The Hong Kong School Curriculum

Development, Issues and Policies

Second Edition

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CHAPTER 1

What Is a Curriculum?

INTRODUCTION

There are nearly as many definitions of the term curriculum as there are books on the subject. The word has its roots in the Latin word *currere*, which refers to 'a course to be run'. The key parts of six definitions are shown below:

- ... the disciplined study of permanent subjects such as grammar, logic and reading.
- ... should consist entirely of knowledge which comes from the established disciplines.
- ... all the planned learning outcomes for which the school is responsible.
- ... the experiences the learner has under the guidance of the school.
- ... those subjects that are most useful for living in contemporary society.
- ... a passage of personal transformation (for both the teacher and the pupil).

We can see that the definitions vary considerably. The first two focus on the nature of what we teach, the third on the planned outcomes or goals of schooling, and the fourth on pupils' experiences and activities in school. The fifth definition focuses on the needs of society, while the last focuses on the process of change for individuals.

This variety of definitions reflect the fact that the term curriculum covers a wide range of characteristics. Curriculum can include a consideration of the purposes of schooling, what we teach, how we teach, both what is planned and unplanned, and it can focus on the product of schooling or on its processes. Each of these different emphases has to be taken into consideration if we are to study and improve the curricula.

THE SCOPE OF CURRICULUM STUDIES

We can best understand what a curriculum is by analysing the issues involved in studying and developing a curriculum. There are five key points:

(1) A curriculum is not the same thing as a 'syllabus'. A syllabus is only a list of the content which should be taught or examined. A curriculum is much more than this. The 'syllabuses' produced by the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) are also more than this as they provide a statement of aims and objectives, and recommend teaching and assessment methods. These syllabuses are actually an official plan of what the curriculum for a specific school subject is intended to achieve. Aspects of the planned curriculum in Hong Kong are stated in written documents such as: the Statement of Aims (EMB, 1993), the Guides to the Kindergarten, Primary and Secondary School Curriculum produced by the Curriculum Development Council (CDC, 1993) and the Curriculum Development Council Syllabuses for each school subject. The HKEA Syllabuses state the plan for one part of the curriculum — the public examinations. The planned curriculum is also sometimes called the *intended* or *manifest curriculum.*

A distinction is also sometimes made between two aspects of the planned curriculum. That which is planned and goes on during the timetabled periods is sometimes referred to as the *formal curriculum.* Those planned school activities which are not part of the subject timetable such as extra curricular activities, sports activities, outside speakers and school trips are sometimes referred to as the *informal curriculum.*

(2) Curriculum plans are not always achieved in practice. Teachers and pupils often have to cope with unexpected events which means that the plans are not always achieved. Moreover many curriculum plans are only statements of an ideal which are difficult to achieve in practice because the teachers might not have the necessary resources, time or skills. The study of the curriculum is also concerned with what actually goes on in classrooms and what pupils learn in schools. What actually happens in schools and classrooms is sometimes called the *implemented curriculum.*

(3) Schools teach pupils attitudes and skills which are not part of any plan. For example pupils might learn to be selfish, racist or sexist. They might also learn to be passive or to have a very low opinion of themselves. These attitudes might be conveyed through educational practices such as ability grouping, teacher-pupil relationships, classroom rules, the selection of textbook content, sex role differentiation of pupils and the reward structure in schools. The social roles, attitudes and values which pupils learn that are not planned are referred to as the *hidden* (or *covert) curriculum.* The values and attitudes which pupils learn from the *hidden curriculum* are potentially very powerful and could be positive or negative, depending on the viewpoint one adopts.

(4) There is not a single curriculum, for the curriculum exists at many different levels. A country has a curriculum. A school has a curriculum which includes all the pupils' experiences across a range of subjects. Every class and every pupil has slightly different experiences. We can also talk about the curriculum for a group of similar subjects such as science or the curriculum of a single subject. We are therefore faced with a wide range of events of different levels which come together under the word 'curriculum'.

(5) In planning a curriculum we make decisions about the content, skills and attitudes we want pupils to learn. As time is limited we also make decisions about what should not be included. The content, skills and attitudes that we decide not to include in the curriculum is termed the *null curriculum.* This concept is important in Hong Kong because the curriculum of many subjects has avoided the inclusion of topics which were seen to be politically sensitive (Stimpson 1991). We will examine this in more detail in Chapter 11.

These points indicate that the study of curriculum is 'a massive, comprehensive and ill defined field' (Lewy 1991). It includes the study of what we plan to do in schools, what happens in practice and the context in which the curriculum operates. This suggests that the study of curriculum lies at the heart of the study of education, and is influenced by many other disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and psychology. However curriculum and education are not the same. Education occurs over our whole lifetime and in many different places — at home, at work and in the family. Curriculum is primarily concerned with what goes on in schools and other institutions devoted to education. Curriculum is therefore similar to *schooling* but not education. It is important to remember this distinction as it helps to remind us that not all education is provided by schools, and we should not expect schools to be the only providers of education.

While philosophers, sociologists and psychologists are all concerned with various questions about schooling, they tend to focus on one aspect of it. Psychologists focus on the nature of learning, philosophers on the aims of education, and sociologists on the links between schooling and society. The study of the curriculum tries to bring these various concerns together and thus analyses schooling using a range of perspectives.

