Principals and Teachers’ perceptions of School policy as a key element of School-Based Management in Hong Kong Primary Schools

Hon Keung Yau
City University of Hong Kong
China

Alison Lai Fong Cheng
University of Leicester
United Kingdom

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how effective is the implementation of school policy in SBM in Hong Kong primary schools. A qualitative method of interviews is adopted in this study. Nine case studies were conducted. A total of 9 principals and 9 teachers responded to the interviews. The findings show that a clearly defined school policy should be developed in order to achieve the successful implementation of school-based management in primary schools.

In the 1980s, the system of relatively uniform centralized budget resource allocation to schools was judged by many to have impaired the achievement of equality, efficiency, liberty and choice. Thus, school-based management was suggested, with lump sum budgets allocated to schools, together with a high degree of community involvement in school decision making and the fostering of diversity within schools to ensure choice (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). School-based management (SBM) was intended to encourage positive participation from teacher, principal and parent representatives on the school board committee (Yadollah, 2006; Cheung and Kan, 2009). This attracted groups of people with different interests to participate in school policy decision-making. SBM also promised greater freedom and authority for principals to exercise their leadership (McInerney, 2003). Schools also allowed professional teachers to express their opinions and take up greater responsibility for decision-making. Teachers became more like partners rather than employees. Teachers also acted as a facilitator and coordinator to reinvent the organizational culture in school (Cheng, 2004). SBM could provide the necessary conditions such as transparency (Cheung and Kan, 2009), autonomy and flexibility in making decisions (Cheng and Mok, 2007). This was intended to help the employees develop the school and strengthen their sense of belonging to the school.

In the 1970s and 1980s, student performance was judged to be far from adequate in Hong Kong. Wong (1995a) argued that this was partly due to the tightening of administrative and financial controls over the schools caused by the proliferation of Education Department’s policies over the years. The Education Department published the School Management Initiatives in 1991 and suggested that all schools should implement school-based management by 2000: thus schools would change from the external control model to that of decentralized authority.

Different features of SBM are being implemented in Hong Kong schools to assure quality. However, experience suggests that the policy of School Management Initiative has created many implementation problems resulting in negative perceptions of SBM. It appears that time...
is inadequate for principal preparation and teacher training programmes to prepare a body of professionals to cope with the changes required, and the Education Department does not sufficiently promote school management effectiveness in schools. School community members have insufficient incentive for schools to take or accept responsibility for achieving school management effectiveness. Schools appear to feel discouraged by the inflexible funding and funding levels unrelated to performance. Hong Kong’s primary school system has been configured in a unique way because the Education Department is the central bureaucracy. Unlike the private, profit-making schools and those government schools controlled by the Education Department, most aided schools are publicly funded as they operate under a Code of Aid and a Letter of Agreement between the Director of Education and the schools’ sponsoring body. SBM appears to conflict with the previous practices in local primary schools and school reformers, principals and teachers have to confront several tensions in restructuring. The three main such tensions are: changes in the way of teaching and learning in schools; changes in the occupational situation of educators, like decision-making processes and conditions of teachers’ work in schools; and changes in the school governance and the distribution of power between schools and their clients. It is, therefore, worthwhile to investigate what features of SBM are actually being adopted in the local primary schools. Moreover, as the principals are the highest rank and the direct manager of the schools, their perceptions of SBM are also important. Some previous research indicates that most of the principals are of opinion that they are facing new challenges as the leader of the school. Most of the principals are not sure whether they should also need to play the role of school manager (Gamage and Sooksomchitra, 2004). According to the policy document - *The School Management Initiative (SMI): Setting the Framework for Quality in Hong Kong Schools* (EMB&ED, 1991) and previous researches (e.g., Schein, 1985; Millikan, 1985; Mortimore, 1991; Milstein, 1993; Cheng, 1993; Mohr and Dichter, 2001, etc), school policy is an essential element to improve SBM. It is, therefore, worthwhile for us to examine the perceptions of a sample of Hong Kong principals and teachers of the extent to which school policy has been effectively implemented in the SBM in primary schools. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the following research question, as perceived by principals and teachers: How effective is the implementation of school policy in SBM in Hong Kong primary schools?

**Theory Background**

School-based management has no clear cut definitions, but has various names, such as local management of schools, site-based management, self-managing school, school-site autonomy, school-based budgeting, school-based curriculum development, shared decision-making, restructuring and decentralized management. The differences in names are less important than the shifts in authority implicit in the process (Herman and Herman, 1993).

