

## ***Proposed Changes in the Senior Secondary Curriculum in English Language in Hong Kong: Perceptions of School Principals and Teachers***

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This paper reports on the assessment of readiness and receptivity of school principals, English panel chairpersons and English teachers for the implementation of the new senior secondary curriculum (NSSC) in English Key Learning Area (KLA) in Hong Kong. Recent research has probed into the dilemmas and challenges faced by school administrators and frontline teachers when facing curriculum change. Such challenges exist in the management of change, the teachers' readiness for change, and in problems with collaboration among the stakeholders. Drawing on these research findings the analysis of this paper focuses on whether such problems are also re-occurring in the implementation of change in the NSSC, and if so, considers how they can be resolved. Using qualitative research procedures four key questions were addressed: how far the school personnel understood the changes in the NSSC; the extent to which they felt they could implement the new curriculum; which factors encouraged/constrained implementation; and the possible effects of change on schools. The findings showed that schools with students of high or medium ability seemed to be more positive in terms of perceptions and receptivity at the initial stage of change, while schools dominated by cohorts of medium or low academic ability students appeared to be resistant to the shift in pedagogic arrangements. Yet all the school principals interviewed expressed their unreserved agreement with the spirit of the new curriculum.

**Key words:** English language key learning area, curriculum

**development, secondary schools, qualitative case studies**

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN HONG KONG**

### **The Medium of Instruction Policy**

In Hong Kong, the perception of the general public, in particular that of parents, of English as the language of power and prestige, resulted in the setting up of a large number of English medium (EMI) schools in the early 1980s. In these schools, English was used as the medium of instruction (MoI) not only in English lessons but also in lessons of other content subjects. The demand for EMI schools had always been high and the number of these schools was found to be nine times that of Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI) schools in which English was used for teaching and learning in English lessons but not in content subject lessons (Li, 2008). One major problem with this late immersion policy was that most students entering English medium secondary schools were ill-equipped with an adequate level of English proficiency for them to learn content subjects effectively in English (Education Commission, 1990, 1995). Many of the EMI schools that admitted less able students used a mixture of Chinese and English for instruction (Shek et al., 1991; So, 1992). The Education Commission (1990, 1995) and Education Department (1989, 1997) identified it as the main cause for the students' 'declining' standard in both English and Chinese. Calls to eliminate mixed code instruction were prevalent (Education Commission, 1990, 1995; Education Department, 1989, 1997; Johnson, 1994, 1997). It was believed that this would ensure the consistent use of English and Chinese as teaching media.

Shortly before the return of Hong Kong's sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997, in its final months of power the colonial Hong Kong government issued a so called 'Firm Guidance' to all schools. This announced that from September 1998, Chinese would be the mandatory MoI

for content subject lessons for all secondary schools with the exception of English lessons in which English would still be used as the teaching and learning medium (Education Department, 1997). As a result of the mandatory implementation of the mother tongue education policy in secondary schools, the percentage of EMI schools dropped from 90 per cent in the 1980s to 25 per cent in 1998. Most school children now begin English at Primary 1 (grade 1) and have 7 to 8 English lessons per week and follow a traditional EFL teaching approach throughout their primary and junior secondary schooling (grade 1 to 9). During this period they study the content subjects in the mother tongue. After this most continue their senior secondary education (S4-7) through the medium of English. About 25 per cent study content subjects through the medium of Chinese during their primary schooling, and based on the results of an attainment test taken in primary six they are considered as capable of studying in English (Education Department, 1998). They then switch to English-medium in secondary schools.

### **The New Senior Secondary Curriculum in English KLA**

Three secondary English syllabuses were proposed and implemented in the last three decades in Hong Kong (Education Department, 1975, 1983; CDC, 1999). A social reconstructionist agenda was discernible in the 1975 and 1983 Hong Kong syllabuses whilst the 1999 syllabus reflected progressivist values (Walker, 2000). However, a more recent curriculum change in the English Key Learning Area (KLA) has been stimulated predominantly by social and economic shifts in Hong Kong. Among these shifts one can count population increases, the rise of a wealthy middle class, the development of the tertiary sector at a time of increasing globalization and new socio-political trends. The English KLA's intended methodology has moved away from oral-structural approaches with their emphasis on decontextualised and discrete language practice aiming at structural accuracy and has instead embraced the more integrated and contextualized practices of communicative pedagogy. The introduction of task-based learning in 1999 reinforced this

move and also stated that English language learning was also seen as a means of accessing other knowledge and skills as part of whole-person growth. To facilitate the implementation of a flexible, coherent and diversified senior secondary curriculum, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is adopting a 3-year senior secondary and 4-year undergraduate academic system as recommended by the Education Commission in 2000. Compared with the current system of a 2-year senior secondary (Secondary 4-5), 2-year matriculation (Secondary 6-7) and 3-year undergraduate system, this is considered as a big change. The new 2006 senior secondary curriculum and assessment (NSSC) (CDC, 2006) which is scheduled for implementation in 2009 is built on the existing English Language curriculum for Secondary 4 and 5 (CDC, 1999) and Sixth Form Use of English (CDC, 1999). It extends the prior knowledge, skills and positive values and attitudes that learners develop through the English language curriculum for basic education from Primary 1 to Secondary 3. These extensions have had implications for classroom activities and the respective roles of the school, teacher and students, with the latter expected to become more participatory and independent in their learning, and the former providing supportive input and scaffolding. In short, the main features of the NSSC are presented as follows:

The provision of a Compulsory Part and an Elective Part

Compared with the current curriculum which consists of only the Compulsory Part a quarter of the NSSC will be made up of an Elective Part which is categorised into Language Arts modules such as drama, short stories, poems and songs and popular culture, and Non-language Arts modules such as sports communication, debating, social issues and workplace communication. Schools have the autonomy to decide on how many and what elective modules to offer. Learners are required to choose 3 modules from the Elective Part. Students' performance in the Elective Modules will be assessed through school-based assessment.