THE QUESTIONS ADDRESSED IN THE STUDY OF CURRICULUM

Given the considerations outlined above we can now identify the key tasks or questions which are addressed in the study of curriculum. These questions are:

a. What are its intentions?
b. What is the content?
c. What methods are used to deliver it?
d. How is it assessed?

} THE BASIC COMPONENTS

e. How can we plan a curriculum?
f. How is it arranged?
g. Does it work and how can it be improved?

} TECHNICAL ASPECTS

h. Who makes these decisions?
i. Are the decisions implemented?
j. What are the influences on the curriculum?
k. What are the future priorities?

} SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

These questions provide the framework for this book, as they are the focuses of the chapters which follow. In each chapter we identify and analyse the different factors which influence the answers to these questions in Hong Kong.

The first four questions we address are concerned with the *substantive or basic components* of any curriculum. These are the concern of Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 which focus on the intentions (aims/goals, objectives), the content of what is taught, the method of teaching, learning and assessment of a curriculum. These elements are closely interrelated, as shown in Figure 1.1.

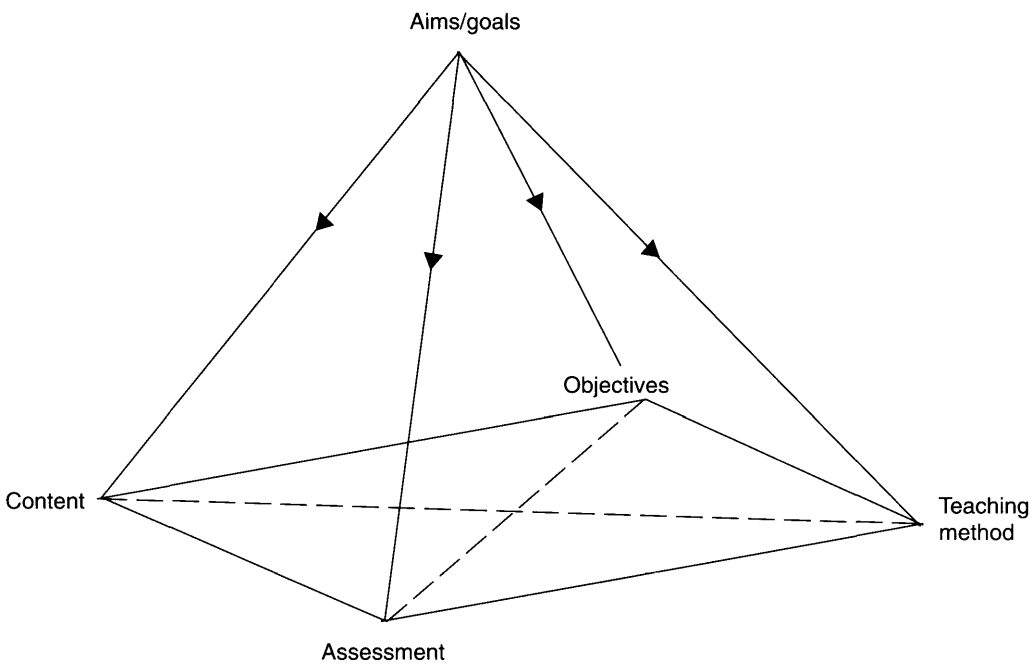

Figure 1.1 The components of a curriculum

Questions e, f and g focus on *technical-professional issues* which are concerned with how a curriculum should be planned, organized and improved. These are addressed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 respectively. Questions h, i and j relate to *social and political aspects* of the curriculum. Chapter 9 is concerned with the way in which the curriculum is influenced by different groups in society. Chapter 10 focuses on analysing why curriculum policies are often not adopted or implemented. Chapter 11 analyses the influence of social, political and economic forces on the curriculum. It also analyses the factors which affect the use of curriculum innovations in schools and classrooms. The final chapter answers question k by identifying the key issues which will have to be addressed to improve the curriculum of schools in Hong Kong.

The structure of this book is spiral, which means that certain topics are revisited. For example, in Chapter 3 we examine questions concerning the content of the curriculum, and then in Chapter 7 we analyse how that content can be organized. Furthermore, this structure also means that the earlier chapters are more descriptive, while the later chapters are more critical and interpretative.

Three points need emphasizing in relation to the key questions which this book addresses. Firstly, the curriculum is not something which is wholly determined by the government or the Education Department. As we suggested in the discussion of the implemented curriculum, schools and teachers are regularly making decisions on parts of the curriculum. For example, schools decide what language of instruction to use and whether pupils should be streamed or taught in mixed-ability classes. Teachers also decide how they will teach their pupils and which texts and materials they will use. The curriculum is therefore not decided by planners only. Teachers and schools should be aware that their decisions will affect all aspects of the curriculum, and they should try to ensure that their decisions are designed to improve the curriculum. The study of the curriculum is designed to help teachers achieve that goal.

