started very early. He let his staff to know more about us, listening to our talks, asking them whether they liked to collaborate with us...I think in this aspect, he is a very far-sighted principal. (SDO2, s. 33)

Role of the project in the school is clearly defined

The effective principals also had a clear idea of what role the project should play in three of the schools that made substantial progress in the first year (Schools 16, 23 and 30). The principals were aware of the problems at the schools and had a clear agenda for what they wanted to achieve. This provided the SDOs with a foundation to work from. The SDOs could formulate strategies quickly and tackle the problems faster. It enabled the project work to flow smoothly and complement the abilities of the staff at the school. Project work was more focused and progress was faster at these schools.

For instance, at School 30, the principal had done a successful job in empowering the staff. The teachers were capable and willing to try new ideas. Since the principal believed his staff could handle the programs and activities related to teaching and learning, he asked the QSP to play the following role in the school: (a) systematically and holistically overseeing

and guiding the development of the school, and (b) introducing the experiences of other schools into the school. As the SDO described:

> He hopes that teachers can know more about the situation in other schools through our network. The principal often asks about what the goals were of the activities that other schools did, and what difficulties they faced in the process. Thus, we would tell him the development trends outside and our experiences gained from working with other schools. (SDO2, s.23)

In the other two schools, not only did the principals know precisely how to make use of the project as a resource, they also knew how to collaborate with the SDOs to play a complementary role in facilitating the implementation of the project. At School 23, after the staff development workshops, the principal would follow up the work of the SDO. She encouraged the teachers to try the ideas introduced by the SDO and provided the necessary resources. As a result, the entire staff became involved, and had a very good relationship with the QSP.

Ineffective Leadership

In over one third of the schools, problems with the school leadership stalled reform work, and hindered the progress of school reform. These problems occurred because (a) the leadership was not committed to reform, (b) there were internal conflicts over school reform, or (c) the leadership introduced too many innovations in too short a time.

Lack of a motivated internal change agent in the school

School change was unlikely to progress if no key individuals were available to facilitate the project and motivate teachers. In four of the participating schools, there was no motivated person in the school, who held an important enough position, to promote the implementation of the project. Without such an internal change agent, it was difficult for the SDOs to initiate any change in the school or motivate the teachers to participate.

At one school (School 31) that had not voluntarily joined the QSP (they were referred by the Education Department), neither the principal nor the project coordinator were committed to implementing the project. Although

the principal obviously knew the situation at the school (low academic achievement and teachers who had low expectations of their students), he believed that the project could not improve the situation. Therefore, he did not support the SDO's work at the school. The attitude of the principal caused the project coordinator and the rest of the staff to be uncooperative as well. The SDO described the relationship with the school as, "[Our] relationship is not intimate. [They] do not rely on us. [They] don't think we can achieve anything" (SDO 7, s.100).

Conflicts between the principal and staff

In some of the participating schools, despite the fact that there were key individuals at the schools to help facilitate the implementation of the QSP, conflicts between principals and staff made development work difficult. This could happen in two ways: either middle managers did not support new principals or principals did not support middle managers in carrying out the reforms.

In three of the participating schools (Schools 15, 25 and 39), the principals were new to the schools. They brought in many new initiatives. However, the changes were incompatible with the teacher culture at the schools, which flavored stability and continuity. They could not gain support from the experienced middle managers.

For instance, at School 25, the new principal actively responded to the curriculum reform and initiated many programs in teaching and learning. However, as expectations had been low at the school for a very long time, many experienced teachers, especially the vice-principals and middle managers, only felt alienated by the reforms initiated by the principal. They did not agree with the changes. The SDO reported that the relationship between the principal and the rest of the faculty deteriorated to such a level that they actively avoided face-to-face contact. The SDO found it difficult to break the ice and initiate any work at the school, since the teachers would identify it as work mandated by the principal.