The institution of cross-curricular links

The NSSC recognises the importance of fostering a greater coherence

between English language and the other subjects through cross-curricular collaboration.

#### The nature of school-based assessment

It is basically the measurement of students' performance in individual subjects by their own teachers as a compulsory component (20%) of their grading in public examinations. It entails the use of a wide variety of assessment methods in addition to the written papers that are currently accounting for the whole of the marks in most if not all of the more popular subjects in the school-leaving Certificate of Education Examination.

This study explores the perceptions of the school principals, English panel chairpersons and English teachers of the new senior secondary curriculum and assessment of the English language education KLA at the initial stage of change. It also portrays the relationship among the schools personnel in shaping the plans and strategies that impinge on the enactment of the change in school.

## **LITERATURE FRAMEWORK**

### **School is a Powerful Location for Enactment of Change**

The school setting is a powerful location for processing knowledge and bringing about change, as crucial determinant decisions are made there. The progress of reforms depends upon the perceptions, beliefs, receptivity and expectations that different personnel hold. They provide the capacity for change. The problem to be addressed is therefore the slippage or degree of adaptation that can occur in the implementation of change as it becomes subject to the quite varied perceptions of those who must implement it (Jones, 2007). This can result either in 'fitness for purpose', in that the reforms are adapted in ways that suit the school context and can then thrive, or they are diluted or introduced in a piecemeal fashion that limits their effectiveness.

Formulating aims is an easy task, but as experience suggests, implementation

is usually much more difficult and much slower. While the aims of the syllabuses may be largely compatible with the economic and political context of the time, they may fit less well with individual school environments, falling prey to such factors such as teacher competence, teacher attitude, student ability, or the school's broader socio-cultural context. When a syllabus has low feasibility, it is imbued with in-built failure (Flett & Wallace, 2005).

Schools have their unique culture and ethos, and can have democratic or authoritarian leadership (Morris, 1996). The Education Department of Hong Kong (1992, cited in Morris, 1996, pp. 123-4) lists the characteristics of an effective school that can originate in its organisational structures:

- a high degree of staff involvement in developing school goals and making decisions;
- a motivated and cohesive teaching force with good team spirit;
- the principal is concerned with personal and staff professional development, and able to make the best use of staff skill and experience; and
- the principal ensures that the school's programmes are regularly reviewed and progress towards their goals is evaluated.

School leaders, especially the principal and other senior and middle managers, are crucial agents of change as the intermediaries between the innovation and the teacher, and they perform a planning, organising, directing and controlling function. Wilson and Blewitt (2005) and Markee (1997) state that a supportive school environment will not only facilitate the acceptance of an innovation but also help reduce the anxiety and difficulty of learning new skills. Teachers are key elements in the process of change in the school context. A curriculum may actually make a stronger address to teachers than pupils. If it cannot change, move, perturb or inform teachers, it will have no effect on those whom they teach (Biesta, 2004). Earl et al (2002) add that good indicators of how staff will respond to change can be found in how strongly they register its need for it, the way they intend to manage it and the

amount of input they give to it.

### **Conflicts, Controversies and Dilemmas Created by Curricula Reform have Become More Intense**

Yet the conflict and controversy created by curricula reform has become more and more intense in the last decade or so (Burns, 2003; Waters & Vilches, 2005). In their study exploring the common dilemmas faced by leaders of schools responsible for curriculum change in the Australian state of Victoria, Flett and Wallace (2005) found that the leaders of the case study schools chose to accept the overall framework of the Curriculum and Standards Framework (Australian Education Council, 1993, cited in Flett and Wallace, 2005), and opted for a workplace compromise as the school moved toward remodelling its curriculum structure. They managed to make some substantial changes in line with the government policy. However, they were sensitive to teacher concerns regarding changes at a school-wide level and also allowed classroom teachers to retain significant autonomy at the classroom level. Such findings were in line with that of a number of studies which had shown that teacher administrators and principals often had to rest content with curriculum decisions made by the government while at the same time trying to accommodate the school-community expectation that they would be included in the decision-making process.

According to Carless (2003), if teachers are not given sufficient consideration the challenging nature of implementing something new may be exacerbated. In exploring the implementation of task-based teaching in primary schools which was introduced as part of a so-called Target-oriented Curriculum (TOC) reform in Hong Kong, he reviewed six issues which were found to impact on how teachers approached the implementation of communicative tasks in their classroom: teacher beliefs; teacher understandings; the syllabus time available; the textbook and the topic; preparation and the available resources; and the language proficiency of the students, and concluded that in view of the numerous challenges and dilemmas impacting

on implementation, curriculum leaders and teachers need to work together to address the complexity of the change process. An innovation needs to be adapted to local contextual conditions and the characteristics of the target learners. There is also a need to build change processes on the existing values, understandings and prior experiences of the teachers who will implement an innovation.

More recently, Lee et al. (2007) reported the major challenges faced by Hong Kong Personal Social and Humanities Education (PSHE) teachers as they developed a school-based Integrated Humanities curriculum. Their findings reviewed the divergent perceptions and varied receptivity of humanities teachers with regard to the NSSC. These divergences appeared to be the major cause of their pedagogical dilemmas at the initial stage of curriculum development work. Teachers' narratives also suggested that clear guidance from school leaders or administrators could make the environment conducive to reform. In contrast, they showed themselves to be aggrieved when asked to accept under-planned and overly autocratic PSHE curriculum change. In some cases, the principal just set ambiguous mission goals such as 'expanding students' horizons under the new curriculum', then ordered the working group to work out the subsequent actions. Another inhibiting factor in curriculum integration was the lack of clear objectives for integration development. This was one of the root causes for the disputes among teaching staff. Without a feasible work plan, schools undertaking full curriculum integration often had the problem of pushing the changes through in a relatively radical manner and so had to strive to maximize their instructional effectiveness in a short period of time. Teachers' narratives showed that teachers and school leaders were unable to reach a clear consensus about how best to co-ordinate these and other related endeavours.

