A Literature Review of the Feasibility of Enacting Curriculum Leadership in Chinese Schools

Yiming Shan

School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China
Email: symhelen@hotmail.com

Abstract

With the implementation of the New Curriculum Reform in China, both schools and teachers are empowered with more right and autonomy in making instructional decisions. However, previous literature related to teachers' curriculum leadership (CL) remains sparse. The purpose of this paper is to explore the feasibility of investigating how curriculum leadership is enacted from the perspectives of teacher leaders. It employed literature review with the Chinese studies related to teachers' engagement in CL and found the necessity of examining the issues of feasibility of enacting curriculum leadership, which focuses on teacher as the leader under Chinese scenario.

Keywords

Teacher Leaders, Curriculum Leadership, Feasibility

1. Introduction

In 2001, the Guideline of Curriculum Reform for Basic Education (Trail) was publicised by the Ministry of Education of China, which led to a new round of basic education reform in China. As Cheng (as cited in Qian & Walker, 2013: p. 304) stated, this reform was "an overhaul of the fundamental values, beliefs and structures underpinning school curriculum". With the implementation of the curriculum reform, teacher's role changed from the enactor or follower to the one who played leadership functions in curriculum decision-making. The following sections will introduce the background and the significance of the study.

In order to sustain high economic growth and strengthen global competitiveness, the Chinese government committed to the education reform with an attempt to put a great premium on the creation and wide distribution of know-

ledge and skills (Li & Ni, 2012; Law, 2014). For one thing, this reform led to the changing patterns of management and governance in the organisation, and more autonomy was delegated to the institutional level (Wang, 2012). For another, with the transformation of curriculum administration in the education reform which was launched in 2001, teacher's role gradually transferred from the follower of "the decisions of the school principal and heads of subject departments" (Law & Wan, 2006: p. 63) to the one who took up "an even more central and leading role in making curriculum decisions" (Law & Wan, 2006: p. 62).

Recently, because of the decentralisation of curriculum decision-making, teachers were empowered to have more and more opportunities in curriculum design. As Law & Wan (2006) noted that teacher took up "an even more central and leading role in making curriculum decisions in schools" (p. 62). Moreover, Handler (2010) stated that "educational literature, theory, and reform trends had long promoted putting teachers in a central role in curricular design" (p. 32). Therefore, probing issues relating teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership seems significant.

Furthermore, many journals which discussed curriculum leadership put focus on examining principal's behaviour in curriculum leadership rather than teacher's engagement (e.g., Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson, & Mcinaman, 1999; Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012; Law, Galton, & Wan, 2007). It could be noted that discussing teacher's participation in curriculum leadership was "an important topic" (Ho, 2010: p. 613) as well, since it could not only help organisational leaders know more about teacher's role, but also assist teachers to obtain related knowledge of curriculum leadership.

Last but not least, from viewing the Chinese journals which examined curriculum leadership, it was found that journals relating teacher's engagement in curriculum leadership took small percentage of the publications since a large proportion of the previous studies relates to exploring the principals' CL (e.g., Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012; Law, Galton, & Wan, 2007). And nearly 70% of these journals made the conclusions and arguments without conducting any kind of research and providing any research data. Therefore, making an attempt at getting insight into issues relating teacher participation in curriculum leadership could offer empirical data and instructional implications for educators to understand more about the curriculum leadership in Chinese teaching context.

The following parts will make the literature review by examining the conceptual framework of leadership and curriculum leadership.

2. Literature Review

With the purpose of exploring the feasibility of enacting curriculum leadership in Chinese schools and focusing on examining teacher's role in curriculum decision-making, four areas of literature will be viewed in this part. Initially, concepts of leadership will be introduced. In the second section, definition of curriculum leadership and the characteristics of effective curriculum leadership will

be examined. The third section will discuss the necessity of enacting curriculum leadership. Finally, previous studies of curriculum leadership in Chinese context will be illustrated.