In two other schools (School 24 and 33), the middle managers had played a leading role in facilitating the project. However, the principals did not

give their support to the middle managers. As the final decision on any major change lies with the principals, it was very difficult for the middle managers to initiate any reforms. If the principal did not support the change, they could not motivate the teachers to carry out the reforms.

Too many innovations were initiated at the schools

In six of the schools, too many innovations had been implemented simultaneously, causing the reforms to be ineffective. The principals introduced too many programs into the schools, without using adequate consideration of what was appropriate. Instead of considering the needs of the school and the receptiveness of the teachers, programs were implemented to raise school reputation and to recruit a better student body. The following quote from a SDO illustrates this "decorate the Christmas tree" attitude of some principals:

> [The principal] wants to do project learning this year. Next year, she will ask to do something else, [It is like] continuously putting flowers on the head. But she doesn't know which flower is appropriate, which is stable. She doesn't care about these [considerations]. If you talk about a thinking skills program with her tomorrow, she definitely wants it. She wants them all. (SDO8, s.28–29)

Because so many programs were implemented in the schools simultaneously, not only were the programs ineffective, but they also increased the grievances of the teachers. This situation also increased the skepticism and hostility of the teachers towards the QSP, as they viewed the QSP as yet another increase to their workload.

This problem tended to occur in primary schools as the principals were usually the primary liaison with the SDOs. Even worse was when a principal not only initiates many new programs and policies, but also constantly changes those programs and policies as well. Such a policy frustrated many teachers.

Misalignment with Public Examinations

Ironically, the progress of the development work was relatively slow in most

of the schools with good reputations and high academic achievement. This slow progress was either because the teachers believed that there was little need to change, or the principals were hesitant to implement any change. This was especially true in schools where students are mostly from a low SES background. The SDOs could not avoid the constraints inherited from the incompatibility between the current curriculum reform and the schools' need to prepare its students for the public examinations.

Teachers do not see the need for change

The SDOs met with strong resistance from the teachers in two of the participating schools. At School 32, the teachers were very indifferent to the project. The school had a good reputation in a district of lower middle class families. Teachers were proud of students' high academic achievement in the public examinations and were skeptical of the new curricular reforms. Their thinking was incompatible with the QSP and a SDO commented that "we have a huge difference in what we value." They doubted that the student-centered learning mode advocated by the project would help students do well in the public examinations and gain admission into universities. Their disagreement with the SDOs was reflected in their attitude during the workshops. An SDO observed that:

> In the first workshop that I conducted, there was a teacher who refused to change the bridge design (during a team building exercise). This reflects reality (at the school), they don't want to change... They are skeptical about educational reform.... What they want to see is high college entrance rates and full marks in examinations. What we do in educational reform is to raise the interest of students in learning, but teachers think that they don't need to do this. (SDO8, s.26)

Principals are hesitant to take risks

In most of the schools with good reputations, the principals shared the dilemma of seeing the need for change but not wanting to risk the excellent academic results of the school for any innovation. This was especially true for schools located in low SES districts which had good academic reputations.

For example, development work at School 33 was slowed by the ambivalent attitude of the principal towards school change. The school is located in a poor district and had a very high university entrance rate (for the district). Some students had even won scholarships for study at prestigious universities overseas. However, the SDO reported that some of the senior middle managers saw an approaching crisis. The school was overly traditional and had a narrow definition of the curriculum. The school was also gradually losing momentum as the more experienced teachers left the school. The new teachers could not handle the non-teaching work, such as counseling and guidance.

