



Best Practice: Enhancing Teachers' Professional Capacity Through School-based Support Services

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CITY: HONG KONG

POLICY AREAS: EDUCATION

BEST PRACTICE

School-based Support Service is a project undertaken by the Education Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) to steer and provide on-site professional support service to enhance teacher capacity in attaining the goals of HKSAR's Education Reform.

ISSUE

- Gap between reform goals and classroom practices;
- Conventional teacher professional development in the form of one-shot workshops or short-term training courses is disconnected from teachers' work and inadequate to support and sustain reform changes; and
- While there is an increasing emergence of school-based support projects, the absence of a conceptual framework, implementation strategies and evaluation mechanism deem such practices piece-meal, ineffective and sometimes contradictory to the reform goals

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- To enhance the educational quality of students' learning experience in line with the education and curriculum reform through the provision of school-based professional support, premised on the integral conception of continuous teacher professional development, school-based curriculum development and school-wide development.
- To assist schools to develop the necessary capacities and mechanisms to sustain the development of the relevant knowledge base and practices embedded in a strong collaborative culture.
- To conceptualize experience in providing school-based support service in the light of bridging the gap between reform intentions and classroom/school changes

IMPLEMENTATION

In 2004, a HK\$550 million Education Development Fund was set up to provide the basic funds for the School-based Support Service Project for 5 years. An Advisory Committee comprised of government officials, university academics, school heads and teachers was set up to steer the direction of school-based support service in Hong Kong.

A School-based Support Office was set up to administer and crystallize the experience of the 5 school-based support projects: University-School Project (USP), Professional Development Schools (PDS), School Support

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Partners (SSP), Mainland Teacher Scheme (MTS) and Principal Support Network (PSN) and the 4 school-based supporting teams set up in the government head office. In 2009, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong approved the continuation of the project until the fund is exhausted.

The actual implementation of the support programs and service at the school level is aligned with the school year cycle. In March, the number and features of support programs to be offered in the new school year in September are disseminated to schools for teachers to decide on the support needed. Teacher autonomy in making application is important to avoid the labeling effect on schools that receive school-based support service as weak ones with deficient teachers. Application is made online with results sent to schools before June to allow the time and space for the service providers and the schools to discuss goals, plans and schedules before the school year.

The application and approval of support service is on a yearly basis with the possibility of extension for three years. Regular school visits on a bi-weekly basis are conducted by the service providers to plan the curriculum, observe lessons and analyze students' work with teachers to improve practices and generate practical knowledge. Through working closely and continuously with teachers in the real situation, the gap between reform goals and classroom practices is bridged.

Schools are also clustered to celebrate success, share good practices and reflect on problems encountered. The good practices and resources developed in the programs are also disseminated on the web. Exit plans are set up and revised from time to time to ensure smooth exit with sustaining development.

COST

The annual budget is about HK\$80 million and the actual expenditure is subject to the demand of the schools and availability of service providers applying through tender procedures. The cost of service per school ranges from HK\$80,000 to HK\$300,000.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The expected outcomes of the support service are a) enhancement and sustaining in teachers' competence to carry out the reform goals; b) improvement in students' learning outcomes and experience in line with the education reform.

Due to the dynamic complexities in the practical educational contexts, it is difficult to draw a simple causal relationship between teacher capacity enhancement and a single program. Acknowledging the limitation of simple measurement, the evaluation of the outcomes and success of the program is conducted by both outsider and insider evaluators, using quantitative and qualitative measures.

Based on two external evaluation reports conducted by two different universities:

- a) teachers joining the support programs show better understanding, demonstrate higher competence and develop more positive attitude in achieving the reform goals than those who did not join the programs,
- b) schools joining the support programs are more willing to implement reform measures e.g. school-based curriculum development, assessment for learning etc,

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- c) stronger teacher collaboration, reflection and confidence, which is important to the sustaining of the reform spirit and facing new changes, is found in schools joining the support programs

The school-based support service program is considered one of reasons for Hong Kong to be one of the top performing areas in education by the McKinsey Report (2009).

Based on the annual satisfaction survey from teachers on the support service since its inception, the satisfactory score is consistently high – an average rating of 4.5 out of a maximum rating of 5. From the case studies conducted in schools joining the support programs, there are significant changes in the teaching strategies and students' learning outcomes.

In addition to the intended outcomes, there are unintended outcomes of the program which include: generation of new practical knowledge in different subject matter, increasing understanding of how teachers learn and change in the workplace context, and unfolding the meaning of teacher professional learning communities for teacher development policy and practices in HK.

TIMELINE

There are two perspective of looking at the timeline. From an administrative and resource perspective, the support programs are funded by the Education Development Fund. The implementation has been smooth and the time-line follows closely.

From the perspective of enhancing and sustaining teacher capacity and change management, school-based support service is not viewed as a one-off event or project. It is expected that the knowledge generated in the project, especially the use of classroom data and evidence to understand how students learn, the importance of curriculum adaptation and coherence to cater for learners' diversities and the realization of assessment for learning to feedback on learning etc. can be sustained.

LEGISLATION

Teacher professional autonomy, ownership and agency, social learning, collaboration and reflection are the basic underlying principles of the support service and the use of new legislation for compliance and enforcing changes is not desired.

LESSONS LEARNED

The most important lesson to be learned in this Project is the changing conception of school-based support service. Initially when we first set up the Project, we thought that teacher deficiency was the root of the problem in education reforms and our role was to help them improve especially from a more technical or instrumental perspective. However, once we got inside the schools, we found that the situations were far more complex and complicated. The delivery expert model did not work. School-based support service is not the delivery of sound ideas and strategies to schools by an expert to fix the teaching problems. A collaborative approach focused on student learning and premised on mutual professional approach is important. The trust allows both teachers and



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external support agents to engage in action inquiry and critical reflection while the use of evidence and relevant information gathered in the classroom facilitates sound pedagogical reasoning and decision making.

Other lessons to be learned include: good understanding and respect of the school ecology and contextual variations; content and pedagogical content knowledge, as well as knowledge on how students and adults (teachers) learn are essential ingredients in the support process; entry and exit plans to schools are both important; regular sharing among external support agents for them to disclose practical problems, conceptualize experience and generate practical knowledge is required.

TRANSFERABILITY

Both the conception of school-based support service and the model used in this project can be replicated. However, it is important to point out that 'support' should not be based on the pathological approach or teacher deficiency model.

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