

# **The role of ‘Meeting Pupil Needs and Empowering Staff’ ’ in quality management system**

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## **Abstract**

The study aims to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of ‘Meeting Pupil Needs and Empowering Staff’ in the quality management in Hong Kong primary schools. A case study of nine primary schools was conducted and a qualitative method of interviews was adopted in this study. A total of 9 principals and 9 teachers from 9 primary schools responded to the interviews. The finding shows that ‘meeting pupil needs and empowering staff’ was perceived to be one of least implemented area because most schools’ parents and students were not given any chances to express their opinions on the school policy as to meet their needs. Some teachers could give opinions on school matters but their ideas might not be accepted. The executive committee members were empowered to prepare the budgets, give opinions and make decisions on school policy. Finally, the implication of the study is addressed.

## **1. Introduction**

In Hong Kong, different reports on educational policy for improving local educational quality were published by the Education Commission since 1986. First, it was to maintain the educational quality of the bought place scheme in private schools that the Education Commission Report No. 3 (ECR3, 1988) was published in 1988. The scheme had been phased out in 2000

with the introduction of a direct subsidy scheme for private schools in 1989 to attain a sufficiently high educational standard and to keep minimal government control. Second, it was to address the issues of educational quality, such as teacher quality and school policies on student academic achievements, that the Education Commission Report No. 4 (ECR4, 1990) was published in 1990. The frontier role of teachers would only be successful if the features of school quality management like customer-driven and commitments of all school members could be stressed. Third, it was to aim at quality school education that the Education Commission Report No. 7 (ECR7) was published in 1997. This report continues the SMI's spirit with a different complexion as suggested by the western experience that a succession of policy initiatives and documents over time is the usual norm.

School restructuring policy in the early 1990s in Hong Kong was similar to those in the United Kingdom, and the United States, especially in Australia. The two policy initiatives - the School Management Initiative and the Quality School Education - as wholesale, systematic and coordinated administrative efforts, aimed at reforming the administrative, managerial and school governance aspects of Hong Kong's school system. These policy documents reflect subtle shifts in emphasis over time. The School Management Initiative was driven by a school effectiveness agenda, while the Quality School Education was underpinned by quality education.

Restructuring is an evolutionary process rather than a one-off transformation. The emphases of SMI and ECR7 are different. The SMI aims to introduce a system of SBM based on the school effectiveness research, whereas the ECR7 focuses on developing quality schools possessing quality cultures, and introducing a framework to monitor and assure quality. Thus, the change from 'effective schools' to 'quality schools' is in line with shifts in the western restructuring.

In 1978, Hong Kong implemented a nine-year universal, free and compulsory general education system which was specific to Hong Kong educational environment. This system provided over 90 percent of the children with such opportunities, but the quality of the education system was a concern. 'Rectifying the problems which are inherent in our present education system requires the combined efforts of all relevant people and organisations, including schools, teachers, parents, employers, universities, youth and social workers, and the media to correct misconceptions and promote a proper understanding of quality education' (ED, 1997). Afterwards, 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.

Different features of school-based management are being implemented in Hong Kong schools to assure quality. However, experience suggests that the policies of *School Management Initiative* and *Quality School Education* have created many implementation problems resulting in negative perceptions of quality management. 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 quality development in schools. School community members have insufficient incentive for schools to take or accept responsibility for achieving quality education. 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. School-based management and quality management appear 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 quality management 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 quality management are also important.

Although the quality school education had been launched in Hong Kong since 1997, it appears that the effectiveness of the quality school education has not been done. The 'meeting pupil needs and empowering staff' is one major feature of quality school education which is identified by ECR7 (1997). The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the 'meeting pupil needs and empowering staff' being implemented in Hong Kong. An interview

qualitative study was used and a case study of nine primary schools were conducted. Nine principals and nine teachers from nine primary schools principals responded to interviews. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the following research question, as perceived by principals and teachers:

