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The Quality Assurance Movement: A Lesson from Hong Kong Schools

Abstract

In the last two decades, the Education Bureau has implemented a two-pronged approach to assuring the quality of education in Hong Kong: an external mechanism via inspection and an internal framework via self-evaluation. However, both of which are mainly top-down and not as effective as expected. This paper reports on an investigation into the effectiveness of implementing self-evaluation in Hong Kong schools and the factors that may have hindered and/or facilitated such a movement. In the conclusion, suggestions are made for policy makers and school practitioners' considerations when they strive to maintain sustainable development in schools.

Keywords: quality assurance, self-evaluation, school inspection, sustainable development, continuous improvement, Hong Kong

Introduction

Hong Kong schools have been confronted with challenges brought by the huge information flow and vigorous innovative moves due to globalization (Pang, 2006). Hong Kong policy necessitates that schools transform into learning communities so as to meet the expectations of their stakeholders. If a school has to become a learning community, it needs to enhance its own learning capacity in such a way that the whole school seeks organizational improvement in a continuous process. School leaders have to submit to a paradigm shift from hierarchical, supervisory and controlling roles to facilitative and supportive roles with careful planning.

School leaders may make use of self-evaluation as an internal mechanism to initiate, lead, and manage organizational change. School self-evaluation will lead to evidence-based organizational change, which allows the school leaders to successfully institutionalize a self-renewal framework in daily managerial practices, as well as to lead and manage change effectively and efficiently. An effective educational leader also plays a central role in placing school self-evaluation (SSE) in a development cycle of continuous improvement. Through the procedures of self-evaluation a self-renewal strategy will, it is hoped, be institutionalized in the school's management structure. This paper explores the roles of self-evaluation in leading school organizational change and the possible ways of managing school change through self-evaluation. In the following sections, a review of the implementation of school self-evaluation (SSE) in the quality assurance movement in Hong Kong is first given. Then the findings from a qualitative research into the effectiveness of the implementation of SSE in Hong Kong schools are presented, in which both hindrances and facilitators to SSE are examined. Finally recommendations are made for the considerations by policy makers and school

practitioners when they think of maintaining the sustainability of school development.

The quality assurance movement in Hong Kong

There have been rapid changes in both the education system and schools themselves in Hong Kong, due to the recommendations of the Education Commission Report No. 7 (ECR7) issued in 1997. The ECR7 recommended a two-pronged approach to ensure the quality of education in Hong Kong: an external assurance mechanism and an internal quality assurance framework. While the external quality assurance mechanism was achieved through the establishment of the Quality Assurance Inspectorate (QAI) in 1997 to which schools were accountable, the internal quality assurance framework relied on schools' own capability at self-evaluation as the process of school improvement. The external quality assurance mechanism was done through adopting a whole-school approach to inspection by the QAI, which assesses schools' effectiveness, identifies their strengths and weaknesses, makes suggestions of ways of improvement and development in the schools and releases inspection reports for public reference. In order to improve the quality of school education continuously, all schools were also expected to engage in cyclical processes of evaluation, planning, implementation and on-going self-evaluation. Every school must work towards meeting the educational needs of its students as effectively as it can and self-evaluation provides information on which to base plans for improvement. By self-evaluation, all schools should produce documents which outline the long-term goals, prioritize development areas, set out specific targets for implementation, evaluate progress of work during the school year, and set improvement or development targets for the coming year (Scottish Office, 2002).

School self-evaluation (SSE) is a mechanism through which a school can help itself review the quality of education, improve continuously and develop itself into an effective school. The three major questions usually asked in school self-evaluation are: (1) What is our school's present performance? (2) How do we know about the school's performance? (3) What will we do after knowing the performance? They seem to be simple questions, but if we want to have a full picture or a thorough understanding of the school through a systematic and objective evaluation of the school's performance, they may be very difficult to answer.

Schools can only improve continuously when they have institutionalized a self-evaluation framework in daily practice and when there is a set of valid, reliable and school-based performance indicators available for use in self-evaluation. Practicing self-evaluation enables schools (i) to develop formal procedures for setting school goals; (ii) to have participation of teachers, parents and alumni in school management, development, planning, evaluation and decision-making; (iii) to assess their progress towards goals as well as their own performance over time; and (iv) to take appropriate steps for improvement. When school-based indicators are translated from the aims of the schools, they are useful tools for measuring and monitoring school performance in areas of interest. Self-evaluation with appropriate school-based indicators provides information to schools, teachers, parents, students and the community with the general profiles of schools for reference and for comparison among schools of similar background, or within the same quality circle. School self-

evaluation and school-based performance indicators are the crucial elements for continuous improvement in schools.

To successfully institutionalize a self-renewal framework in daily managerial practices as well as to lead and manage change effectively, the leader needs to: (1) acquire appropriate knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework and concept of school self-evaluation; (2) develop and acquire the necessary skills and attitudes for self-evaluation and manipulation of performance indicators; (3) think through the leadership role as a guide to action; and (4) clarify for themselves, the strategic elements that are essential for an effective implementation of the school development plan. Then, the principal should examine the types of knowledge, kinds of skills and the attitudes which need to be developed for successful implementation of organizational change.