In the New Senior Secondary English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6) (CDC, 2006), it is clearly stipulated that collaboration among school principals, English panel chairpersons and English teachers is important as all these post-holders play a prominent part in the planning, development and management of the school-based English

language curriculum. This proposition forms the basis of the approach to this study and assessment of the plans and strategies of the participating schools for curriculum change.

## **ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL'S RECEPTIVITY AND READINESS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE NSSC**

### **Views of School Personnel at the Frontline Limited**

The NSSC (CDC, 2006) will be implemented in September 2009 and support has been made available to teachers through seminars and other courses offered by the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. Yet supporting activities have been mainly concerned with information dissemination and it has yet to be determined whether they are considered adequate for teachers to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills for implementing this type of curriculum reform. Issues related to the promotion of the new curriculum and teaching have appeared in newspaper reports and editorial columns. Notwithstanding the debates and heated discussions about the way English language education for secondary students should move forward, the views that we hear are the conceptual ones of policymakers, curriculum developers and academics. Consideration of the views of school personnel who are at the frontline has been limited. So far, only a few academic studies have been carried out to investigate teachers' perceptions of the NSSC. Much work needs to be done to reveal how curriculum changes in English language are interpreted by the educators themselves.

### **Research Objectives**

This research is an exploratory study which starts to plug this research gap. Because of the complexity of the reform process within a school, the study

looks at the responses of different categories of educators, including senior and middle management as well as classroom teachers. All such personnel have an impact on the degree, scope and nature of the changes implemented in a school. The study also seeks to encapsulate this complexity by analysing the perceptions of the personnel who can affect change. Though any comments about the effects of change are purely speculative the results of this study can be generalised at a meta-level and contribute to the insights and understanding of change for curriculum planners, teachers educators, schools, and other stakeholders, making us more aware of the complexities of the change process in general and amidst the particular dynamics of the Hong Kong context. The findings can inform and influence policy, shaping the strategies of future curriculum reform in Hong Kong. They can also help identify the strengths and weaknesses in school management, opening the way to its improvement and development. They can further create a better awareness of the kinds of support systems needed to enhance the capacity of teachers to handle changes effectively.

This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do school principals, English panel chairpersons and English teachers view the NSSC in the English language education key learning area at this initial stage of change?
2. What will impede the shaping of plans and strategies to bring about curriculum change in the school?
3. How will teacher perceptions of change impact the NSSC's implementation in the school?
4. What are the contextual factors that affect change in a school?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The study investigates the receptivity and readiness of school administrators

and teachers for implementing the NSSC for the English language education key learning area in Hong Kong through a qualitative inquiry. Principals, panel chairpersons and teachers of English Language Key Learning Area were invited to attend semi-structured interviews to elicit their views about the impact of the NSSC at the organisation and classroom levels. The invitation was sent to three cohorts of teachers who participated in the Education Bureau commissioned 18-hour professional development programme - *Understanding and Interpreting the New Senior Secondary Curriculum* - offered by The Hong Kong Institute of Education in January 2007, March 2007 and May 2007 respectively. They were asked if four members of the staff from their school, including the principal, panel chairperson of English, a teacher teaching English at senior secondary level and another at junior secondary level, could attend the interview. The sample was considered to be representative of the different roles and at different levels of responsibility adopted by personnel in schools implementing curriculum change.

### **Procedure**

Eventually, ten schools accepted the invitation and a total of 40 teachers with varying profiles in these schools were interviewed between February 2007 and January 2008. The interviews were chosen as fit for the specific purpose of obtaining more in-depth, developed responses to a series of open-ended questions. An interview schedule was developed (See Appendix I) based on which the teachers were asked to express their views on the following aspects:

- Understanding changes in the NSSC Guide
- Factors encouraging and/or constraining the implementation of the NSSC
- How well the senior management and teachers feel they can implement the NSSC in the English learning area
- The possible effects of change on the senior management, teachers and learners

Yet, after the scope of the research project was reassessed, data from only six of the participating schools were included. The six schools were chosen for their location and the level of their students' attainment. Three of these schools, Schools A, B, and C, were English-medium (EMI) schools, in which English was used as the medium of instruction, not only in English but also in other subjects. The other three, Schools D, E and F, were Chinese-(Cantonese-) medium (CMI) schools which used English as a medium of instruction only in English classes up to end of junior secondary level but which switched to full EMI for some content subjects at senior secondary level (Secondary 4-7).

Given that a successful English-medium education is regarded as a prerequisite for socio-economic advancement in Hong Kong, EMI schools have been much sought after by parents. Schools A, B and C consisted mostly of students who had middle or above-averaged academic achievements. Two of these schools were located in central urban areas while the other one was found in the suburbs. Schools D, E and F were mainly composed of students of middle to low academic achievements. As with participating EMI schools two of the CMI schools were situated in urban areas, while the third one was in the outskirts of the city.

This sample of schools ensured that the qualitative data collected from the interviews were representative of the views of administrators and teachers of two major types of schools in Hong Kong.

### **Data Analysis**

All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and checked by the principal and teacher interviewees before data analysis proceeded to ensure that the study would yield authentic and credible outcomes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Triangulation that incorporated the review of other materials such as school documents, meeting records, teachers' notes and students' work was also employed (Creswell, 2005). All data were coded, categorised and analysed. Verbatim quotations from the teachers regarding their views on the

NSSC were extracted for presentation of findings.