3. Leadership

Leadership refers to "the exercise of influence over others' practices" (Chiristie & Lingard, as cited in Ritchie, Tobin, Roth, & Carambo, 2007: p. 152). According to Elliott et al.'s (1999) statements, leadership involves "a dynamic interplay of school-related factors and personal factors" (p. 171) and it is viewed as "the activity by which the system goals are translated into educational programmes" (p. 172). To be specific, a person who takes the leadership role is anyone who has influences on others and groups within the organisation.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in learning orgasination. As Nashashibi and Watters (2003) described, leadership was "associated with the ability of an individual to influence others to work together effectively to achieve common goals" (p. 48). Furthermore, Cummings (2011) put forward that leadership was "critical to improving curriculum efforts" (p. 8). Harris (as cited in Law & Wan, 2006: p. 63) mentioned that leadership "contributed to the school's distinctive culture and community". It can be concluded that leadership is the process which influences the followers, the achievement of the goals and the development of an organisation. Nowadays, reviews of the educational leadership literature tend to focus on transformational leadership, which "represents a move to a position where leadership is a shared activity" (Elliott et al., 1999: p. 173). Moreover, Hopkins (2003) put forward that the focus of transformational leadership was "the people involved, their relationships" and the transformation of individual's "feelings, attitudes and beliefs" (p. 56).

According to the above mentioned definitions, a teacher could be a leader if he or she could collaboratively work with other teachers and/or create opportunities for peers to improve educational practice. Because transforming a school into "better learning organisation" could "only be furthered by teachers" (Hamzah, Yakop, Nordin, & Rahman, 2011: p. 59), the following section will focus on discussing curriculum leadership in which teacher is engaged as the leader.

3.1. Curriculum Leadership

Recently, there is a call for teacher participation in curriculum decision-making (Law, Galton, & Wan, 2007; Wiles, 2009; Elliott et al., 1999). The studies of curriculum leadership turn the focus towards the "the professional role of teachers in making curriculum" (Law et al., 2007: p. 156). The following sections will examine the definition of curriculum leadership and the characteristics of effective curriculum leadership.

3.2. Definition of Curriculum Leadership

As Law and Wan (2006) described, curriculum leadership was a "loose term" (p.

62). This term was defined by many researchers, which mainly fall into two categories.

Initially, there are some definitions concerning who takes on the leader role in curriculum leadership. Bradley (2004) described that curriculum leadership was "often a role within a broader administrative position" (p. 1), which could be taken by the principal, the administrator or the teacher. Nowadays, curriculum leadership "signals a new focus for teacher leaders" (Klein, as cited in Cummings, 2011: p. 8), which "characterises the changing conception of the role of teachers in curriculum decision making" (Loucks-Horsley, as cited in Law & Wan, 2006: p. 62). Moreover, Law et al. (2007) mentioned that teacher participation was a necessary condition in decentralised curriculum decision-making in curriculum leadership.

Secondly, some definitions focus on articulating the specific responsibilities and the administrative duties of curriculum leadership. Referring the administrative duties, Nashashibi and Watters (2003) noted that curriculum leadership integrated the strategic goals and the shared vision of the organisation into "all areas of work and disciplines" (p. 8). It encompassed "a wide range of decision making processes and activities in schools and classrooms" (Law & Wan, 2006: p. 62), such as "goal setting and planning; monitoring, reviewing and developing the staff of the school; culture building; and allocating resources" (Lee & Dimmock, 1999: p. 457). Concerning the responsibilities, Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland and Elliott (1998) described that curriculum leadership actions included "any initiative that teachers may undertake to encourage more effective learning and teaching" (p. 76), "irrespective of whether they are conscious of their efforts or not (Elliott et al., 1999: p. 175)". To be specific, the responsibilities of curriculum leadership "extend beyond teaching practice to the sociocultural and political aspects of educational content decisions" (Ylimaki, 2012: p. 305).

In general, a teacher as the leader who is engaged in the curriculum decision-making is the mainstream of transformational leadership. Next part will discuss the characteristics of this effective curriculum leadership.

3.3. Effective Curriculum Leadership

According to the categorised definitions discussed above, the following sections will examine the traits of effective curriculum leadership from two aspects.

Concerning the role engaged in curriculum leadership, a teacher as the leader should "have a desire for greater participation" in "curriculum, pedagogy and assessment" (Ho, 2010: p. 614) as well as the "strong ego and confidence in her importance to the success to the school curriculum" (Bradley, 2004: p. 8). Furthermore, leaders in effective curriculum leadership should "have a strong disciplinary background in social change theories as well as organisational theories often used in educational administration training programs" (Ylimaki & Brunner, 2011). In addition, leaders should possess the "communication skills to explain all aspects of curriculum to audiences of different levels of sophistication" (Bradley, 2004: p. 9).