The effectiveness of the implementation of self-evaluation in Hong Kong schools

A qualitative research was conducted to solicit the principals' and teachers' views on the effectiveness and usefulness of the projects and exploring the factors that help and hinder the implementation of school self-evaluation (SSE) in Hong Kong schools. A sample of 20 schools was randomly selected for the qualitative research, and their principals were interviewed. Teachers' views on the same subject matter were also solicited during whole-school workshops held in the schools. The principals and teachers' views and opinions, thus collected, were summarized and transcribed, and subsequently analyzed and categorized into themes. These are summarized below.

Factors that hindered the implementation of SSE

Generally, most principals and teachers opined that school self-evaluation had become a normal practice in schools, though it was a new and innovative concept. They thought that since the implementation of school self-evaluation involved a paradigm shift in school management and change of practices in normal school lives for all teachers, external support including financial resources, staff development programs and in-house and consultancy services should be provided. In addition, most principals and teachers would like school self-evaluation be implemented phase by phase, thus giving them more time and 'space' to acquire new knowledge and skills in the matter. They reported that in the present turbulent school environment where there were already many school reforms and innovations, further introduction of new concepts, such as school self-evaluation would inevitably lead to resistance. There were many specific factors that hindered the implementation of school self-evaluation in Hong Kong schools, problematic at the time the views were collected, and these are summarized and classified at the system level and the school organizational level as below.

Hindrances at the system level

1. **A loosely coupled system.** The Hong Kong education system clings to a loosely coupled system, with aided schools forming the major sector. About 80% of schools in Hong Kong are aided schools, 5%, government schools,

5%, direct subsidized schools, and 10%, private schools. While aided schools receive financial support from the government, they have their own school sponsoring bodies and management committees. Aided schools, by comparison with government schools, have greater autonomy and discretion to respond to requests for change and the implementation of education policies by the Education Bureau. That is, resistance to change in the Hong Kong education system is much greater than that in education systems in other countries, where the state or government schools form the largest sector.

2. **A too ambitious plan.** There are approximately 1,000 schools, primary and secondary, in the Hong Kong education system. Conducting whole-school territory-wide inspections or external school reviews within a few short years was an unrealistic plan. Expecting most schools to be self-reliant in conducting self-evaluation, and to be able to raise their capacity for change within a year or so was again impractical and unattainable.
3. **Too many existing reforms.** There have been many new reform proposals for the education system in Hong Kong in the 21st century, in addition to those left over from the last decade. Most of the implementation of these reforms and policies was attempted without good planning and co-ordination. Schools have been suffering from the great burdens and confusion arisen from these reforms. Any introduction of further new reforms and programs in schools would cause at best, indifference and perhaps resistance, because of tremendous pressure and workloads already existing in schools.
4. **School self-evaluation is a complex process.** The implementation of school self-evaluation involves a change of school culture and a change of general practices in school lives. Such changes cannot be achieved only by directives issued by the education authority, but need a well-planned, bottom-up strategy of initiation and introduction which needs extra resources and supports from external sources.
5. **Lack of resources.** Effective implementation of new reforms or initiatives needs extra resources and support. At the time of economic recession in the early years of the new millennium in Hong Kong, the shortage of financial and human resources created more difficulties for the implementation of school self-evaluation throughout the territory.

Hindrances at the school organizational level

Implementation of school self-evaluation at the school level is not an easy task, given the present turbulent environment and conservative culture found in most Hong Kong schools. Based on the research, major factors that hindered the effective implementation of school self-evaluation were summarized. Since these factors are commonly found in most Hong Kong schools, they are worthy of the special attention of school leaders and administrators.

1. The plurality of categories of stakeholders and the diversity of views and opinions in schools might lead to many excellent sets of reforms being opposed.
2. Past failed experience in the implementation of educational policy caused schools to take a passive and conservative approach to educational reforms.

3. Schools are inevitably political arenas and power struggles are common. These create resistance to educational change in the schools.
4. School leaders and the teachers in some schools might be embroiled in conflicts, which caused tensions, fears, and low morale among teachers, not conducive to introspection.
5. The communication breakdown between teachers and administrators found in some schools resulted in a very weak basis for professional collaboration and commitment.
6. There were no formal, systematic, and in-depth, well designed professional training programs to train people in the implementation of SSE.
7. Most schools were either passive, or reactive against change, and there was a little culture of organizational learning in schools.
8. Most schools lacked a long-term vision of or planning for school development and improvement.

Factors that facilitated the implementation of SSE

Though there is a predominance of factors that have hindered the effective implementation of self-evaluation in Hong Kong schools, there are a few factors, at both the system level and the school level, that have facilitated self-evaluation in the school context.