School-based management can be defined as a system where there is a significant and consistent decentralization to the school level of authority to make decisions related to the allocation of resources, with resources defined broadly to include knowledge, technology, power, material, people, time and money and to work as the collaborative school management cycle which integrates goal-setting, need identification, policy-making, planning, budgeting, implementing, and evaluating systematically. The school remains accountable to a central authority for the manner in which resources are used (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, 1992).

Hong Kong is facing challenges in the international economic arena and has adopted a new
managerialism philosophy and decentralized power in its education system to meet the economic challenge (Ng and Chen, 2008; Cheng, 2005a, Cheng 2005b). The Hong Kong government focused its education policy on improving the quality of education and proposed a comprehensive change of public sector school reform in financial and management strategies and procedures of the administration in 1989. In 1991, the Education and Manpower Branch and the Education Department published the policy document named *The School Management Initiative (SMI): Setting the Framework for Quality in Hong Kong Schools* (EMB&ED, 1991) for setting out the reform of the school system. The SMI document supports Hong Kong’s school restructuring with a school effectiveness model, that is, to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the school management and to achieve better quality of education in all the systems. The Hong Kong’s SMI is equivalent to the United Kingdom’s local management of schools, school-based management in the United States and the self-managing school in Australia.

In 1991, SMI was introduced in Hong Kong as a voluntary scheme opting in by schools to increase membership by persuasion rather than by legislative coercion. The first cohort of 21 schools (aided secondary) joined the scheme in 1991. In 1992, 13 secondary schools (10 government and 3 aided) joined it. The participating schools increased sharply to 93 (70 primary and 23 secondary) in 1993 by the influx of schools from the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals and Po Leung Kuk. In 1994, more than 100 schools participated out of a total of approximately 1250 schools. By 1997, only a minority of schools (under one-quarter) had chosen formal membership, an outcome regarded as somewhat disappointing. It is worth recognizing that though many schools had chosen not to become formal members of the SMI scheme, they were, in fact, implementing policies consistent with the SMI strategy. Yet, Wong (1995b) noted that the tightening of administrative and financial controls over the schools had been the Education Department’s own doing caused by the proliferation of its policies over the years. The net outcome was the stretching of its own resources and the stifling of school initiatives (Wong, 1995b).

Based on the policy document - *The School Management Initiative (SMI): Setting the Framework for Quality in Hong Kong Schools* (EMB&ED, 1991) and previous researches (e.g., Schein, 1985; Millikan, 1985; Mortimore, 1991; Milstein, 1993; Cheng, 1993; Mohr and Dichter, 2001, etc), the school policy of SBM has been distinguished in this study and it is discussed in the following.

**School Policy**

**Mission**

For SBM, the ideal or mission of running a school represents a group of shared expectations, beliefs and values of the school, guiding the school members’ educational activities and direction of work. This vivid and strong mission is also willingly actualized and implemented more effectively by the participation of school members (staff and the head) shared and developed into the educational ideal and the strong and unique organizational culture and policy (Schein, 1985; Millikan, 1985; Mortimore, 1991; Milstein, 1993; Cheng, 1993; Mohr and Dichter, 2001).

**Aim, purpose, goal and objective**

The externally-controlled school has a ‘passive receptive style’, its major concern is to carry
out assigned duties and therefore it is ‘executive procedure-based’ to avoid making any mistakes. Even when some procedural rules may run counter to the benefits of students and teachers, procedures will be put in the first place. While school-based managing school aims at developing students and teachers according to the school’s own characteristics, thus the school has the role of ‘initiative-developing style’ focused on teachers’ effective teaching and students’ effective learning (Cheng, 1993). SBM schools, according to Davies and Anderson (1992), reflect explicitly the aims, values and ethics shared and understood by all stakeholders involved in working towards the same clearly-stated (Wagner, 1995) and agreed-on goals (Hoy and Miskel, 1996). In the USA, SBM schools had the following specific objectives (Conley, 1993): (1) Curriculum that moves to a greater emphasis on problem solving, application and integration of knowledge; social skills and attitudes (Coddng, 1997); (2) Student-focused learning (Hopkins and Lagerweij, 1996); (3) Learning that is best assessed in terms of outcomes, not processes; (4) Education that extends beyond the walls of the classroom; (5) Teachers who serve as coaches, advisers to students, model expert performances, guide and encourage students toward improving their learning, and thus facilitate learning, not control it; (6) Cooperative learning; (7) Process skills considered as important as knowledge of specific content; (8) The belief that all learners are valuable and have the ability to define goals for themselves; (9) The school should be organized to enable students to feel a sense of belonging and connection (Stedman, 1987; Mortimore et al., 1989; Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Sammons et al., 1995); (10) It should reach out to parents and the community (Stringfield cited in Townsend, 1997).