## **FINDINGS**

### **General Views of the Teacher Interviewees on the NSSC**

This section summarises the views of teacher interviewees in six selected participating schools. Findings show that most of those interviewed welcomed the implementation of the NSSC, with those in management positions showing particular enthusiasm. Some were of the opinion that giving students a range of modules to choose from would help motivate their learning, whilst teachers would appreciate the flexibility they hoped they could gain from delivering their presentations. Others expressed their support for the NSSC as the new curriculum should be able to broaden students' horizons, cultivate their minds, enhance their values and attitudes, and increase their exposure to English. They also thought that learning English through task-based learning, language arts and non-language arts activities would be more fun. They further acknowledged the benefits of continuous school-based assessment, saying that it would minimise the risks of determining one's academic future with a one-off examination. Some teachers also appreciated how the reforms allowed students more time for extra-curricular activities. The preparation work carried out in the two major types of schools is presented below.

#### *English-medium Schools*

In their preparation for curriculum change in the Key Learning Area of English Language the three EMI schools showed strong support for change. This support originated in the willingness of senior management to listen to the opinions and requests of the English KLA teachers. In fact, timetabling and the allocation of teaching staff and resources had made the English KLA

the envy of teachers of other KLAs. This larger allocation was expressed by the recruitment of an additional native English teacher (NET) who had expertise in language arts. The teacher was tasked with helping develop the English language curriculum and provide support for material development. Teaching assistants were also hired to conduct remedial classes so as to cater for individual differences in learning. Special arrangements for double- or triple-period sessions per week or cycle and half-day or whole-day activity sessions in the school time table were made so as to allow continuous stretches of time for learning and assessment tasks. These schools adopted a clear language policy which was followed by all teaching staff. English was used not only in English language lessons but lessons of other subjects except Chinese and Chinese History and some subjects such as Physical Education which were thought to be better if rooted in the local culture. Teachers' accounts showed their confidence in creating an English speaking environment when school assemblies, announcements and many of the other activities at school, grade and class levels were conducted in English.

Another shared feature of these schools was the incorporation of some of the language arts and non-language arts electives stipulated in the NSSC in their English language curriculum or introduced as extra-curricular activities at junior secondary level long before the NSSC was due to be implemented. Because of their comparatively high English language proficiency, the students in English medium schools were considered having the ability to appreciate aesthetic emphasis in a language arts curriculum even at junior secondary level and so to a certain extent they were better prepared for learning the elective modules of the NSSC.

However, some teachers encountered difficulties in coming to terms with the NSSC. Owing to the high demand for NSSC courses/seminars/workshops and the limited places available at the initial stage of preparation, teachers had to take turns to be enrolled in these courses. Most of those recommended by the principals for the earlier courses were teaching at senior secondary level. They were experienced teachers who were concerned about their students' achievements in public examinations and so were frustrated by the

proposed changes in pedagogy and the move towards assessment methods which to them favoured the development of students' affective attitudes and performance abilities rather than the language skills needed for examinations and further studies. Two interviewees described how they felt about the change:

My generation of teachers were taught the hard-core skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing when we were students, and we ended up with a high proficiency in English. Following the new curriculum my students will be exposed to a wider variety of text types and contexts. They may be more socially intelligent but whether they'll become high achievers in terms of language development remains to be seen. I don't think these students will get high scores if they take SAT or TOEFL Examinations (Panel Chairperson of English, School B).

The electives aren't challenging to my students. You know they've started learning language arts since Secondary 1. So long as they read or view some texts and express their feelings in a general sense they'll have no problem getting a pass or above in the school-based assessment. They may have no motivation to work hard (Senior secondary teacher, School A).

These remarks show how some senior secondary teachers in EMI schools felt skeptical about the ability of the new curriculum to produce students who had the high level language skills necessary to perform well in public and overseas examinations. It is apparent that teachers in EMI schools were more concerned about the examinations results. They harboured a very strong belief in academic training which prejudicially disfavoured the transformation of pedagogy. They showed particularly strong concerns about the 'decline in language skills' when the NSSC was implemented. They worried about students' readiness for taking public examinations in which 80% of the English KLA papers still demanded good language skills. In general many EMI schools had started preparing for the implementation of the NSSC as some of the language arts components had been in place at junior secondary level. Yet some teachers were doubtful whether the new arrangements would

benefit students' development in language skills in the longer term. They also worried lest the new curriculum would not be challenging enough to those students whose English proficiency was considered middle to high.

#### *Chinese-medium Schools*

Chinese medium schools (Schools D, E and F) thought about preparing for the implementation of the NSSC, but have not had any concrete plans for lesson arrangements and manpower allocation. Teacher interviewees from these schools comprising student cohorts of middle to low language proficiency whose use of English was limited to English language lessons reported that both the language arts and non-language arts modules of the NSSC had not yet been introduced at junior secondary level. In schools having a large population of low academic achievers teachers' instructional formats mainly focus on didactic pedagogy and knowledge inculcation. They thus devote themselves to such objectives as expanding students' vocabulary power and enhancing their structural accuracy instead of exposing them to naturalistic English usage inside and outside class, whilst also trying to develop an interactive and performance-based classroom. As one interviewee argued:

Many of my students are new arrivals from Mainland China. They didn't start learning English until Primary 4 and so they need time to catch up. They might have learned some simple English songs when they were in primary schools, but drama or poems may be too difficult to them. We have inter-class debate competitions but such activities are done in Cantonese, not English. That may explain why in my Secondary 1 and 2 classes, I spend lots of time on revision of grammar so as to strengthen their foundation of the target language (Junior secondary teacher, School F).