Although the middle managers at School 33 were committed and capable of facilitating school change, the hesitation of the principal and his unwillingness to delegate the authority to them made the development work almost impossible. An SDO observed the following about the principal:

> He will say, "I understand" and "yes," and admits that there is a need for change. However, he can't make up his mind whether to take the risk to try some new ideas.... That's why his style is "discussion without decision, decision without action." (SDO 9, s.60-61)

Incompatibility of the current curriculum reform with the public examinations

The pressure of public examinations was prevalent in all schools, not only in those with a long history of academic achievement. At school 34, a new secondary school, the principal requested that the QSP-related work other than project learning be stopped for a year in order to focus on preparing the secondary five students (the first group of students in the school) to take the public examination:

> We haven't done much work in this year, because the principal announced at the beginning of the school year that they had to elevate the public examination results of the secondary five students. The other things shouldn't be done so much. (SDO9, s.79)

Another SDO mentioned the difficulties encountered in the secondary

schools, especially in the ones that had high reputations and high academic achievement. He commented that it is actually not unique, but was typical among the secondary schools:

> In fact, the work in secondary schools is really difficult. One of the reasons is that the conception of subject disciplines is too strong. But the work we talk about is cross-disciplinary. Besides, the secondary schools face the pressure of public examinations. Thus, we only have room [in secondary schools] to work with secondary one to secondary three [students]. (SDO8, s.27)

Initial Implementation Success

According to the SDOs, early success was crucial to winning the trust and acceptance of the teachers. Early successful experiences encouraged the teachers to seek further collaboration with the SDOs. This was especially true in the schools that had not engaged in a thorough discussion about reform, or when principals had not consulted with their staff during the adoption process. Early success also engendered greater confidence in the staff members leading the reform and resulted in a beneficial partnership with the project.

In nearly one third of the participating schools, the project made significant progress because of early successes. In contrast, initial unsuccessful programs, in which teachers were disappointed in their experiences with the tryout programs, resulted in the deterioration of the relationship between the SDOs and the teachers.

Improvements in student performance impress the teachers

At seven of the participating schools, the success of student learning activities drastically changed teachers' expectations of their students. For instance, at two rural area schools (Schools 12 and 13),[2] students were not exposed to cultural resources due to the isolation of their community and their low SES background. Teachers had very low expectations of their students and thought that they could not handle project work. The SDO described how the success of the students' public project presentation influenced the teachers:

> [When the teachers] saw the [unexpectedly impressive] performance of the students, they were convinced...[We told them] the students could do it, don't underestimate them. Their trust and confidence in us grew...The success strengthened those who believed [in the project]...Up till now, our work is still progressing. (SDO8, 45-47)

Successful macro work gains the trust and confidence of the staff

In seven of the participating schools, it was the success of the macro work and the professional development workshops for teachers that laid the foundation for further collaboration and development. At four schools (School 11, 12, 13 and 30), the professional development workshops gained the trust of the principals as well as the teachers in the project.

At School 13, the macro work revealed some institutional problems at the school: too many of the initiated programs were ineffective, and there was no mechanism for teachers to voice their opinions or to participate in decision making at the school. After the workshop, the senior management of the school felt worried and did not know how to deal with the complaints raised. The SDO was fully aware of the crisis and handled the issue carefully. He managed to reconcile the conflict and finally gained the trust of both the senior management and the teachers:

> Before, there was something hidden and [you] could not see it, but now it is in the open... [This change] made the conflict intense. The critical point is how much courage you have to face the problems, and how much wisdom and capability you have to improve the situation. At that time, I was very determined to talk about this... Now, the teachers know that [I am] not an external person to help them attack the school supervisor or the principal; the principal also see that I am not solely on the teachers' side, to attack her. (SDO8, 20)

Unsuccessful programs led to the deterioration of the relationship with the teachers

At six of the schools however (school 4, 8, 15, 19, 29, 32), the teachers perceived the development work as a failure. This caused a deterioration of the relationship with the schools. For example, at School 8, the principal

had supported the project and motivated a group of young teachers to participate in the project learning activities. It was hoped that the activities would show the rest of the faculty, who were skeptical about the project, how to facilitate student project learning. However, the first few workshops left the teachers feeling that the workshops were ineffective. The SDO reported the response of the teachers to the first workshop: "We used two class periods to teach students how to ask and formulate questions. The teachers felt that it was a waste of time." (SDO10, s.16)

The failure of the program discouraged teachers from further participation in QSP-related work. The SDO reported that the core group responsible for facilitating the project had broken down. "Although we called a [core group] meeting, no one responded. Since the meeting had no effect, we didn't meet any more" (SDO10, s.7). Only one teacher was still interested, but she was too inexperienced to be able to motivate the other teachers. The SDO's conclusion about the work in the school was: "The school has put a lot of resources [into the program]. But [they] found many inadequacies in the students. They felt that [the program] hadn't fulfilled its potential and did not have the effect that it should have" (SDO10, s.25).