School Development Planning

The development of a plan in the form of long-term and short-term goals helps schools to coordinate their activities as they pursue their aims and values (Davies and Ellison, 1992; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991). Adams (1991) identified two broad categories of educational planning models, namely the rational and interactive models. Planning procedures based on an annual cycle, using a relatively traditional rational approach might be effective for schools in a fairly stable environment, they might work less well in one which is more turbulent and unpredictable (Caldwell and Spinks, 1988). The rolling plan, using an interactive approach, is a process of continual creation, monitoring and adjustment (Wallace, 1991). Continual monitoring, frequent adjustment of existing plans and the occasional creation of new plans implies a structure of regular meetings, and a procedure for arranging ad hoc meetings to make decisions in response to unanticipated changes. This helps schools to cope with an increasingly turbulent environment in such a way that a procedure which over-relied upon the production of more rigid annual development plans might not (Wallace, 1991). Studies showed that ‘principal’s support’ and ‘resource support’ are good predictors for ‘positive outcomes of planning’ (Webster, 1985; Haynes and Blomstedt, 1986; Louis and Miles, 1990; Fullan, 1990; Hargreaves and Hopkins, 1991; McInerney and Leach, 1992). The support of the principal and the availability of resources are recognized as having a positive effect on the success of planning in achieving school goals (Haynes and Blomstedt, 1986; Fullan, 1991). McInerney and Leach (1992) found that there were positive relationships between school improvement as a result of planning and principal leaderships, feelings of teacher ownership, and ongoing commitment of organizational resources. Principals in schools which demonstrate these planning characteristics are likely to display considerable confidence in the professional knowledge and judgment of their teachers (Wong et al., 1998).

In Hong Kong, the SMI policy recommended that every SMC should produce a constitution setting out the aims and objectives of the school (EMB&ED, 1991). The survey on SMI
progress found that there was evidence of all schools having an annual plan, statements of mission and goals, which are similar to those stated by the Hong Kong Education Department (ED, 1994).

Recently school-based activities like ‘school-based curriculum design’, ‘school-based remedial teaching’, ‘school-based counseling’ and ‘school-based staff development’ have been widely carried out in Hong Kong. Since the SMI scheme encourages participation in decision making (including planning decisions) by all concerned parties including all teaching staff, the principal, the school management council, and (to some degree) parents and students (EMB&ED, 1991), it provides a very favorable environment for the development of planning based on the flexible, consensual model (Adams, 1991). According to a study by Wong et al (1998), there has been some progress in the development of a culture of teachers’ participatory decision-making in planning. However, Hong Kong teachers may not be accustomed to the degree of freedom and the changes initiated by individual teachers in these circumstances may be largely uncoordinated. Changes to, or derailment of, the school plan in this way may be seen to interrupt the smooth functioning of the school as a whole and to waste resources. This may happen to self-managing schools in Hong Kong at this early stage of the SMI scheme as teachers are still quite inexperienced in the handling of professional autonomy. Thus, a model of flexible planning called ‘A Self-managing School Planning Model’ is proposed for self-managing schools as an alternative to the model set out in the SMI document. In this model, the key concept is responding to the environment. Featuring systematic and periodic evaluations, it is no longer a one-way, cyclic and sequential model but is responsive, recurrent and flexible in nature. Goals, means and actions can be amended after evaluation, if the need arises (Wong et al., 1998).

**Research Method**

To investigate the research question, a qualitative method of interviews was adopted. Nine case studies were conducted. In this study, nine principals and nine teachers from nine schools were involved in interviews. Interviews involve an open-ended set of structured questions in a conversational manner to obtain and record accurately the respondent’s valid evidence about human affairs (Yin, 2009). The interview questions were adapted from Quality Assurance in School Education – Performance Indicators for Primary School (Education Department, 1998), with modifications of their wordings were adopted as the instrument of data collection for interview to probe the perceptions of principals and teachers. The interview questions were divided into two parts. Part A included four questions on personal information. Part B included three questions: (1) What are your present school aims? (2) Which are the long-term goals and the short-term goals? (3) How is the procedure of setting the school aims?

**Findings**

The interview data are presented below.

School policy was perceived as one of important elements by principals and teachers. More schools used the staff development day to make principals and teachers understand long-term goals, short-term goals and annual plan goals and support the school goals and school development plans so that the school could implement its policy more effectively.

The interviewees said
Teacher E: One of our long-term goals is to develop student self-confidence, positive life and right value viewpoint through multi-intelligent ability and whole-person learning for development of student potentiality.