1. How effective is the implementation of 'Meeting Pupil Needs and Empowering Staff ' in Hong Kong primary school?

## 2. Theory context

Advanced countries have continuously implemented educational changes to improve educational quality. These changes included innovative school-based curriculum with activities and new teaching approaches, school improvement plans, shared decision-making among principals, teachers, parents and students, change of school management (David, 1989; Cheng, 1991; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998), and development of ISO 9000 (Moreland and Clark, 1998; Quinn et al., 2009). These changes in the educational service were influenced by the results of quality management (QM), with the pursuit of quality (Peters and Waterman, 1982) being the means to the effective end in the commerce and manufacturing organisational sectors. Several convincing research findings also demonstrated the importance of pursuing quality management (Juran, 1979; Crosby, 1979, 1986; Deming, 1986; Feigenbaum, 1987; Collard, 1990). Quality management (QM) had taken root in commerce and industry. Its applicability to education came to be widely recognised and accepted by school management theorists.

Education is coming to recognise the need to pursue the sources of quality and to deliver it to students. The sources of quality in education are said to include, in an appropriate

combination, well-maintained buildings; outstanding teachers; high moral values; excellent examination results; specialisation; parental support; business and local community; plentiful resources; the application of the latest technology; strong and purposeful leadership; cares and concerns for students; a well-balanced curriculum.

In Hong Kong, school-based management comprises such elements as (EC, 1997:17): '(i) development of formal procedures for setting school goals and evaluating progress towards these goals; (ii) provision of documents to outline the schools' profiles, development plans and budgets, and means of evaluating progress; (iii) preparation of written constitutions for the school management committees; (iv) participation of teachers, parents and alumni in school management, development, planning, evaluation and decision-making; and (v) development of formal procedures and resources for staff appraisal with effective quality assurance mechanism for schools and staff development according to teachers' needs'.

The introduction of School Management Initiative offers a school-based management framework implemented by all schools in 2000 for continuous school improvement with enhancement of quality school education and greater flexibility in the use of resources based on the individual student needs and characteristics. However, evidence found that a major problem in the school system was the lack of a quality culture (EC, 1997). Evidence also shows that many schools have no development plans linked to goal achievement, no clear targets for both academic and non-academic students, and no appraisal systems to assess the performance of principals and teachers. Moreover, the support to schools is poor in promoting a quality culture. It is also 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 promote quality development in schools. School community members could have insufficient

incentive for schools to take or accept responsibility for achieving quality education. Schools feel discouraged by the inflexibility in funding and the funding levels unrelated to performance. Little recognition of the 'value-added' efforts made by schools is given to develop their students' potential. It is, therefore, the proposals of the ECR7 suggested a strategy of 35 points regarding implementation and reorganised into six groups of strategy: (1) a framework for developing and monitoring quality school education; (2) preparing for quality school education; (3) assessment of performance; (4) incentives to encourage quality school education; (5) school-based management; and (6) funding flexibility.

This study is focused on the major feature 'meeting pupil needs and empowering staff' which is identified from ECR7 (1997). The detail of this feature is outlined below:

Meeting pupil needs and empowering staff can be explained in terms of meeting customer needs, listening to customers, managers' responsiveness, and empowering staff.

**Meeting Customer Needs.** Quality in business equals customer satisfaction (Hutchins, 1990). Quality consists of meeting customers' stated needs and requirements for providing a product or service (West-Burnham, 1992). Quality management as customer-driven quality makes products or services explicit for meeting or exceeding the expectations of customers (Murgatroyd and Morgan, 1993). TQM includes all work relationships for customer satisfaction and quality for conformity to customer requirements. TQM involves assessing customer needs and expectations, producing quality outputs to meet customer's satisfaction, and documenting the returns of quality investments by directly linking quality education outputs with inputs of time, money and effort (Weller, 1998). Educationalists like Kohn (1993) feared that TQM would ignore the needs of student learning by reducing it to fiscal terms. However, according to West-Burnham (1992), the

components of meeting customer requirements in schools include (a) understanding of customers' values; (b) attitudes as reflected in the language, involvement and commitment of the school's customers; (c) effective communication appropriately match with customers' educational level; (d) meeting customer expectations with school to share and express high expectations; (e) preferences negotiated, developed and established on the basis of customers' feedback on issues like uniform, pattern of the school day, sex education, religious education, etc; (f) social situation with prevailing patterns of culture, the ethnic balance, unemployment, the economic situation, social advantage and deprivation are significant features in helping to determine a school's response to its community; and (g) commitment of parents is a direct function of the significance attached to education and this will in turn reflect the six components identified above. Thus, in West-Burnham's (1992) diagnostic inventory, effective TQM schools think that 'we meet customer needs' whereas the least effective TQM schools think that 'we teach pupil needs'.