Secondly, these questions about the curriculum cannot be answered without reference to people's values and to political considerations. For example, the goals of education, whether education is provided free and who receives education are questions which are influenced by people's views of their society, of the purposes of education, the availability of resources and who controls those resources. In schools, curriculum decisions such as which textbooks to use, whether pupils should study in English or Chinese, and whether Putonghua should be taughts are also influenced by economic, social and political considerations. Educational research and more efficient systems of curriculum development might provide more information and allow for greater efficiency, but they do not ensure that curriculum decisions become wholly scientific or objective. Educational research can also be used to support a preconceived viewpoint. For example, a person who believes that Cantonese should be used as the medium of instruction could gather data to show that pupils learn more effectively when they use their mother tongue. In contrast a person who believes that English should be used could collect data which shows that pupils who have received instruction in English have better opportunities for further study and employment prospects.

Thirdly, we can answer each of these questions from both a normative and a positivist perspective. A *normative perspective* is concerned with what should happen in schools, while a *positivist perspective* is concerned with what actually does happen in schools. It is important to be clear which perspective is being used as they can produce very different answers to the questions. Many discussions on the curriculum are confusing because one person is focusing on what should happen while the other is concerned with how things are in practice.

STUDYING THE CURRICULUM: ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The different definitions which we identified above are not only a reflection of disagreement over what the curriculum is, but they also reflect very different views or conceptions about the most appropriate way to analyse and think about the curriculum. It is important to recognize that there is not a single way of analysing the curriculum which is generally accepted. Unlike the study of mathematics or some branches of science, there are not generally accepted truths or methods of analysis in the study of the curriculum. The same tensions which characterize the approaches of the social sciences are evident in the study of education. For example, the common distinction between empirical, interpretive and critical perspectives in the social sciences is clearly evident in studies of the curriculum. The *empirical or positivist perspective* focuses on trying to obtain and analyse data which describes how the curriculum operates. The *interpretive perspective* is concerned with trying to make sense of the way the curriculum operates in society, the influences on it and its functions. The *critical perspective* addresses the normative question — how should the curriculum be changed to create a more just, equal and moral society. Clearly these perspectives are derived from very different assumptions and judgements about both why we should study the curriculum and the appropriate methods to use.

Another way of distinguishing the specific ways of analysing the curriculum is provided by Reid (1992) and by Marsh and Willis (1995). They distinguish between four key conceptions that people hold in terms of two criteria: the extent to which existing social institutions are seen as determining the nature of an individual's behavior, and whether we analyse curricula in terms of predetermined theories or principles. The main features of the four conceptions are summarized below.

Systematizers or System Maintainers: They focus on the idea of a curriculum as a plan or blue print for activities, and expect schools and individuals to implement it unproblematically. They use curriculum aims to determine the details of the plan and spend a great deal of time defining what should be in the various components of the curriculum plan. The focus is on the parts of the curriculum, especially the identification of objectives, the design of programmes to achieve them and the evaluation of their effectiveness. The curriculum analyst is seen as a specialist who has the essentially technical job of keeping the machine running smoothly and

helping teachers and schools to implement the master plan. In essence the education system and its curriculum are broken down into and analysed as part of a complex planned system, but the system itself and the plan are viewed as unproblematic and therefore accepted and taken for granted.

Radicals or System Changers: They are the opposite of systematizers, for they believe that the system is not operating efficiently or fairly and requires radical change. The curriculum is seen, along with other social institutions such as the legal system, as a means of reproducing the existing social order which oppresses the majority or certain sectors of the population. A great deal of radical analysis is concerned with identifying how schools in general, and the curriculum in particular, play a part in establishing and maintaining the unequal distribution of power in society. Their concern is with analysing what the curriculum is for rather than with trying to make it work. Central to radical analyses is the strong use of an a priori or predetermined theoretical position. This means that they start with a view of the role of education in society and search for evidence to support that viewpoint.

Existentialists — Focus on Individuals: They share the radicals' view that the curriculum should be viewed critically, but they do not share their view that this can be explained solely by reference to the role of education as a vehicle for social oppression. They are more concerned with the practical implications of the curriculum for the individual and how the system might be improved. The broad generalizations and macro explanations of radicals are replaced by a concern with individual experiences, personal growth and consciousness. For some the curriculum is liberating; for others it may be oppressive. They thus tend to focus on areas of analysis concerned with the individual and how one can improve one's position, for example psychoanalysis, biography and gender studies. They do not start with a strong predetermined theoretical position, but tend to try to generate theory from specific concrete cases.

Deliberators — Focus on the Practical: These avoid seeing the curriculum as a plan, a system of social control or a personal experience. They see the study of the curriculum as the discovery of problems, deliberation on those problems and inventing solutions to the problems. They focus then on the way in which plans can be realized in schools and classrooms which are recognized as different and to a degree unique. In effect this is a compromise perspective and to a degree a contradictory one. It sees plans and institutions as limited; it accepts differences between schools and individuals, and it is concerned with problems and actions.

Each of these four perspectives provides a different way of analysing the curriculum. However, it is clear that different areas of curriculum analysis have been more influenced by some of these perspectives than others. For example the analysis of the basic technical questions we identified on page 4 has been strongly influenced by systematizers; the social and political aspects of school curricula

have been influenced by radicals; the analysis of teaching methods, school improvement and staff development have been the focus of concern of deliberators and existentialists. Each of these conceptions represents a different philosophy about the nature of society and social action. The need is to recognize both the philosophy which underlies an analytical perspective and an awareness that alternative perspectives and interpretations exist.