Referring the responsibilities and administrative duties, effective curriculum leadership should be transformational (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000). Vann (2010) mentioned that the transformational leadership style was "the most appropriate leadership style to use", since it had "charisma, consideration and creativity" (p. 6). Ho (2010: p. 623) stated, there was a need to "involve staff in the process of decision making in order to make them aware of their own professional roles and responsibilities in contributing to curriculum and pedagogy". Further, Stark, Brigges and Rowl-Poplawski (2002) noted, teacher leader should "propose, advocate for, and coordinate a process of regular, thoughtful examination of whether the curriculum is meeting its intended goals" (p. 347). Last but not least, teacher should "ensure that the decisions taken are based on the needs and interests of young children" (Ho, 2010: p. 622). As Law et al. (2007) mentioned that every teacher should be responsible for making curriculum decisions for their students in their specific context.

3.4. The Necessity of Using Teacher as the Leader in Curriculum Leadership

Silins, Mulford and Zarins (2002) claimed that "the school as a learning organisation was defined by the level and quality of leadership that characterised the everyday work of the school" (p. 634). Curriculum leadership has close relationship with the development of learning organisation. The following parts will discuss the necessity of using teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership from three aspects: school improvement, teacher development and student development.

Transformational leadership plays a significant role in organisational development, since it could not only "foster the growth of organisational members and", but also enhance the "organisational learning, organisational effectiveness, and organisational culture" (Ross & Gray, 2006: p. 180). Law et al. (2007) mentioned that teacher took participation in the curriculum leadership could bring benefits for school's improvement. Ritchie et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative research with a high school in the USA and found that curriculum leadership could create and sustain educational accomplishment. Further, Ho (2010: p. 621) put forward that teacher's collaborative work in the curriculum leadership "forms part of the foundation of a good school".

Meanwhile, curriculum leadership is helpful for teacher development. Law et al. (2007) claimed that teacher participation in curriculum leadership could enhance "the transformational experiences for the professional development of teachers" (p. 144), since when teachers were engaged in curriculum decision-making, they would obtain more chances to communicate with peers and they would have more opportunities to share knowledge and skills with colleagues. Ho (2010: p. 621) stated that "teachers who took a more active role in curriculum and pedagogical decision making were more accountable for the quality of teaching and learning". As mentioned by Katzenmeyer and Moller (as cited in Elliott et al., 1999: p. 178), teachers collaborating with peers were "effec-

tive in influencing others".

Last but not least, curriculum leadership could enhance student's learning outcomes. Law et al. (2007: p. 155) stated that teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership had "substantial professional skills and knowledge about what and how to make curriculum decisions most suitable" for student learning. Macpherson et al. (1998: p. 76) found that curriculum leadership actions could encourage more effective learning after conducting a mixed method research with 2500 teachers in Queensland. Furthermore, Handler (2010: p. 33) claimed that teacher participation in curriculum leadership would "help teacher align content with student needs".

In conclusion, teacher as the leader in the curriculum leadership plays vital role in the development of learning organisation since it could not only motivate participants but also facilitate effective teaching and learning. Next part will examine the previous Chinese studies on teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership.

3.5. Chinese Studies on Teacher as the Leader in Curriculum Leadership

With the implementation of curriculum reform for basic education since 2001, the decentralisation of curriculum decision-making became the tendency in leadership and teachers were empowered to have more and more opportunities in making curriculum decision. Many Chinese educators began to discuss issues relating teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership.

This section will mainly review these previous studies, which have research dada and findings, with the purpose of extending the understanding of the findings elicited by researchers and getting implications from previous Chinese studies.

Fan, Wang and Tang (2007). Fan, Wang and Tang (2007) investigated teachers and principals' perceptions of curriculum leadership in three secondary schools in China by sending questionnaires to 74 participants and interviewing 6 principals and 3 curriculum leaders. The results of the study indicated that 56.9% participants have little or even no understanding of the concept of curriculum leadership, whereas 83.9% respondents expressed their eager in obtaining knowledge and skills concerning curriculum leadership. And 84.4% participants acknowledged that the teacher rather than the principal should take the central role in curriculum leadership.

Liu and Kang (2012). A case study with a group of teachers in a primary school was conducted by Liu and Kang (2012). From interviewing with the teacher participants, it was found that teachers were not familiar with what curriculum leadership was and they did not believe that teacher could take the central role in curriculum decision-making. The finding showed that teachers were lack of related knowledge of curriculum leadership.