**Listening to Customers.** Quality means putting customers first before developing other things because quality stems from listening to and responding sympathetically to the needs of their customers. Total quality management taking on the human management approach is that organisations should do everything in the interests of their customers (Hutchins, 1990). To meet client expectations and satisfaction, TQM uses public survey to gather information from the public instead of providing information to the public and to obtain continuous feedback on progress, planning and development processes within schools (Bradley, 1993). In schools, an example of listening to customers is through the student council, which represents the interests of students and involves in a variety of aspects of school life, like social activities, curriculum development planning, and timetable discussions. Thus, in West-Burnham's (1992) diagnostic



inventory, effective TQM schools think that 'we listen to our customers' whereas the least effective think that 'we give out information'.

**Managers' Responsiveness.** The focus of quality education activities should be to become responsive to meeting the needs of students and parents, the main clients of the school (Sackney and Dibiski, 1994). Reynolds and Cuttance (1992) advocate making effectiveness, not efficiency the goal of administration by listening to teachers; not evaluating critically but giving ongoing feedback on work and provision from the monitoring process to the implementation process. Bradley's (1993) application to education is to remove barriers to worker pride: abolish the annual or merit rating scheme and management by objectives. School principals should seek, receive and consider suggestions from all employees, openly discussed in meetings, regardless of the person's rank (Townsend, 1997). Thus, in West-Burnham's (1992) diagnostic inventory, in effective TQM schools 'senior managers listen and think' whereas in the least effective TQM schools 'senior managers administer systems'.

**Empowering Staff.** A sense of empowerment can be caused by participative decision-making shared among the stakeholders at the school-level as active community participation (Clune and White, 1988). Total quality management requires each staff member to be treated as a unique individual, unlike scientific management (Hutchins, 1990). Many who have worked in schools that have adopted this philosophy have seen the same benefits in schools that corporations have found in their workplaces (Murgatroyd and Morgan, 1993). Regardless of rank, principals and staff in such schools were found to be characterized by cooperation and coordination of collegial decision-making; they talked with joy and pride when assumed a close interdependency and trust that was reciprocated; and they clearly perceived as empowered to act when action was needed (Townsend, 1997). The goal of quality education is to empower school staff by providing

authority, flexibility, and resources to solve the educational problems particularly to their schools (David, 1989). Thus, in West-Burnham's (1992) diagnostic inventory, in effective TQM schools 'staff must be empowered' whereas in the least effective 'staff have to be controlled'.

In Hong Kong, for meeting pupils' needs and empowering staff, the school management, including all aided schools and the government schools, should practise SBM by 2000. Teachers, parents and students should be empowered to participate in school management to achieve school goals and formulate long-term plans to meet student needs. The principal can decide with the SMC, teachers and parents with greater flexibility on how to use and allocate the money or funds according to their student needs (EC, 1997). In addition, to maximise rational decision making and administrative efficiency, bureaucracy being an ideal structure for an organisation is characterised by (1) division of labour and specialization; (2) impersonal orientation; (3) hierarchy of authority; (4) rules and regulations: to ensure uniformity and to regulate the behaviour of jobholders; and (5) career orientation (Hoy and Miskel, 1996). Besides, the schools should be effective if they establish an adequate school structure to facilitate the development of the educational processes, to lubricate and fuel the dynamics of interaction within the effective functioning of the whole school system (Purkey and Smith, 1983), to set up managerial, structural and cultural conditions (Creemers, 1993), and to create effective conditions and efforts for uniting all sub-units in the school (Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Scheerens, 1993).