QUESTIONS

1. The Curriculum Development Council (CDC 1993a) defines a curriculum in the following terms: 'A school curriculum consists of all those activities designed or encouraged within its organizational framework to promote the intellectual, personal, social and physical development of its pupils'. What aspects of the curriculum does this definition focus on? What aspects does it neglect?

2. Select a specific school subject and use the table below to identify the main features of the planned, implemented and hidden curriculum.

Main features of: / School subject	The planned curriculum	The implemented curriculum	The hidden curriculum

3. Mr. Leung teaches English in a co-educational school. As usual, before he starts the lesson, he tells the girls to clean the floor and the blackboard. He then hands back the homework and tells three pupils that their work is messy and they should do it again before the next lesson. He suggests that they should get their parents to help them if they have problems. He then gives two merit marks to pupils because they have kept quiet during lessons and warns that pupils making a noise will receive demerit marks.

   What are the characteristics of the hidden curriculum in Mr. Leung's classroom? What attitudes and types of behaviour is he encouraging in his pupils?

FURTHER READING

A comprehensive analysis of the development and nature of curriculum studies as a field of study is provided by Tanner (1980) and by Jackson (1992).

CHAPTER 12

Priorities and Policies

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will first review the key features of the Hong Kong school curriculum; then we will focus on the problems and issues which will have to be addressed if the school curriculum is to meet more effectively the increasingly diverse and complex demands which are made on it. We have identified many of those problems in the earlier chapters and they can be classified into two broad categories. The first relates to the policies or means which are used to develop and improve curricula. This includes approaches to planning, to supporting implementation and to decision-making. The second concerns the purposes, goals or ends of curriculum development, and policy-making. The attempts to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and to cater for the needs of academically less able pupils are examples of such goals. The first section of this chapter focuses on curriculum development policies, the second section on the areas for reform.

A central point that needs to be recognized is that the sorts of problems which affect the curriculum, unlike problems in engineering or science, are not ones that are ever completely solved. This is because many curriculum problems involve a trade-off between competing goals. Therefore, if we introduce a policy to solve one problem, then this is likely to result in the emergence of another set of problems. For example, if more schools were required to use Cantonese as the medium of instruction, then this would probably result in complaints that this would have a negative affect on the standard of English and on Hong Kong's international competitiveness. Similarly, the reform of the school curriculum to cater more effectively for the needs of all pupils would probably be accompanied by concerns about a possible decline in academic standards. These trade-offs are a reflection of the existence of, and competition between, different conceptions of schooling and of the curriculum. In the end, the curriculum has to be able to

achieve an acceptable compromise between the competing, but legitimate, conceptions of its purposes and nature.

THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: AN OVERVIEW

In earlier chapters we have identified a number of ways of analysing the school curriculum. In this section we will combine some of those analytical distinctions to provide an overview of the key features of the curriculum. In Chapter 3 we distinguished between a view of knowledge as something which was 'established' or which was 'constructed', and in Chapter 5 we noted that these emphases resulted in forms of assessment which show a strong and low degree categorization respectively. In Chapter 4 we introduced the concept of pedagogic framing, which indicates the extent of control which teachers and pupils have over what goes on in the classroom. In Chapter 7 we distinguished between the strength of 'classification' which reflects the strength of the boundary between the contents of the curriculum. These three analytical distinctions — the framing of pedagogy, the categorization of assessment and the classification of curriculum contents, are juxtaposed in Figure 12.1.