Wang (2008). Wang (2008) conducted a research on curriculum leadership at the primary and secondary schools in China. The purpose of his study was to

probe people's perceptions on teacher as the leader of curriculum leadership. He sent questionnaires to 728 participants, which included 67 principals and 661 teachers. From the research findings, he discovered that 63.7% participants had strong interests in participating curriculum decision-making and 56.8% teachers show positive attitudes towards taking the leader role in curriculum leadership. However, 90.5% teachers admitted that they were not empowered of making curriculum decision.

Zhang and Fu (2013). Zhang and Fu (2013) collected data from one primary school by using questionnaires. From the 167 teacher questionnaires, it was found that 63% teachers showed their interests in curriculum leadership. However, 82.4% participants acknowledged that they are not quite familiar with the issues relating curriculum leadership and they seldom take part in curriculum leadership.

In conclusion, these previous studies are significant since they provide the practical implications. Three issues could be extracted from these studies. Firstly, most teachers hold positive attitudes towards empowering teacher of the power to engage in curriculum decision-making process. This is a necessary premise of enacting curriculum leadership, which appoints teacher as the leader, in Chinese schools. Secondly, it should be noticed that the concept relating teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership is quite new for most of the teachers. Therefore, it is necessary for them to be trained with the skills and knowledge of curriculum leadership. On the other hand, these studies have limitations. As for Wang's (2008) and Zhang & Fu's (2013) studies, the researchers only conducted the study by using questionnaire. According to Oppenheim's (1992: p. 102) statement, participants have "no opportunity to correct misunderstandings or to probe, or to offer explanations" in the questionnaire. Therefore, only adopting questionnaire as the data collection method has potential disadvantages. Concerning Liu & Kang's (2012) research, they only analysed one primary school by adopting interview which might not be representative to other organisational context. Further, all these previous studies just give the percentage without any detailed analysis and did not discuss the importance of curriculum leadership.

Apart from the issues extracted from these practical studies, the unique characteristics of teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership are discussed by other educators. First, Xiong and Zhong (2010) presented that the school-based curriculum development tradition in Chinese context hindered teacher's engagement in curriculum decision-making. Second, some Chinese educators (e.g., He & Li, 2013; Lu, 2011; Wang & Zheng, 2013; Xiong & Zhong, 2010) put forward that teacher should take the central and leading role in curriculum leadership in schools, since teachers are the ones who are familiar with students' needs and they are the ones who are often involved in the affairs of designing curriculum, implementing curriculum and making curriculum decisions. Third, researchers (e.g., Sun, 2011; Zheng, 2007; Wang & Kang, 2013) suggested that teacher as the curriculum leader should demonstrate "a thorough understanding" (Cardno, 2006: p. 455) of curriculum. Fourth, educators (e.g., Han, 2012;

Wang, 2008; Zhang & Xie, 2012; Zheng, 2007) indicated that a teacher as the curriculum leader should be collaborative in working with peers. Last but not least, Wang (2013) noted that there should be the teacher training programmes which focused on introducing issues relating curriculum decision-making and curriculum leadership.

In general, the Chinese previous studies on teacher engagement in curriculum leadership showed the essence of the central role of teachers in curriculum decisions-making within the tradition of school-based curriculum development. Further, these studies presented the urgency and necessity of the transformation in the curriculum leadership from the centralised form to the decentralised one.

4. Conclusion

The term curriculum leadership, which is quite "different and unique from other educational leadership functions" (Bradley, 2004: p. 5), has been viewed as the focus of recent studies on leadership. Since the decentralisation of curriculum in school-based context, teacher engages more actively in curriculum decision making process.

This article introduces the concepts of leadership, curriculum leadership, the necessity of enacting curriculum leadership and Chinese previous studies on curriculum leadership. From the discussion, it could be concluded that teacher as the curriculum leader in curriculum leadership could yield significant benefits for the school improvement, teacher development and student development. From viewing the Chinese previous studies relating teacher as the leader in curriculum leadership, it was found that although teachers showed strong curiosity, interests and motivation in engaging in the curriculum decision-making and taking the leader role of curriculum leadership, they had little skills or knowledge of curriculum leadership and seldom were empowered. And there are some limitations in the previous studies, such as the case they chosen was not representative, research methodology had the bias and many studies were conducted without research data. Therefore, examining the issues of feasibility of enacting curriculum leadership, which focuses on teacher as the leader, under Chinese scenario seems significant and pivotal.

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