Principal J: Our school mission is to develop student personal potentiality. Our long-term goal is student-centered with active learning, continuing life-long learning ability and whole-person education.

Thus, most schools found to have their long-term goals were to develop student personal potentiality, self-confidence, positive life, right value, student-centered with active learning and continuous lifelong-learning ability.

Teacher F: Our long-term goals are to develop student religious belief in Jesus Christ and to show their love of Christ by good conduct and their conscientious behavior in daily life.

Principal B: Our long-term goals are to guide students to know Jesus Christ and to develop student civic responsibility with self-management spirit and the right value viewpoints to adapt the society.

As for religious schools, their long-term goals were found to develop civic responsibility and student religious belief in Jesus Christ and to express the love of Christ by good conduct and conscientious behavior in daily life.

Teacher D: Our long-term goal is to develop Information Technology for improving teaching and learning effectiveness.

Principal H: One of our long-term goals is to provide teachers with professional training on the staff development day so as to discuss and improve continuously on the annual school goals that match the school long-term goals stated in the constitution. Teachers also bear the responsibilities to work with the teamwork spirit for the school annual goals.

Other schools were found to emphasize developing Information Technology for improving teaching and learning effectiveness, and providing teachers with professional training on the staff development day to discuss and improve continuously on the annual school goals according to their school’s long-term goals in its constitution. Also, teachers bear the responsibilities to work with the teamwork spirit for the school annual goals.

Teacher G: One of our short-term goals is to emphasize on the student multi-intelligent potentiality by constructing a good and enjoyable learning environment for them.

Principal A: Our short-term goals are to provide students with ideal learning environment for the whole-person education so as to have a well-balanced development in education of 5 areas: ethical, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic aspects.

As for short-term goals, most schools were found to support providing students with whole-person education and multi-intelligent potential ability in the well-balanced development of 5 learning areas: ethical, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic, and constructing an ideal/good/enjoyable learning environment for the students.
Teacher E: Our short-term goals are to develop a systematic curriculum matched with extra-curricular activities so as to improve student academic standards, attitudes and conduct and to provide students with enjoyable and happy learning environment.

Other schools were found to define their short-term goals to develop systematic curriculum to match with extra-curricular activities as to improve their students’ academic standards, attitudes and conduct.

Teacher C: Our short-term goals are to establish a more effective management and monitoring system, to formalize a perfect system of award and punishment, and to strengthen the relationship between parents and the community.

Principal F: Our short-term goals are to set up a fair appraisal system and to make use of the resource in the annual report as to improve the learning environment.

Few schools were found to have the short-term goals to develop a fair appraisal system and a more effective management system, to formalize a perfect system of award and punishment, strengthen the relationship between parents and community, and to make use of resources in the annual report.

Teachers are also involved in how to set, implement and evaluate annual goals and plan.

Principal G: The school board committee consists of the supervisor, 3 external members, the morning and afternoon session principals; one yearly elected teacher representative member and one parent representative member. The school board committee makes all staff understand the school mission with clear school goals so that teachers can make the decisions of the school annual goal and plan easily.

The school board committee was found to make all staff understand the school mission and school goals so that it can help them decide easily the annual goal and annual plan.

Teacher H: Our school has a 3-day staff development annual programme and one of them is the SBM day which involves all staff to discuss the annual theme of the next year.

Principal J: Our annual goal will be discussed in the subject meeting, the staff meeting and the meeting of the executive committee (including the principal and Assistant Mistress). The executive committee will finally decide the goal for our annual development and will brief it in the staff meeting for further suggestions.

Principal F: After the goal of the annual development is decided, I will appoint our Assistant Mistress/Master to draft our annual development plan with the annual goal and the plan will be reported to seek for the approval of the school board committee.

Teacher B: When the annual school plan is approved, different subjects/groups will be given the plan to discuss and fix their own goal, work plan and implementation in their subject/group meetings. They will then evaluate their own goal, work plan and implementation in the year-end as to monitor their level of performance. Yet, we have not given parents to participate in the
The schools were found to discuss the annual goal or theme with all the teachers in the yearly staff development day or SBM day, or in the staff meeting. The teachers’ opinions are discussed with the heads of subjects or groups and the principal in the meeting of the executive committee. The decisions of the following year’s goal/theme are briefed in the staff meeting to seek further suggestions. The principal then appoints the assistant mistresses/masters to draft the annual school development plan for the annual goal. The draft of the annual plan with the annual goal is then submitted for approval from the school board committee. After the approval, the plan is given to the different subjects and groups to fix their goals for implementation and it is discussed in their meetings. Their implementation of the annual goal is evaluated at the end of the year to monitor their degree of achievement and performance. Yet, the parents cannot participate in the decision-making of the school policy – school goal and plan.