Facilitators at the system level

1. **A leaner, flatter governance structure of the central education authority.** Based on the recommendations of the report on the review of the Education Department (Education and Manpower Bureau, 1998), the Hong Kong Government successfully merged the Education Bureau (EB) with the Education Department (ED) in 2002. The governance and ruling structure for the school education system has changed from a three-tier structure (Bureau-ED-Schools) to a two-tier one (Bureau-Schools). The interdependence between policy making and policy implementation has been strengthened and the school education system has become more tightly coupled. The central educational authority is now more interactive, and responsive to addressing the problems and difficulties which arise in the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms.
2. **An evolving model of quality assurance.** Though the two-pronged strategy (an external assurance mechanism and an internal quality assurance) to assure the quality of education in Hong Kong has remained unchanged since 1997, the framework for quality assurance has been evolving in order to meet new needs of schools in the ever-changing external environment. A new framework which enhances school development and accountability through school self-evaluation (SSE) and external school review (ESR) was introduced in 2003 (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003). The framework stresses the internal mechanism more than the external one and more resources have been put into the promotion of school self-evaluation.
3. **Availability of tools for self-evaluation.** Following a few years' development and continuous testing, the Education Bureau has been successful in developing some sets of tools for school use in self-evaluation

(Quality Assurance & School-based Support Division, 2016a, 2016b). These tools include performance indicators and key performance measures in the domains of management and organization, teaching and learning, school support and ethos, and academic and non-academic outcomes. They provide a balanced coverage and a common platform for assessment of different aspects of schoolwork and student performance for SSE and ESR and will build territory-wide norms against which school performance can be compared and assessed. Stakeholders questionnaires for teachers, pupils and parents, and other tools in the social and affective domains for students have also been developed for use in SSE and schools are allowed to choose the relevant indicators for their own needs and uses.

Facilitators at the school organizational level

A few schools under the study had successfully created a culture of self-evaluation and organizational change. Such characteristics existed in some of these schools before they started to implement SSE as required by the policy. Factors that facilitated the implementation of school self-evaluation in these schools are summarized as below.

1. **An enhanced leadership.** There was an enhanced leadership in the schools that succeeded in implementing school self-evaluation and initiating organizational change. The management of organizational changes calls for “strong” leadership. Some organizational components have a limiting influence on other organizational components because of the presence of multiple and often conflicting goals. The success in achieving beneficial organizational change in these schools was due to the strong leadership that eliminated these tensions by deciding upon unified goals and clarifying technology.
2. **Shared values.** There were, to a considerable extent, shared values among the staff members in the schools which successfully implemented school self-evaluation in the management and organizational structure. Sharing values is the one fundamental basic that holds staff together and unified when faced with changes in long-term and short-term goals and visions. If organizations determinate means-ends structures for attaining preferred outcomes, then agreement about preferences is the only source of order that is left.
3. **Focused attention and setting priorities.** There was special attention on human relations in the management system in the schools that had successfully implemented school self-evaluation. Small step strategies within a confused, turbulent and ever-changing environment may produce more effective, efficient, interesting, varied, and thoughtful organizational changes. Leaders in these schools compensated for multiple and conflicting goals by carefully selecting targets, controlling resources, and acting forcefully.
4. **Good team spirit, high staff morale and a strong sense of professionalism.** The very successful schools in the implementation of SSE possessed a very strong teaching force that had good team spirit and high staff morale as well as a strong sense of professionalism. The formation of the strong and professional teaching force was not an accident but the result of deliberate and careful selection during the recruitment of personnel. High

teacher morale and strong team spirit were also the outcomes of the enhanced leadership and effective management systems in the schools.

The above findings in the qualitative research into the effectiveness of implementing self-evaluation in schools and the factors that hindered and facilitated organizational change shed light on how school administrators can lead and manage organizational change for school development and improvement.

Conclusion

Evidence-based organizational change has become a very recent trend in the school reform and improvement movement, in which school self-evaluation plays an important role. School self-evaluation provides a framework which allows school leaders to institutionalize a self-renewal strategy in daily managerial practices as well as to lead and manage change. Due to various hindrances at both the education system level and the school organizational level, some Hong Kong schools have not been successfully establishing a self-evaluation framework and some schools are still having a weak culture of self-renewal. Nevertheless, a normative-re-educative strategy may be effective in helping schools to surmount the resistance and hindrances found at both system and organizational levels. The practical experience gained from a few successful schools can shed light to other schools to transform into learning organizations through the implementation of school self-evaluation.

In order to facilitate change in schools, administrators should have enhanced leadership that unifies the school's goals and clarifies the technology for achieving them; promotes the sharing of values among all members and agrees about preferences; and focuses attention by carefully selecting targets, controlling resources, and acting forcefully. Not only do good team spirit, high staff morale and a strong sense of professionalism form the crucial basis for change, but they also help reduce the resistance to change. Effective leaders are those who can adopt these approaches to change flexibly in coping with the challenges created from the ever-changing external environment and in leading their organizations towards excellence.

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