### **3. Research Method**

To investigate the research question, a case study of nine primary schools were conducted and a qualitative methods of interviews and was adopted 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 two interview questions in which the principals and teachers' perceptions of quality management were revealed (Table 1).

Table 1 – Interview questions

Question number	Description
1	How do you decide if the important decision making greatly concerns with the school or the teachers?
2	How do you think of your school – it is being improved continuously, or it is being good (even very good)? Why do you think so?

The researcher did a pilot study of the interview questions. Two part-time colleagues working as principals in two different primary schools were asked and they suggested that most of the items should be changed. The face-to-face semi-structured, in-depth interview was chosen as the most

suitable method for gathering data. The respondents were the principals and teachers of functional or departmental heads. The selected school principals were contacted individually by phone calls from the researcher while teachers were approached directly by their principals, who also arranged the time, dates and places for the interviews. Each interview lasted, on average, one hour guided by a set of open-ended interview questions at the presence of the researcher. Before the interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of the research and reassured the subjects regarding confidentiality. As the interviewees were well informed beforehand through phone calls, they seemed to feel relaxed and expressed their opinions more freely in a well-prepared room. Out of 12 schools selected, 3 school principals had already run special functions and declined the invitation for interviews at the time of conducting the research. Subsequently, 18 respondents in 9 schools instead of 24 interviews in 12 schools were completed. The return rate of around 75% was assumed to be satisfactory.

#### 4. Findings

Qualitative Respondents' Personal Demographic Characteristics. Nine primary schools located in Hong Kong, Kowloon and New Territories were selected and they had been implementing SBM for about 6 years. The schools with a mean of 72 computers provided education for about 817 students with a mean of 60.7% not applying for school textbook fee subsidies in average from primary 1 to 6. They have a mean of about 38 teachers with 96% of trained teachers organised into traditional subject departments, having a principal and two deputy principals. Their school working experience was about 22 years for respondents aged 47. They had been at the school for about 9 years in the present school and the teachers taught in a variety of disciplines. They were 9 principals (8 males and 1 female) and 9 teachers (4 males and 5 females) for about 7 years in the present senior rank of assistant mistress/master, with special responsibilities and roles

like head of department, functional head, level coordinator and administrative teacher as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Profile of Qualitative Respondents' Personal Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Std. Dev.
Sex	Male	<b>12</b>	<b>66.7</b>		
	Female	<b>6</b>	<b>33.3</b>		
Educational and Professional Qualification	Bachelor or below	<b>15</b>	<b>83.3</b>		
	Master or above	<b>3</b>	<b>16.7</b>		
Job Position	Principal	<b>9</b>	<b>50.0</b>		
	Assistant Master	<b>9</b>	<b>50.0</b>		
Age				<b>47.4</b>	<b>3.9087</b>
Year in Present Rank				<b>6.9</b>	<b>3.9028</b>
Year of Service				<b>21.6</b>	<b>6.8875</b>
Year of Serving in Present School				<b>8.9</b>	<b>6.3699</b>
Number of Teachers				<b>38.0</b>	<b>7.6485</b>
Percentage of Trained Teachers				<b>96.0</b>	<b>0.0047</b>
Number of Students				<b>817.0</b>	<b>288.3141</b>
Number of computers				<b>72.0</b>	<b>32.0351</b>
Number of years of implementing SBM				<b>5.7</b>	<b>2.9902</b>

The interview data are presented below.

'Meeting pupil needs and empowering staff' was perceived to be one of least implemented area because most schools' parents and students were not given any chances to express their opinions

on the school policy as to meet their needs. Some teachers could give opinions on school matters but their ideas might not be accepted. The executive committee members were empowered to prepare the budgets, give opinions and make decisions on school policy.

Principal D: If important matters arise, I, being the principal, will call a meeting to discuss it with the executive committee members. The matters will then be discussed in the staff meeting. Teachers, not parents and students, can give opinions on the matters of school policy but their ideas may not be accepted.