Discussion and Implications

Since the publication of the School Management Initiatives by the Hong Kong Education Department in 1991, schools in Hong Kong have gradually changed from external control management to school-based management to improve educational quality and school effectiveness. Teachers and principals have also supposedly changed from the role of employees to partners in the schools. They bear the responsibility for participating positively in the decision making of school policy and implementing the school plan to maintain management effectiveness in school.

Developing Clearly Defined Visions and School Policy

The ‘school policy’ of SBM was one of important elements as perceived by principals and teachers. The schools are effective if they have a clearly defined school policy and shared vision with autonomy from the government. The schools should have a vision, which comes from the sponsoring organizations. However, not too many teachers could state explicitly the mission and the policy of the school. The school managers were used to perform under the instructions and tight control of the external central authority, not in accordance with the school’s characteristics and needs, and school members do not have autonomy and commitment. For external control management, it is assumed that there should be standard methods and procedures to achieve management goals and they are suitable for all schools. However, each school has its unique features and it is certainly impractical to assume uniformity across all schools. Cheng (1993) also highlighted some of the drawbacks of external control management related to school policy, goals and missions. They include (1) missions which are unclear, given by outside with no development needed; members may not accept them and be committed to them; (2) emphasis placed on keeping and implementing external mission; (3) paying attention to academic achievement or a few final outcomes, but neglecting the process and development; and (4) evaluating as a means of administrative supervision. Thus, it is advised that each school should develop school policy in a plan with clear visions or missions and goals. Moreover, the school policy should be made by collecting wider information from all concerned parties like students, parents and teachers in various means such as questionnaires and interviews. All concerned parties should be provided with the annual school plans and goals for the past three to five years and the government policies to collect more suggestions in the evaluation of previous annual plan. It is also suggested to
create an open, trusting and harmonious atmosphere to encourage teachers of different ranks to participate actively and positively in the process of decision making for school policy. Constructive school policy and plan can also be borrowed from other school plans by visiting their websites. This helps improve the making of the coming school plan with the school policy appropriately to the needs of all parties to achieve school-based management and effectiveness.

In summary, to achieve the successful implementation of school-based management as perceived by principals and teachers, it is recommended to develop clearly defined visions and school policy. Moreover, the schools should regularly review their capacity for future change and have a systematic audit of current strengths and weaknesses carried out with an evaluation of progress used formatively to support adopting the new school plan.

Limitations of the Present Study and Recommendations for Future Research

There is one major limitation of the study that the findings are based on the respondents’ perceptions. To improve the validity and reliability of this academic inquiry for future researchers, some recommendations are suggested as follows. More qualitative methods like observation and interviewing students and parents can be used to promote the reliability of the study and further understand the extent of the success of school-based management implementation. Thus, the educational institutions and educators can base on the results, improve the system and enhance school management initiatives. Hopefully, findings of this study can make a contribution to future research and effective implementation of SBM in Hong Kong and other places of the world.

Concluding Remarks

Since the Education Department’s publications of SMI in 1991, primary schools in Hong Kong have changed from the model of external control management to SBM in order to improve school management. SBM is rather active in a culture with the teacher’s participation in democratic school management. Thus, principals, teachers and parents have to change their traditional roles to fit the decentralized school management. The teachers have to change from the role of employees to partners to the school, and they have to take up the same responsibility as the principals and parents in participating in the decision of school policy. The chances for teachers’ participation in the decision of school policy thus help them have a greater sense of belonging to the school and promote their job satisfaction and school management effectiveness.

Thus, the leadership of principals, teachers and parents in the present complicated and knowledge-changing society should continuously pursue life-long learning for professional development in order to make appropriate decision on school policy in order to enhance school management effectiveness. All these factors have to be taken into account and it is hoped that future researchers will consider them in further studies of educational quality.

References


Education and Manpower Branch and Education Department (EMB&ED) (1991). *The school management initiative: Setting the framework for quality in Hong Kong schools*. Hong Kong: Education Department.

Education Department (1994). *Report of the second survey conducted to evaluate the first phase of the school management initiative scheme*. Executive summary, school management initiative scheme, Hong Kong: Education Department.


Wong, K. C. (1995b). *School Management Initiative in Hong Kong: the devolution of power to schools, real or rhetoric.* In K.C. Wong and K.M. Cheng (Eds.), *Educational leadership and change: An international perspective* (pp. 141-153). Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong Press.