Fully supported by the school management, this group of teachers took turns to attend NSSC courses/seminars/workshops commissioned by the Education Bureau, though owing to the limited places available it would still

take quite some time before all could have a chance to receive professional suggestions about implementing the new curriculum. Notwithstanding the school-based nature of the NSSC, without proper training nor the urgent need to work out a unique set of teaching materials, many teachers chose to rely on coursebook materials to be developed by publishers nearer the time of the implementation of the NSSC, and on service providers whom they thought had expertise in the elective modules. One interviewee suggested that these could make up for their inadequate knowledge about the new curriculum and deficiencies in their knowledge of the lesson design needed to implement it or of the related instructional procedures:

We have been told that new modules such as Popular Culture would require specific materials to be designed by teachers. Many of my colleagues might find this difficult as they don't know much about the elective modules. Yet I think new coursebooks will be available before the implementation of the new curriculum, and so teachers won't have to worry so much even though some still haven't had a chance to attend any NSSC courses. Besides, we've applied for funding support from the Education Bureau for implementing the NSSC. If successful we'll invite service providers to conduct English enhancement activities such as drama for students (Senior secondary teacher, School D).

On the whole teachers in these schools were more willing to accept professional guidance and advice than those in the previous three schools. They were well aware of the problems of their students' comparatively low English proficiency, and of how English was used only in English lessons but not in lessons of other subjects in their schools. They also understood the difficulties implicit in the lack of a supportive English language environment with extensive contexts of use. They saw no urgent need to develop school-based materials to implement the elective modules of the new curriculum as this task might have been beyond their own capabilities whilst giving students a product that was too demanding for this first stage of curriculum change. They felt it better to wait for professional suggestions as to what was practical and useful.

In the following sections, the four research questions will be addressed respectively.

### **Teachers' Understanding of the Changes in the New Curriculum**

On the whole, the teachers' narratives revealed their partial understanding of the new curriculum. Some reported having access to the officially espoused curriculum and updated information on the Education Bureau's website or documents. Fewer than half of those interviewed reported having participated in NSSC courses or seminars while others were still waiting for their turn. Of those who had received professional guidance some commented negatively on the content of these courses which mainly provided the theoretical framework of the NSSC, but not much on the lesson design and pedagogy which were considered most useful to them. Others, mainly from the English-medium schools, also expressed some concern about the limited experience of some of the instructors of the NSSC courses in delivering the elective modules in the local context. As two senior secondary school teachers summarised simply:

The two short NSSC courses I've attended focused on theories and concepts of the new curriculum, but not on how to design and teach the elective modules. Furthermore, though strongly promoted by the Education Bureau, school-based assessment wasn't touched upon in the courses. I still can't tell what the new features of the NSSC are (Senior secondary teacher, School E).

The course instructors put efforts into preparing and delivering the course, but as they themselves hadn't implemented the NSSC before, they weren't able to provide us with more concrete information about how to implement the new curriculum, not to mention solving our practical problems. You know we have a lot of questions about the new curriculum. I hope Helpdesk or Hotlines can be set up to provide assistance and support for our concerns (Senior secondary teacher, School C).

Clearly the teachers were in a dilemma as to how they could develop a school-based curriculum that could meet the requirements of the NSSC on the one hand, whilst motivating students and addressing their needs on the other. Although most interviewees seemed keen and eager to accommodate pedagogical changes that would result from their adoption of the new curriculum, the professional suggestions they received were mainly at the conceptual level which failed to inform their classroom practices. Some schools chose to invite professional support by setting up joint projects with local teacher education institutions. These projects initiated such activities as topic-based English language teaching workshops, lesson observation by consultants and peers, or post-lesson discussions for professional development.

Thus the confused consequence of the teachers' dilemma was to hold the proposed curriculum in high regard whilst simultaneously expressing reservations about the adequacy, level and quality of professional support provided by the educational authorities.

### **Factors Encouraging or Constraining the Implementation of the NSSC**

Obviously strong school support is essential for the enactment of change in schools. Perspectives gathered from teachers' interviews reflected unanimous agreement on the significance of senior management support for the allocation of staff with the expertise to teach relevant modules, the reduction of teaching load, the adoption of a clear language policy, flexible lesson and time arrangements, the provision of additional resources, and professional support and development. On the whole teachers in the sample schools appreciated the strength of support coming from the senior management who in most cases were willing to attend to English teachers' suggestions and requests with a dedication that sometimes attracted the envy of the teachers of other content subjects. Yet to some teachers of English the provision of extra resources could mean additional teaching and administration load. The pressure exerted on English panel chairpersons was found to be enormous. At

the same time, because of their non-English language teaching background, few principals claimed to have a thorough understanding of the NSSC and so would assign the job of developing implementation strategies to the curriculum coordinator.

Notwithstanding their stewardship role when faced with large-scale curriculum realignment, many curriculum coordinators were happy to rely on the information and instructional arrangements provided by the panel chairpersons of English, who were usually considered the most resourceful people when it came to understanding pedagogy and developing teaching kits for students, while the rest of the teachers in the English Department were happy to be led by them. A panel chairperson from an EMI school voiced her grievances about the heavy administrative load that this situation caused:

The school authority has always been supportive of the English panel, but the workload of managing a panel with 15 teachers to prepare for the implementation of the new curriculum is terribly heavy for me. You know two-thirds of the teachers haven't attended any NSSC seminar yet. On top of my regular teaching and administrative duties, I have to provide professional support for them, edit their teaching kits, liaise with teachers of other subjects to promote cross-curricular collaboration. These additional duties are time-consuming and nerve breaking. Two of my predecessors chose to step down and give up their posts as senior teachers one after the other last year. I'm not sure how long I can cope with the pressure and huge workload (Panel Chairperson of English, School B).

Her grievances were echoed by the senior teacher of the school:

I appreciate the strong support the principal has given us. However, I think the proactive approach this school is taking has pushed us teachers too hard. Taking charge of the large number of extra-curricular activities after school and attending professional development courses take up much time. Conducting school-based assessment is even more time-consuming. Teachers have to assess each class of thirty-five students' oral presentations individually and then give them feedback. These usually have to be done after school. I hope the school authority would be more sympathetic

towards our heavy workload (Junior secondary teacher, School B).