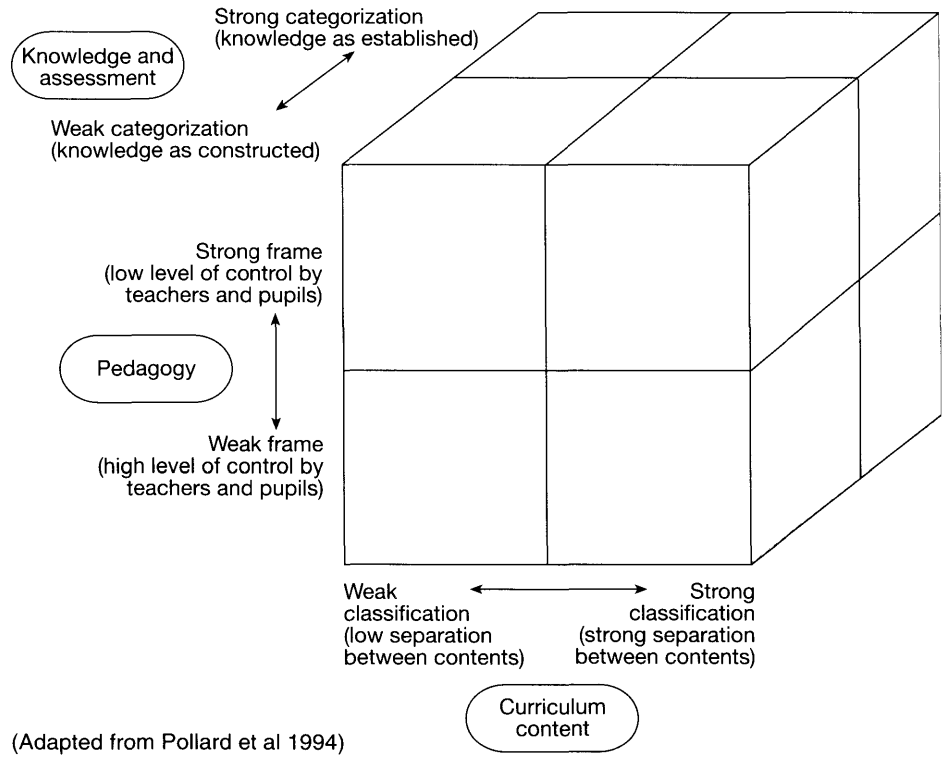

Figure 12.1 Changing dimensions of curriculum pedagogy and assessment

Clearly the differences between curricula at different levels of schooling and between different subjects means that we cannot simply locate the curriculum in Ffigure 12.1. For example, the kindergarten and sixth form curriculum display very different features. Similarly, the curriculum of languages and aesthetic subjects like Music and Art display features very different from those of Physics or Mathematics. If, however, we compare the curriculum to that which prevails elsewhere (Marsh and Morris 1991), and consider the characteristics of the implemented curriculum, then the overall emphasis in Hong Kong is characterized by a strong degree of classification, frame and categorization. In Bernstein's (1975) terms, it is a very strong example of a collection type curriculum.

When we look at the features of many of the curriculum innovations which have been introduced over the last three decades, they have essentially been trying to move the curriculum to reduce the strength of classification, framing and categorization. Examples of such innovations include the activity approach, the TOC, the SBCPS, integrated subjects (Social Studies and Liberal Studies), and the Cross-Curricular Guidelines. The SBCPS is trying to increase the control of teachers over curriculum decisions. Liberal and Social Studies are trying to reduce the strength of classification, and the TOC is attempting to reduce the strength of categorization of assessment.

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

A theme which emerged from the earlier chapters was that the planned curriculum promotes curriculum components (intentions, content, pedagogy and assessment) that are worthwhile and desirable. However there is a significant gap between many aspects of the planned curriculum and the implemented curriculum. Consequently, many intentions are not achieved. This is especially evident with regard to the schooling of academically less able pupils and to the achievement of personal, social and moral education. The specific features of the system of curriculum development (McClelland 1991) which we identified in earlier chapters that contribute to this are:

- it is centralized and top down;
- it is product-oriented;
- it focuses on single subject syllabuses;
- it involves consultation for legitimation;
- it is geared to adoption;
- it takes implementation for granted.

The four aspects of curriculum policy-making which will need to be addressed to help reduce the gap between intentions and practice are the selection of innovations, supporting implementation, the nature of public assessment and a focus on curriculum processes.

The Selection of Innovations

We saw in Chapter 9 that curriculum innovations are selected and promoted by decision-makers who are detached from schools and who often use criteria primarily based on the innovation's perceived worthwhileness, quality and desirability. This sometimes results in copying trends and fashions in the West, as it allows the rapid and inexpensive promotion of 'modern' developments. The nature of the innovation itself is rarely viewed as problematic because to argue against it is to reject its self-evident worthwhileness. Thus the standard strategy of curriculum innovation which is used follows this pattern:

(a) Identify the weaknesses and limitations of the present styles of teaching and learning which are termed traditional, didactic, teacher-centred and product-oriented.
(b) Specify what benefits will arise to pupils and society if a more pupil-centred, progressive, inductive, modern style is used; and
(c) Recommend that new curricula be introduced which embody the goals identified in (b).

This approach ensures that curriculum plans are decided primarily with regard to their intentions. Questions of relevance, feasibility and practicality are viewed as essentially technical, rather than substantive issues. This was very apparent with the introduction of TTRA/TOC which has only recently begun to address these issues.

Unfortunately, the experience in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, suggests that the intended impact on patterns of teaching and learning often does not materialize for a range of reasons. When this occurs, it is easy for policy-makers to blame teachers for their lack of commitment, professionalism or skills. The very limited success of a wide range of highly desirable innovations arises primarily from the failure to treat implementation issues as important in policy decisions. As a result, curriculum innovations such as the TOC, the Activity Approach for primary schools and the Communicative Approach to language learning are being selected and promoted without reference to information on the context in which they are to be used. Consequently, teachers find themselves presented with policy initiatives which they often view as impractical, as they do not take into account key variables such as the repertoire of teachers' skills, the resources available, the expectations of pupils and parents, and the requirements of public examinations. The result is that the goals of the innovation are too distant to constitute a realistic target and the innovation is adopted at a superficial level, ignored or misused. It is vital to pursue policies with regard to what is both desirable and achievable. The selection of innovations therefore needs to be informed by research on what is going on in classrooms and schools, which will allow real needs and attainable targets to be identified.

Supporting Implementation

The pursuit of worthwhile goals results in a concentration upon the initiation phase of curriculum development and a relative neglect of those activities subsequently designed to support implementation. The standard pattern of centralized curriculum policy making in Hong Kong involves the provision of a very limited range of support activities, such as the provision of one-off seminars and of circulars and guidelines. Often, a more comprehensive range of support activities are provided only when teachers have opposed an innovation, such as the TOC. Teachers are therefore often placed in a position of being expected to implement a change which they had no part in designing, of which they have a limited understanding, and with minimal or no support in terms of resources or training. Two implications arise from this.