Teacher J: The executive committee members, not teachers, are empowered to prepare the budgets, give opinions and make decisions on school policy. Their decisions in the executive committee will first be considered and made on meeting students' needs and benefits.

Most schools had achieved some progress as shown by students' more active learning and better-spoken ability. Yet, insufficient resources limited their progresses since teachers were too busy with heavy workloads to work out new change plans.

Principal F: Our school can improve with more progress as we have made improvement to meet the needs of the society. Students become more active in learning and better in spoken ability. Teachers are more enthusiastic, creative, aggressive, committed and supportive of the school missions and development plan.

Teacher B: We, teachers, work well and cooperatively with each other and improve our professionalism in designing the curriculum. However, with insufficient resources, teachers are too busy with the heavy workloads to work out new plans.

## 5. Discussions and implications

Since the publication of the School Management Initiatives by the Hong Kong Education Department in 1991 and School Quality Education in 1997, 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 QM in school.

As found by the present study, 'meeting pupil needs and empowering staff' of QM is one of adopted elements perceived by principals and teachers. Most of the schools have a large number of duty lists, committees, teams, subjects and groups headed by senior teachers or vice-principals who are directly responsible to the principal. Almost all organisations are still characterised by bureaucracy. To maximise rational decision making and administrative efficiency, bureaucracy being an ideal structure for an organisation is characterised by as follows: (1) Division of labour and specialisation: each person's job is broken into simple, routine, and well-defined tasks. (2) Impersonal orientation: sanctions are applied uniformly and impersonally to avoid involvement with individual personalities and personal preferences of members. (3) Hierarchy of authority: each lower office is under the supervision and control of a higher one. (4) Rules and regulations: to ensure uniformity and to regulate the behaviour of jobholders. (5) Career orientation: members are expected to pursue a promotion or a permanent career for this career commitment in the organisation (Hoy and Miskel, 1996:104). It must avoid reliance on bureaucratic processes that stress forms and checklists, as well as mandated components rigidly applied in schools and classrooms. The success of a school depends on a judicious mixture of autonomy for staff

participating in decision-making of various subjects with groups and less control from the central office for a direct autonomy.

As suggested by several scholars that the schools should be effective if they establish an adequate school structure to facilitate the development of the educational processes, to lubricate and fuel the dynamics of interaction within the effective functioning of the whole school system (Purkey and Smith, 1983), and to create effective conditions and efforts for uniting all sub-units in the school (Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Scheerens, 1993). Creemers (1993) also emphasises that the managerial, structural and cultural conditions should be conducive to effective schools. Schools should seek out and consider using materials and approaches that have been successful so that staff are empowered and schools should be given greater autonomy and authority with more flexibility and responsibility for the delegation of financial planning to work out activities to meet pupil needs and to improve pupil academic achievements. Also, more gatherings and more communication channels can be used for teachers to express their opinions and complaints to solve their problems leading to effective management.

#### 6. *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

There are some limitations of the study. First, the sample size is small and only the interviews of nine primary schools were conducted. The study cannot be generalised to all schools involved in the SMI scheme in Hong Kong and may affect the generalisation of the results. But they may provide useful evidence to support the investigation of QM in a larger sample of SBM schools, if not all, in both local and international contexts.

To improve the validity and reliability of this academic inquiry for future researchers, some recommendations are suggested as follows. First, a larger sampling scale with larger size and



more types of schools widely located in the place studied should be recommended because the larger is the scale of the project, the data obtained will be more valid, reliable, representative and generalised of the whole population. Second, other qualitative and quantitative methods, such as observation and survey, can be used in future study. Thus, the educational institutions and educators can base on the results to improve the educational quality. Hopefully, findings of this study can make a contribution to future research and effective implementation of QM in Hong Kong and other places of the world.

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

Since the Education Department's publications of SMI in 1991 and QSE-ECR7 in 1997, primary schools in Hong Kong have changed from the model of external control management to SBM in order to promote the educational quality. Quality management tends to be passive in a culture with the teacher's participation in controlling school management. Some factors including school and student backgrounds, school tradition, school climate and culture, community expectation of the school, still affect quality management on 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 enhance quality management. 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.

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