Thus grievances concerning the much heavier teaching and administration load induced by some schools' extensive preparation work for the new curriculum were clearly voiced. Another possible factor constraining the enactment of change was the teachers' frustration at their limited exposure to the language arts and non-language arts modules. Most reported their lack of knowledge about English Literature and training in teaching these areas. Those who had participated in 'one shot workshops, or short burst and quick fix events' (Day, 1993; Skyes, 1996) also complained that these had done little to prepare them for the transformation of pedagogy.

A teacher said:

Though I was trained to teach English and have been teaching this subject for 15 years, my major was not literature or language arts. So I have limited knowledge about them. Though I've attended the 18-hr course on Learning English through Language Arts, with so many topics crammed in such a short course I don't think I'm confident enough to deliver the language arts modules. There're one or two colleagues who have expertise in teaching drama and poetry but because of their tight teaching schedule I dare not seek help from them (Senior secondary teacher, School D).

Obviously, a strong belief in the importance of having the expertise in the elective modules and resentment at the additional workload could be unfavourable for the enactment of change in schools. Even in EMI schools in which some elective modules had been incorporated in the junior secondary curriculum, the cross-curricular collaboration strongly advocated in the NSSC still appeared relatively weak and the communication among teachers of different KLAs was loose.

### **How Well the Senior Management and Teachers Feel They can Implement the NSSC in the English KLA**

Basically, principals' interviews highlighted their eagerness to push for

advancement work. Most principals were confident that their schools could offer a sufficient selection of elective modules and make flexible use of learning time such as the arrangements of more double/triple period instead of single period English lessons or outings and visits to promote language learning. They also felt able to create a language-rich and supportive environment, promoting a harmonious school culture, appreciating the progress teachers had made, whilst setting up a valid school-based assessment (SBA) mechanism, etc. As the principal of one of the sampled schools said:

I think we can implement the NSSC well, because the senior management has agreed to give the English KLA as much support as possible. This year their requests for resources to conduct some new language activities for students, such as a reading campaign, readers' cafe, Kaleidoscope Zone, and school-based seminars for teachers from sister schools were all entertained (Principal, School C).

Compared with the principals the teachers at the frontline were less optimistic. Some teachers revealed a hesitant and sometimes sceptical attitude, particularly in schools dominated by low academic achievers. This attitude also seemed to reflect their concerns about whether their school would actually launch comprehensive preparation work or make substantial progress in curriculum change. Feeling constrained by the limitations of their students the teachers in these schools were not ambitious enough to set a clear direction for development. They only aimed to strengthen students' structural accuracy rather than making professional attempts to reorganise the content for the new curriculum, and chose to count on professional advice provided by service providers and materials prepared by publishers, thinking that these would be available before the implementation of the NSSC. A teacher made this remark:

Though it's still more than a year from now I'm not confident in being able to implement the new curriculum well. The students' English ability is poor and they aren't motivated to learn. Only a few of my colleagues in the

English KLA have attended courses of the NSSC. We may strengthen the extensive reading scheme at junior secondary level in the next academic year but aren't able to do much in terms of the new elective modules and school-based assessment. Just hope consultants could be hired to run courses for us and new coursebooks for the NSSC will be published soon (Junior secondary teacher, School E).

In general, interview findings revealed how the senior management and teachers had quite different perceptions of the NSSC whilst their receptivity varied also, possibly due to 'pragmatic concerns'. Notwithstanding the strong support and additional resources injected into the English KLA, teachers manifested some quite strong resentments particularly in respect of self-doubts about whether they could cope with the paradigm shifts in pedagogy and assessment. They also felt burdened by the workload from having to prepare for the implementation of the new curriculum. For example, they faced increased seminar and workshop attendance, the preparation of teaching kits, the conduct of extra-curricular activities, not to mention the administration of school-based assessment.

### **The Possible Effects of Change on the Senior Management, Teachers and Students**

Teachers not only appreciated the support given by the senior management of their schools, but also had high hopes for how change might affect change for the better on people at the executive level. The hopes for change included setting out a clear language policy at senior secondary level with appropriate language assessment strategies and provision of additional resources as well as professional support and development for teachers. Their views were echoed by the principals, who also expressed their interest in assuring effective timetabling and staff-allocation arrangements. Despite their optimism about the possible effects of change on the senior executives, the teacher interviewees expressed unease over cross-KLA arrangements. Those in CMI schools with students of medium or low academic ability were

particularly worried by the difficulties their students had in the medium of instruction in content subject lessons being switched from their mother tongue to English at senior secondary level.

When asked how the change would affect the teachers, the principal interviewees expressed their eagerness to see teachers broadening their understanding of the relationship between language and other subject content while liaising more with teachers of other subjects. They also voiced an interest in seeing teachers extend their understanding of how to assess learning and use assessment to promote learning. For their part, the teachers were less enthusiastic about these possibilities, though some were taken with the idea of further broadening their knowledge and practice of language teaching through the use of language arts and debating. A teacher described her concern about senior management's high expectations:

The principal and the curriculum coordinator have been positive about the possibility of our implementing the NSSC well, and the likely impact of change on us the teachers. He reported in the last staff meeting that our school had applied to the Education Bureau for 3 million dollars for implementing the new curriculum and if approved, this would give us a lot of resources. Yet I think abundant resources won't solve all the problems. Neither the teachers nor the students are well prepared for the changing roles they'll have to play in the new curriculum (Junior secondary teacher, School D).

Despite the high regard they held for the new curriculum, both the principal and teacher interviewees, in particular the latter, were less certain about the possible effects of change on the students in their schools. A few principals in schools with students of above-averaged academic achievement mentioned the possibility of broadening and deepening the students' language competencies. The principals of such schools also expressed confidence in their students' making greater use of English and in further developing their acquisition of learning skills, positive values and attitudes. They also hoped their students would take more responsibility for their own learning. Yet the teachers' accounts did not reflect these views. Most of them

had reservations about whether changes in the curriculum would affect students positively.