First, there is a need to involve practitioners in the development of curriculum policy. Even within a highly centralized system, their input is more likely to lead to issues related to implementation being taken into account. However, in itself teacher involvement is not easily achieved nor is it a panacea. Logistically not all teachers can be involved in curriculum development, and many teachers are unable or unwilling to become involved. Teacher participation can also be counter-productive and result in a great deal of time and effort being wasted. Despite these problems a sense of ownership of an innovation does encourage implementation and teacher involvement encourages planners to address implementation problems. Those countries which have established effective professional organizations to support curriculum development have developed a range of methods which allow them to obtain a substantial degree of teacher-input into the design of centralized curricula.

Second, the initiation of policy should not be divorced from the implementation and assessment phases of the curriculum. The provision of resources, in-service education and the identification of appropriate means of assessment should be incorporated into the process of curriculum development to ensure that the policy can be operationalized and to permit modification and adjustment of plans in the light of experience. One way to achieve this is to identify, support and discriminate some of the curriculum innovations which have been developed in schools. One of the most important methods used to ensure innovations are practical and have their quality improved is the use of pilot projects and trials. Unfortunately in Hong Kong trials and pilots have mainly been used as a response to criticism of an innovation or as a way to legitimate or justify the existing policy. It is as though Tyler's classic model has been interpreted as proposing a linear sequence of stages of curriculum development with a separation of policy-making (the identification of aims and objectives) from questions of implementation (pedagogy and assessment). Instead, what is needed is a fluid relationship between the components of a curriculum to ensure that goals are selected with careful consideration of their impact on practices, the provision of teaching resources, the choice of appropriate content and methods of assessment.

If it becomes evident that the goals cannot be adequately assessed or that workable resources cannot be developed, then it is the goals which need to be reconsidered.

A related point concerns the nature and purpose of supporting activities. It is evident that the primary support for teachers attempting to implement curriculum policies is the provision of new textbooks, circulars, regulations or courses designed to transmit information about the policy. While it is necessary to ensure that teachers are aware of a new policy, this in itself is not sufficient to ensure a change of practice. The abandonment of existing familiar practices always involves a cost, and changes, especially those which affect the style of teaching and the role of the teacher, are extremely difficult to bring about.

Public Assessment

Where there is an imbalance between demand and supply (for well-paid jobs, elite schools, university places) and where there is a high rate of private return to each level of education, the educational system must incorporate some mechanism for selection and sorting. Public examinations have been widely adopted as the fairest method for determining who will obtain the scarce number of available places. Where selection pressure is high, examinations begin to become the reason for schooling. Pupils and parents become more concerned with their certification than with their education. As was explained in Chapter 5, the effect of this is that the style and format of public examinations places a very strong influence on the style of teaching used and the style of learning which is encouraged.

If a public examination, in an attempt to maximize the objectivity and efficiency of marking, consistently requires candidates to reproduce chunks of discrete and trivial information, then that is what pupils will be encouraged to do in class. Teachers will transmit that information and pupils will attempt to memorize it. This will exert a more powerful influence on the implemented curriculum than any other factor, especially in a society where there is a low level of teacher professionalism.

The solution does not lie in the removal of public examinations, for they are merely a symptom of the essential problem which is the need to select pupils for scarce places. Nor does the solution necessarily lie with a shift from norm- to criterion-referenced assessments. If criterion-referenced tests are used to perform selective and summative functions, then they lose the benefits usually associated with criterion-referenced testing. The time and effort which is required to develop a new curriculum is likely to be wasted if the means of assessment are not able to measure those skills and understandings which are its reason for existence. The development and testing of appropriate means of assessment should therefore be considered at an early stage in the process of curriculum design. Too frequently it is undertaken by another agency long after the publicity which accompanies the new policy has evaporated. More importantly, examiners, by virtue of the very important and practical nature of their task, are more likely to be influenced by the realities of the classroom and by the need to ensure objectivity and inter marker

reliability. The result can be a massive disjuncture between plans and practices. This can be avoided only if both achievable goals and appropriate means of assessment are identified.

The Focus on Curriculum Process

For some time now curriculum plans have been promoting pedagogic styles which stress the need for teachers to help pupils to learn how to learn. This is based on the belief that we should focus on the process rather than the product or content of learning. If pupils can learn skills such as inquiring and problem solving and work easily with other people, then they will have the ability to deal with new and unpredictable problem situations in the future. Innovations which stress the importance of aspects of the learning process include: inquiry learning, problem solving, issues based teaching, inductive teaching and co-operative learning.

There is a parallel with this focus on process in curriculum innovations and the general approach to and purposes of curriculum development. The emphasis in Hong Kong has been to see curriculum development in terms of identifying and promoting specific curriculum innovations. The Activity Approach, the TTRA, the Communicative Approach, Modular and Integrated Curricula are all solutions to problems or desirable trends which have been identified and promoted by the government. This emphasis involves trying to get the schools to adopt and implement specific curriculum products.