Role of Program Facilitators

It appears from the SDO interviews that, just as with school leaders, the characteristics of SDOs play a very important role in determining the progress of a CSR project. This section discusses the role SDOs played in the QSP and issues that influenced their accomplishments. These issues include the SDOs' experience and expertise, collaboration among the different SDOs, and the dilemma of the precise role to take at the schools.

Experience and expertise of the SDOs

Working with the schools to implement comprehensive school reform is very challenging work. It involves both macro work—school organization and working with different stakeholders such as parents—as well as micro work specifically focused on teaching and learning, sometimes requiring expertise in specific subjects or disciplines. In addition, each school has its

own special problems and needs, which may vary greatly from school to school.

Some SDOs—exemplary teachers who were temporarily transferred from schools to the project—reported that they faced particular difficulties in doing the macro work. This difficulty resulted from the fact that their expertise was in specific subjects; therefore, they did not have enough background and/or experience with the macro work. As one SDO stated: "Because of my [lack of] ability and experience, [I] couldn't actively guide [the school]" (SDO7, s. 121).

Problems also occurred when the SDOs were asked to teach methods that they were unfamiliar with. For example, since the current curriculum reform advocates that schools try project learning, many schools asked the SDOs to guide their teachers in conducting project learning activities in the schools. Some SDOs had no previous experience facilitating such project learning. They had to learn and teach it simultaneously. One of the SDOs described the situation as follows:

> I didn't know much about project learning. I followed the lead of SDO8 [a supporting SDO] and played a supporting role. SDO8 also feels that he doesn't know enough about this [project learning]. Thus, [we] are learning from SDO3 and SDO2. (SDO7, s.22)

The SDOs' lack of experience often worsened the situation, when teachers were already reluctant to participate in the program

Collaboration among project facilitators

In some cases, collaboration and teamwork among the SDOs was found to mitigate any inadequacies in the SDOs' expertise. Some schools made enormous progress despite the fact that their primary SDOs had not had previous experience with CSR. This was because the SDOs could draw on the ability and expertise of more experienced SDOs. Each SDO could contribute his/her strengths, concentrating on what he/she was most familiar with.

For example, at School 23 a new SDO whose focus is micro work, partnered with a more experienced supporting SDO, who is skillful with

macro work. The SDO reported that QSP-related work progressed quickly at the school because both the macro and micro work were successful:

> The school joined the QSP quite late, [but] is very successful. Especially since SDO3 [a supporting SDO] worked with them on macro work, parent workshops and project learning. Also, SDO8 [a supporting SDO] is working with teachers on Chinese language. [I am] working on English language. As a result, they [the teachers] have had a lot of contact with us. (SDO7, s.71)

The dilemma of whether or not to take a dominant role

Many SDOs reported that they preferred working in a democratic and liberal way. The SDOs did not want to pressure the school staff into doing something they were not motivated to do. This more liberal style worked well in some schools, but in other schools, it allowed QSP-related work to come to a standstill.