Overall, both the school leaders and teachers were optimistic about the possible effects of change on the senior management who were preparing for the implementation of the NSSC. Some teachers expressed their appreciation of the more visionary school executives and acknowledged the aspiration of the managerial personnel to provide strong and concrete professional support and guidance. When it came to assessing the possible effects of change on teachers, the principals and other levels of management were perhaps unsurprisingly more positive than the teachers themselves. In fact, some of the teachers thought it might be difficult to cope with the large-scale curriculum realignment and pedagogical rearrangement. As far as the likely impact of change on students was concerned, most interviewees were pessimistic. This was particularly the case for teachers who acknowledged their students' limitations. Fortunately, however, they all shared a more constructive attitude when it came to pushing forward the decision to change.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of interviews reveal that most of the school personnel, including principals and teachers, support the implementation of the NSSC. The teacher interviewees were in general concerned about how to prepare their students well for implementation of the new curriculum. On the whole, the perspectives gathered from school principals and teachers have shed light on our understanding of the influence of teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum, school personnel's receptivity towards it, and teacher preparation on the enactment of change in schools. Understanding such comments can enhance the effectiveness of curriculum implementation in English KLA and possibly in other contexts.

### **Teachers' In-Depth Understanding of the New Curriculum Would Improve the Quality and Relevance of the Schools' Advancement Work**

Teachers' misconceptions about the nature of a curriculum are always a barrier to that curriculum's implementation (Carless, 2003; Clark et al., 1999; Li, 1998). The study reveals that fewer than half of those interviewed reported their having attended NSSC courses or seminars, while the rest were still waiting for their turn. Among those who had received professional advice many found too much weighting was given to understanding the concepts of the new curriculum, with far fewer opportunities for enhancing their practical pedagogical competence. Without the ability to link the newly learned theories to appropriate instructional arrangements in the classroom, many of them were still unsure how to make sensitive response to students' needs and were unprepared for the anticipated changes in their role as teachers from knowledge transmitters to facilitators. Those who were not majored in literature or language arts and had not yet received formal professional guidance were the hardest hit. Some acknowledged their limited ability when it came to presenting the newly introduced elective modules, and declared the language-arts modules to be particularly problematic. Others chose to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and were pleased to stick to a textbook-dependent and transmission-oriented approach to classroom teaching in this early stage of change.

Yet the teachers' worries about having to implement the new curriculum soon would likely be alleviated if more training courses or seminars could be offered for all teachers and not just the lucky few. In addition to courses and seminars that might focus more on the concepts and principles of the design of the new curriculum, workshops could be arranged to enable teachers to align the practice with the views of teaching and learning expressed by the new curriculum components. Such workshops could help develop the teachers' ability to prepare teaching kits, to be reflective on all occasions, and to compare their work and beliefs with those of others who are teaching the same class or a similar class. Video records of successful and effective

instructional experience, collaborative inquiry by teachers in the same school or in the same subjects across schools, mentoring, and the production of teaching kits by the educational authorities could also be helpful to improve the quality and relevance of the schools' advancement work.

### **School Personnel's Receptivity Towards the New Curriculum will be Enhanced If They are Convinced of the Good Values of The New Curriculum to Students**

When an innovation is incompatible with the teachers' belief systems their receptivity will be affected and some form of resistance or negotiation of the innovation is likely to occur (Karavas-Doukas, 1995). This study shows that notwithstanding their keen and strong support for the NSSC, many teachers expressed strong reservations on the grounds that the new curriculum would not improve student language performance and achievement. Those teaching in schools comprising student cohorts of high ability tended to believe that an over-emphasis on performance-based curriculum might weaken their students' examination performance.

Teachers teaching in schools dominated by low academic achievers found the new components too demanding for their students. Most were not ambitious enough to conduct poetry or debating activities or to nurture high order thinking, but chose to adhere to a grammar-oriented approach so as to enhance students' academic use of language. The principals were keener and more enthusiastic than the teachers when it came to pushing forward the curriculum change, however. For them the anticipated impact of the new curriculum on the school leaders, teachers and students was positive. Some were choosing to push through the changes in a relatively aggressive manner and were attempting to maximise the teachers' instructional effectiveness in a rather short period of time.

Such internal variations in the schools will probably constrain the enactment of change. More opportunities for professional guidance should be provided to convince teachers of the positive values of the new curriculum to

students. A feasible work plan for curriculum development needs to be carried out by the managerial personnel step by step so as to alleviate the burden on teachers, most of whom have been struggling to cope with the new demand. A consensus between the school executives and teachers needs to be reached on different areas of coordination.

### **School Managements' Appreciation of Teachers' Progress Made Would Facilitate the Curriculum Advancement Work**

Hong Kong language teachers are acknowledged to have heavy workload much of which comprises meaningless tasks that do not have any direct impact on their pedagogical effectiveness and which may reduce the time available for lesson preparation (Storey et al., 1997). This study further unveils a constraining factor of enactment of change in schools. In the process of curriculum transformation, teachers not only had to carry out their regular teaching and administrative duties during school hours, but also attend NSSC courses and seminars, develop teaching kits for the new curriculum, conduct school-based assessment to individual students, and also organise new extra curricular activities to enhance the language proficiency of the students. These additional duties usually take place after school hours, and are one of the root causes for teachers' resentments against the new curriculum. Panel chairpersons of English KLA are the hardest hit. The teachers' heavy workload has hindered the development of cross-curricular collaboration work, an initiative strongly promoted by the educational authorities. Nonetheless, more and more teachers felt they were being stretched to the limit.