Just as effective learning requires that pupils learn how to learn and how to solve problems, effective curriculum development requires that schools and teachers see their job as identifying and trying to solve curriculum problems. Unfortunately those attempts to promote a problem solving capacity in schools have themselves sometimes reinforced the view of curriculum development as something which involves promoting and implementing curriculum products. The School-Based Curriculum Project Scheme is a good illustration of this. It was introduced in 1988 with the goal of encouraging schools to develop curricula to meet the specific needs of their pupils. Lo (1993) has shown that the scheme was administered in a way which meant that schools were expected to adopt curricular materials for use in existing curricula and the primary goal was to adopt materials and display them in an annual exhibition. The focus was therefore on curriculum development as an exercise in producing tangible products for display, not on encouraging schools to develop an environment which identified problems and worked towards trying to solve them.

Effective curriculum development requires that schools develop the capacity or processes which allow them to continuously attempt to improve their curriculum. The promotion of ready-made solutions makes it difficult to encourage the development of that capacity.

THE GOALS OF REFORM

We turn now to look at the specific areas of the curriculum in Hong Kong which need to be improved. Arguably, the most important is the overall need to reform the curriculum to provide for the pursuit of goals which are not readily achieved through the provision of a curriculum based on the academic disciplines. To put the point more positively, the need is to develop a balanced curriculum which is able to provide for: the intellectual development of pupils, the future needs of society and the economy, and, the interests, needs and development of all pupils.

At present, the curriculum is highly academic and this creates two specific problems. Firstly, it caters poorly for those pupils who are less academic. This problem is made worse by the fact that many of these pupils are trying to study in English. Consequently some schools, especially those whose intake is mainly bands 4 – 5 pupils, are experiencing major discipline and behaviour problems. This is sometimes made worse when schools continue to emphasize academic achievement in an attempt to improve the banding level of their future intake.

Secondly, by focusing on academic achievement, the curriculum stresses the pursuit of the acquisition of knowledge and places less emphasis on the development of skills, attitudes, aesthetics, personal, social and moral development. This is a problem for all pupils, not just for those who are academically less able, for a well developed academic intellect does not guarantee that a pupil has developed desirable skills (e.g. communication and co-operation) or attitudes (honesty, tolerance and civic-mindedness) or competencies (e.g. aesthetic appreciation). This problem was highlighted in the late 1980s when the universities complained about the quality of their entrants. Their concern was not with their academic competence, but rather with their lack of competence in areas such as communication, problem solving, sports, social skills and aesthetics. This problem has been recognized in the planned curriculum, but those policies designed to produce a more relevant, diversified and balanced school curriculum have not had a major impact on the curriculum implemented in schools.

What has happened in reality is that the curriculum of many schools has 'drifted' over time. More time has been given to the core academic subjects, and as new important subjects have emerged (Computer Studies and Putonghua), they have been added to the timetable by reducing the time spent on aesthetic, cultural and craft subjects. Table 12.1 shows the proportion of time that the ED recommended (S1–3) should be spent on different subject areas and the actual situation in 1990 and 1994 in a random sample of 32 secondary schools. Clearly the curriculum is increasingly focusing on the core academic subjects, especially Mathematics, Science and Languages, at the expense of cultural, practical and technical, and humanities subjects.

This imbalance is also reflected in the way schools allocate marks within their internal examinations at S3. This assessment is important because it determines which stream pupils will be placed in and which subjects they can study at the HKCEE level. Table 12.2 shows how the marks from specific subjects contributed

Table 12.1
Comparison of subject selection and time allocation (S1–3)

Subject group	Suggested time allocation	Time allocation in 32 schools (1990)	(1994)	Subject selection
Languages	35–40%	34.7%	36.4%	Chinese, English, Putonghua
Maths and science	20–25%	27.3%	28.5%	Maths, Science, Computer Literacy
Humanities	15–20%	18.0%	16.7%	Geog, History, Chinese History, EPA
Cultural, practical and technical	15–20%	18.0%	16.7%	PE, A & D, Music, HE/DT
Other learning activities	5%	3.7%	3.3%	Cross-curricular activities

Table 12.2
Contribution of subject groups to the overall examination grade at S3

Subject group	Subject	Percentages
Language	Chinese English Putonghua	36.5
Mathematics and science	Mathematics Science Computer Literacy	28.6
Humanities	History Geography Chinese History Economic and Public Affairs (EPA)	26.6
Cultural, practical and technical*	Physical Education (PE) Art and Design (A & D) Music Home Economics (HE) Design & Technology (DT)	8.0

to the final assessment of pupils at the end of S3. What the table clearly confirms is the importance attached to languages, mathematics and sciences, and the very low status given to cultural, practical and technical subjects. What the figures in Tables 12.1 and 12.2 do not reveal is the very big differences which existed between the schools. One school allocated only 24% of internal examination marks to languages while another allocated 45.4%. One school allocated 32% of the total marks to cultural, practical and technical subjects while many schools allocated no marks to those subjects. Instead grades were awarded, but these did not contribute to the total assessment mark given to each pupil. Similarly, some schools allocated no time to other learning activities while others allocated about 5%.

The very clear message that pupils receive in many schools is that what really counts is the study of languages, mathematics and science. A pupil who is more talented and interested in the humanities and cultural subjects is bound to do fairly poorly in the internal examination given the way the marks are allocated. In contrast a pupil whose interest and capabilities are in languages and/or sciences will receive a relatively high internal examination mark.