A liberal attitude often worked at schools with a highly motivated staff. The school staff would push the programs forward themselves and seek guidance only when they needed it. This gave school staff a sense of ownership and improved the motivation and quality of QSP-related work. For example, at School 16, the liberal attitude of the SDO gave the school confidence in the SDO. The SDO reported that teachers felt safe with the project:

> We won't force them to do anything... If they don't want to begin, we won't force them. If they want to try [the project], we will provide full support. This is the message that we convey. This message makes them comfortable. (SDO2, s.2)

However, the liberal style often failed to work at schools that lacked a motivated internal change agent. At these schools, the SDO had to become a driving force for change, or the project would come to a standstill. At School 1, there was no motivated internal change agent, and QSP development work made almost no progress during the first year. The SDO eventually realized that he had to change his strategy; he took on a more dominant role at the school:

> This school is relatively passive. [The staff] don't know how to ask us to do development work. It is because of the school leadership.... My working style is not to push the work hard. I would explain [the project] to them, and let them choose what to work on. However, [I] waited and waited. [There was] no response. I discovered that this strategy didn't work. I couldn't wait for them. That's why I told the principal frankly [the last time I met him], that if he did not become involved, I would lead the core group to work myself. (SDO8, s.12)

On the other hand, if the SDO played an active dominant role at the school, the staff might become too dependent on the SDO. This is antithetical to the goal of the QSP—building staff capacity and the self-improvement capability. At School 20, the early success of the QSP work had garnered the trust and confidence of the senior management. The principal would consult the SDO about almost all major decisions at the school. The SDO was happy that the development work had an impact on the school. However, she was also worried that the principal had become overly dependent on her, "I began to feel that she is a bit too dependent on me. Whatever she does, she will consult me first." (SDO2, s.67). This dilemma was common among the SDOs who took on a more active role at the participating schools.

An ideal partnership exists when neither side is dominant, that is, when both the school and the QSP interact with each other and are complementary to each other. For example at School 16, where the SDO had gained the trust of the senior management, the SDO reported that she had developed a very "healthy" partnership with the school:

> We developed a relatively close partnership at an early stage. During the initiation of project learning we [the QSP] played the role of experts. But we [the QSP and the school] were partners during the planning, organization and experimentation [stages] of the work. The development of our relationship was very healthy, which is the ideal relationship that we want to develop. (SDO2, s.1)

Summary and Discussion

Certain overarching themes emerged from the SDO interviews conducted at the end of the first year of the QSP. The factors affecting the progress of school reform fall into four categories: school leadership, the incompatibility with public examinations, the initial implementation success, and the role of program facilitators.

The leadership at the school and staff attitude toward reform were very important factors affecting the progress of reform. The reform work was more likely to progress quickly if the school leadership (a) worked to increase teacher readiness for CSR, (b) had a clear conception of the role of the project at the school, and (c) provided support to school staff involved in reform-related work. On the other hand, reform work could become stalled if: (a) the leadership distanced itself or did not involve itself with the project, b) there were internal conflicts at the school about the reform project, or c) the leadership introduced too many innovations and programs into the school. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have found that the role of the school principal, the adoption process, "buy-in" on the part of the teachers, and the presence of motivated internal change agents, are all very important to the eventual success of a CSR program (Bodilly, 1998; Datnow, 2000; Faculty of Education et al., 2002; Fullan, 1992; Muncey & McQuillan, 1996).

In Hong Kong, problems with school leadership and the lack of motivation for reform can often be traced back to the incompatibility between the current reform efforts and the assessments used in current public examinations. The objectives of the on-going reforms, including the current curriculum reform, are not aligned with the public examination assessments that are now in place. Because of this, teachers often did not see the need for change, and principals were reluctant to implement change as it might adversely affect their schools' public examination results. In the QSP schools, this issue was especially acute in schools with high academic achievement located in low SES districts, where teachers worked hard to improve their

students' academic performance beyond their peers at other schools. This has also been found to be a problem in the U.S. As Muncey and McQuillan (1996) observed in the Coalition of Essential Schools project, "For the 'good' high schools, establishing success proved more difficult, and faculties questioned both the need for change and the value of Coalition philosophy" (p. 151).