To dispel such resentment the managerial personnel should recognise the importance of professional support, especially for those teachers who are not majored in Literature. The unfamiliarity of the new elective modules requires a substantial emphasis on material preparation. Peer support and collaboration should be promoted. Teachers' progress made should be appreciated, and empathy towards teachers' huge workload induced by the curriculum

advancement work should be shown.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study show that schools with students of high or medium ability seemed to be more positive in terms of their perceptions and receptivity at the initial stage of change. In preparing for the implementation of the new curriculum, they have taken one big step forward by incorporating some of the new elective modules into their junior secondary curriculum. Yet many teachers have expressed some reservations despite their recognition of, and support for the reform initiatives. Some are doubtful about how well the new curriculum will equip students with the hard core language skills which will enable them to excel in public examinations. Others are bewildered by the heavy workload induced by the advance work such as attending courses, designing teaching kits, conducting school-based assessment and organising extra-curricular activities, etc.

In contrast, schools dominated by cohorts of medium or low academic ability students appeared to be resistant to the shift in pedagogical arrangements. To the teachers the new curriculum demands high level of language proficiency from its students. Yet they feel discouraged by variations in student abilities in the same class, their own deficiencies in designing materials, poor knowledge of instructional techniques for delivering the new elective modules and the lack of a favourable English environment. This discouragement is impeding the adoption of a teaching style which gives more emphasis to interpersonal intelligence and higher order cognitive skills. Most teachers adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and are more receptive to the professional suggestions and textbook materials with which publishers are responding to the new curriculum. Some are happy to be passive and loyal followers of the senior management, and still share a constructive attitude towards curriculum reform.

All the principal interviewees expressed their unreserved agreement with

the spirit of the new curriculum. Compared with the frontline teachers they were more optimistic about the benefits that the new curriculum would bring to the school, the teachers and possibly the students. Some took a proactive stance by pushing forward the curriculum change within a short period of time. Many a time such speedy actions have resulted in an administrative inability to ensure full compliance with curriculum restructuring and with the insufficient development of a feasible work plan for the smooth implementation of the NSSC.

Experiences of change over the past decades have revealed that reform cannot be achieved without actively engaging the hearts and minds of teachers (Carless, 2005). The professional development of teachers, whilst being central to reform, needs to go further than 'delivery models' comprising courses, workshops or other such events (Knight, 2002). What usually motivates teachers is not mandated change, but 'making a difference' in the lives of students they teach (Day, 1999). So far the Hong Kong reforms have imposed an increasing burden on teachers, and in this respect are not unlike those being implemented in other parts of the world. There is a danger of change in rhetoric failing to lead to substantive improvement. A more definitive verdict on the effectiveness of the NSSC in Hong Kong is unlikely to be available until the new curriculum is actually implemented in 2009.

In conclusion, the challenges that school personnel face in their preparation for implementing the NSSC require further investigation and collaborative efforts if they are to be addressed.

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## APPENDIX I

### **Interview Schedule for Principals / Curriculum Coordinators / English Panel Chairpersons / Teachers**

Aim: To collect data on stakeholders' knowledge, understanding and perceptions of the new senior curriculum and assessment for the English language education key learning area.

**Preliminary information (If the interviewee is a school principal, please ask questions 3, 4 and 5 only)**

1. What subjects & level(s) do you teach?
2. What was your major subject of study?
3. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
4. What were the courses or workshops, etc. related to curriculum reform you attended in the last 12 months?
5. What is your role in the NSSC? (implementer, coordinator, etc.)

### **Perceptions and expectations**

#### Part A – Understanding changes in the NSSC

1. How did you learn about the NSSC? Have you read the draft NSSC curriculum framework sent to school?
2. How well do you think you understand the NSSC?
3. What, in your view, are the most significant new features of the English language curriculum in NSSC? How is it different from the current curriculum?
4. Do you see these new features as a continuation from the principles of the P1-S3 English Language Curriculum?

Part B - Factors encouraging and/or constraining the implementation of the NSSC

1. What do you think are crucial factors that will facilitate the implementation of the NSSC?
2. Do these facilitative factors exist in your school?  
(If the answer to the above question is negative) How do you think the implementation of NSSC in your school will be affected by the absence of these factors? What do you think should / can be done to resolve this problem?
3. What are the possible difficulties that your school will encounter in implementing the NSSC in 2009? Please describe the three most significant difficulties. What do you think should be done to cope with these difficulties?
4. Are there any staff development programmes (e.g. lesson study, leadership training, language arts assessment) which are ongoing, or have recently been completed in your school? Do you think these projects will help the implementation of NSSC in your school? Why or why not?

Part C – How well the senior management and teachers feel they can implement the NSSC in the English learning area?

1. When the NSSC is implemented in your school, what do you think the senior management of your school will very likely be able to do? What makes you think so?
2. When the NSSC is implemented in your school, what do you think the senior management of your school will very unlikely be able to do? What makes you think so?
3. When the NSSC is implemented in your school, will all the elective modules be offered? If yes, will the teachers have relevant expertise to teach these modules? If not, why not? Do you think the number of modules to be offered by your school is enough? If not, how to solve the problem?
4. When the NSSC is implemented in your school, what of these do you think the teachers of your school will very likely be able to do? What makes you think so?

5. When the NSSC is implemented in your school, what of these do you think the teachers of your school will very unlikely be able to do? What makes you think so?

Part D – The effect of change on the senior management, teachers and learners

1. Which particular perceived effects of change do you think require immediate attention in your school?
2. Will the school's perceived effects of change at different levels form a basis for the staff professional development programme? If yes, in what way?
3. Will special groups/teams be established to handle the effects of change the school perceives? Who will usually be chosen to lead the different teams/groups?
4. Will the effects of change the school perceives form part of the school's strategic plan/agenda/vision? If yes, in what way?
5. Is there a mechanism in school to monitor the cycles of development and revision, and to take care of the professional and psychological needs of the staff involved? If yes, what is the mechanism?
6. Will the school communicate its perceived effects of change with other stakeholders, e.g. parents, EMB, to solicit understanding and support? If yes, how?
7. Do you think the changes brought by the implementation of the NSSC can address students' needs? If yes, in what way?