In the S4/S5 years the problem of academic drift is magnified, for this level of schooling also suffers from a further problem of a lack of curriculum breadth. At S4/S5 level pupils choose to study science, humanities or commercial subjects. This means that at an early stage of schooling they have no further access to whole areas of learning. Pupils may study groups of related subjects such as Economics, Accounts, Commerce and Computer Studies, which means that they experience a very narrow curriculum.

The three key policy areas which affect the curriculum have been characterized by indecisiveness and inconsistency. These relate to the language of instruction, the common core curriculum and the promotion of cross curricular guidelines.

The Language of Instruction: We noted earlier that the government has encouraged more schools to use Chinese, but this has largely been unsuccessful. The majority of schools have been Anglo-Chinese, and their approach has effectively involved the use of textbooks and examinations in English but verbal classroom interaction primarily in Cantonese. ECR4 (1990) devised a policy to encourage schools to use the language of instruction suited to their pupils' abilities, which would involve most schools using Chinese for all components of the curriculum, namely, teaching, textbooks and examinations. This policy was approved by the government and represented the closest they have ever got to having a defensible policy which involved more than exhortation. The pursuit of this policy has now however been effectively sabotaged. The ED has not asked schools to decide whether they will use English or Chinese. They have instead asked schools to decide which subjects will be taught in which language. So pupils might study Mathematics and Physics in English but History, Economics and Geography in Chinese. Furthermore the combination of subjects and languages could change from year to year. This neither addresses nor helps to solve the problem of pupils studying in a foreign language. In reality, many schools are claiming to use English for Mathematics and science

subjects and Chinese for the humanities (History, Geography). The opportunity has therefore been lost to implement a policy which might have helped reduce the gap between the curriculum and pupils' capabilities.

The Common Core Curriculum: We saw in Chapter 7 that this aspect of curriculum policy is like a chameleon: it changes its form in different circumstances. In reality, there is no policy on a core curriculum in secondary schools, which has contributed to the 'drift' referred to above. Consequently, what has emerged as the core is a combination of subjects which focus on an academic rationalist conception of the curriculum. Other goals of schooling such as the social, moral, personal and aesthetic development of pupils are relatively neglected.

Therefore, the problem is not that pupils study very different types of curricula, but rather that the academic goals pursued by traditional core subjects such as languages, Mathematics and Science are also pursued by most other subjects which pupils study. They involve pupils studying bodies of discrete knowledge which are defined by textbooks and examined by written assessments.

If a common core curriculum was identified which provided a body of learning that all pupils should study that took up about 50% to 60% of the time available, then this could serve to encourage schools to diversify the rest of the curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils. Schools will begin to diversify the curriculum more readily if the core was a *real* core, and they were expected to decide on the nature of the non-core or optional part of the curriculum. At present, the pupils are being provided more and more of the 'common core', and for those pupils who are less able academically, or only less able at languages, Mathematics and sciences, they are not being provided with a curriculum which allows them to develop their competency in some other area.

The Cross Curricular Guidelines: The problems outlined above have not been wholly ignored. As we noted earlier, one attempt to address the need for greater social and personal development involved the introduction of cross curricular guides in civic, moral, sex and environmental education. These were designed to permeate the whole curriculum so that teachers of all subjects would address relevant issues in their normal teaching. So, for example, the Chemistry teacher was supposed to talk about cohesion, friendliness and cooperation when teaching about atoms joining together! These guidelines, along with other curriculum 'innovations' such as the School-Based Curriculum Project Scheme, allowed the ED to demonstrate that they had a policy to promote social and personal education, and school-based initiatives. In reality, as we saw in Chapter 10, the guidelines have had little impact on what goes on in schools with the possible exception of the guidelines on environmental education. For example, a recent survey of 400 teachers indicated that less than 5% had read any one of the guidelines. It is difficult for teachers to implement something which they are not aware of. With regard to the SBCPS, it has resulted in the production of a range of curriculum materials but not in the development of curricula designed to meet the needs of

pupils. So the failure of the curriculum to focus on pupils' social and moral development has involved a policy which is a sham.

In three key areas, therefore, we have policies which demonstrate a mixture of a lack of will, expediency, inconsistency and a degree of farce. We do not have policies in Hong Kong designed to determine the language of instruction used in schools, the nature of the common core and to promote personal and social education. This has exacerbated the problem of the curriculum of schools drifting towards providing a curriculum which focuses on developing a narrow set of competencies. Those competencies are the ones which are seen to maximize the pupils' opportunities of gaining access to tertiary education, namely, the formal use of English as the medium of instruction to focus on studying a range of academic subjects.

The features of the three key policy areas outlined above are somewhat paradoxical. In some key areas of the curriculum, Government policy has been very clear and effectively implemented. The best examples are the control of the ED over the content of what is studied and the textbooks schools can use. These policies emerged as we noted in Chapter 10 to ensure that the curriculum was not used to destabilize the Government and encourage political dissent. Consequently curriculum materials are mainly evaluated to check if the content matches that of the syllabus but the control and evaluation of the quality of materials is poor. The overall pattern which emerges is that effective policies on the curriculum have been pursued when the survival of the Government is at stake. What pupils study, which textbooks they use, how the non-core elements of the curriculum are constructed and how the curriculum is delivered are decisions which schools should be encouraged to take. The language of instruction used in schools, the nature of the common core curriculum and of the means to achieve a balanced curriculum are questions which deserve and require a clear, defensible and consistent national policy.

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