Nevertheless, the study revealed that problems with leadership and motivation could often be overcome if the project achieved early success at the school, that is, if the reform efforts were seen to be successful by the teachers during the initial implementation of the project. This led to an improvement in the relationship between the school and the QSP and could thus, to a large extent, mitigate problems with "buy-in" on the part of the teachers. On the other hand, QSP-related work was often stalled if the teachers perceived the initial collaboration to be a failure.

There were also factors inherent to the QSP that affected the progress of school reform efforts. These factors had to do with the experience and expertise of the SDOs, the way they were assigned to various tasks, and the cooperation among them. Some SDOs encountered difficulties when assigned to tasks for which they felt inexperienced. However, collaboration and teamwork among the SDOs could often mitigate any inadequacies in an individual SDO's expertise.

Many SDOs also reported problems with the issue of how dominant a role to take. Schools without a motivated internal change agent could progress only if the SDO adopted a dominant role. However, if the SDO takes on an overly dominant role, the school could become overly dependent on QSP support. This dilemma was also reported by Hatch (1998) and Pounder (1998).

Implications

The commitment of the school principal to the project and the presence of a motivated internal change agent are two of the most important factors affecting the progress of school reform efforts. CSR program providers should

choose those schools with high readiness; where the principal and middle managers are committed to change. They should also work with school staff to increase their readiness before commencing the project. This makes it more likely that reform will succeed.

Project providers should also make sure that their staff are properly trained regarding the issues that they will likely face. Staff should be organized so that program facilitators are not asked to handle issues that they are not familiar with. Project providers can also try to foster collaboration among its staff to make up for individual deficiencies. Additionally, program facilitators should be made aware of the issue of when to take or not to take a dominant a role in a school.

Program facilitators should be very careful about ensuring the success of the first few programs implemented at a school, as these have a disproportionately large effect on the progress of the reform effort. They should make sure the programs are of good quality and are likely to impress teachers. It is also important that these programs be responsive to teachers' needs, and demonstrate that the project is useful in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

School principals should also increase the readiness of their staff before the adoption of CSR. They can provide staff with opportunities to observe activities in similar projects. Principals should also involve the staff in the adoption process, and support the staff that are involved in the reform. School principals can most effectively promote school reform when they have a clear idea of the objectives of the reform project. This would provide school reform organizations a foundation from which to work. The program facilitators can formulate strategies quickly and tackle the problems faster, thereby increasing the chance of success. These issues are especially of concern if CSR funding is available for only a short period of time (less than three years).

Schools referred by the Education Department were often "not ready" to implement school reform. Reform was hindered in some of the referred schools because there were no internal change agents to help facilitate the

project. As voluntary participation is vital for successful reform, it is important to secure the commitment of the school principal before implementing the reform project.

The interviews revealed a major misalignment between the on going curriculum reforms and the Hong Kong educational system (specifically the public examination system). This incompatibility causes a dilemma for principals and staff in schools that want to change. It also lies behind the skeptical attitude of teachers in schools with high academic achievement. The government should ensure that the public examinations coincide with the ideas and vision of the curriculum reform that it advocates. Making available detailed information about its plans for the future of public examinations would encourage further reform at the schools.

Notes

1. The ATLAS Communities Project is a collaboration of the Coalition of Essential Schools, Education Development Center, Harvard Project Zero, and the School Development Program.
2. Schools 12 and 13 share the same school building. They each run for half the day and share the same policy. The project learning activity and student presentations were jointly held.

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Appendix

The following topics were covered in the interviews, with specific questions and follow-up questions being asked depending on the responses from the interviewees.

- What are the main characteristics of the school?
  The school context
  The characteristics of the staff (principals, core group, middle managers, teachers)
  The strengths and weaknesses of the school (what factors foster and hinder school improvement?)

- What developmental work was done at the school in the past year?
  Macro (work related to school organization and culture)
  Micro (work related to teaching and learning)
  Their impact on the school
  Their impact on the collaboration

- What plans are there about the future direction of development in the school?
  Judgment of the school improvement before then
  Future direction of the school development
  Forecasting success/effect of the collaboration