

Coaching Approach As An Agent Of Managing Curriculum Change

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Introduction

One of the most significant changes in education world-wide in recent times has been the shift in attention from what teachers do to what students do, and especially how they learn. However, how students learn is very much dependent on how teachers teach, and current studies continue to focus on the teacher as the vital link in delivering curriculum and in implementing educational change. This article aims to provide present research and theories relevant to how teachers manage curriculum innovation in their classrooms, with particular attention to introducing a coaching approach as an agent of managing curriculum change.

Managing curriculum change

Accepting the wisdom of an international trend towards learner-centred curricula, Thailand's recent National Education Act has mandated a shift from the country's traditional approach to one which encourages active and cooperative learning, a greater recognition of individual student differences, and relating learning to 'real life', a group of features amongst others that have become associated with 'progressive education' (Olson, cited in Owens G.R., 2001).

While Thai education has long espoused such beliefs as the importance of young people being active and of their cooperating with their teachers and each other, that schooling nurtures individual students, and that education should prepare students for life, especially in moral and practical senses, the form which progressive education takes in the classroom requires a paradigm shift in Thai teachers' thinking. What may have been an evolutionary process in American or British education over an extended period of curriculum reform, and even natural to most of the teachers involved, is much more of a challenge to Thai teachers' established understanding of their role and that of students when the period allowed for

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expected change is reduced to months. And closely associated with that challenge in reconceptualizing teaching and learning is the equally demanding one of changing their teaching practice from being a knowledge transmitter to one of student learning facilitator.

Two of the researchers whose work informs much of this issue consider the parameters of change in the following ways. Nunan (1988), from a language teaching background, lists the key features involved in a shift in teaching methodology as: (i) the pedagogical concept of the teaching approach; (ii) the types of learning activities; (iii) the role of teacher and learner; (iv) the role of materials, and (v) the role of assessment. Fullan (1992), whose field is curriculum innovation, considers that educational change involves three related components: (i) the possible use of new or revised materials (e.g., direct instructional resources such as curriculum materials or technologies); (ii) the possible use of new approaches (e.g. new teaching strategies or activities); and (iii) the possible alteration of beliefs (e.g. pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying particular new policies or programmes).

Considering the impetus for educational change, Fullan proposes two main forms: voluntary – when teachers themselves choose to participate in or even initiate change, when they find dissatisfaction in their current situation and see the need to improve their professional practice; and imposed change – which comes from a source external to the classroom, normally from national education policy devised at system level and operating top-down. He argues that successful curriculum implementation is more likely when the change is voluntary (Fullan, M. 1992:69). In such countries as the USA, the UK and Australia the revolution that has taken place in curriculum change has been generated both from below and above; this joining of forces has impelled these countries down the path to profound change with relative agreement system-wide. In Thailand, although educators at all levels acknowledge that reform is necessary, it is the National Education Act of 1999 which is driving innovation almost alone. Fullan's analysis of change, therefore generally would imply that it faces the more difficult task.

A range of implementation strategies and pathways from the perspective of innovation as a staged process, is reported in studies by Berman and McLaughlin (1976) and White (1988). These studies all appear to agree on there being three broad phases of the implementation process: initiation, implementation, and continuation. The initiation phase consists of that part of the process which leads up to and includes a decision to adopt or to proceed with change. The implementation phase involves the first experiences of attempting to put an idea or programme into place at a practical level, while the continuation phase refers to whether the change gets built in as an ongoing part of the system. Fullan's

perspective on innovation recognises the significance of these phases also. In his analysis, however, implementation of a new curriculum involves two major interrelated components. The first is the content of the changes; such content involves the development of new meanings in relation to new underlying concepts, new programmes, and new sets of activities. The second involves the process of implementing and maintaining the changes (Fullan, M., 1992: 128). As described by Fullan, the successful implementation of curriculum change involves four interacting factors or characteristics: perceived need, clarity, complexity and workability (Fullan, M. 1991: 68-73). The ways to develop the basic education teachers' competencies on learning management to prepare for ASEAN Community included preparation, resource allocation, motivation and empowerment, training and development, ongoing development, and knowledge sharing (Chaiyos Paiwithayasiritham & Yuwaree Polpanthin., 2016). Details described as the following below;

- **Perceived need**

The degree to which people perceive the need for an innovation can influence the extent to which the implementation is successful. The need for the change, as described by Fullan, comes from either external or internal factors, or both. External factors are the social, political and economic situations which require change in education policy. This clearly applies to the current situation in Thailand. Internal factors relate to the need to change being perceived by the people involved because they are not satisfied with their present situation and are looking to find a better means of providing students with better quality learning (Fullan, M. 1991; cited in Bottomley, Y., Dalton, J., Corbel, C. & Brindley, G.. 1994:33). This applies to those who are actively seeking ways to introduce new teaching methods in Thailand – a group of innovators, mostly with international links – but by no means all in the field nor throughout the country.

- **Clarity**

Successful curriculum implementation requires the participants to have a clear understanding of the issues involved in the innovation in order to assist in determining its relevance of the innovation, according to Fullan. Such clarity applies to reconceptualising the specifics of teaching methods, including the purpose of the new pedagogical approach, types of learning activity, the role of teacher and learner, and the role of materials and assessment. Where these introduce unfamiliar procedures of the kind the new curriculum, such as organising group learning activities or assessing individual learning progress, the teacher's

individual beliefs underpinning her or his pedagogical practice are bound to be challenged as well, and make rethinking the change clearly a difficult but important step to take.

- **Complexity**

As change is not a predictable process, it requires the people involved to understand that it is complicated, and to be prepared to modify their thinking and practice to suit specific, and changing, circumstances (Fullan, 1991). It is important that a flexible implementation plan is drawn up for the people involved, though this should not lose the virtue of clarity in doing so, if this is possible. Teacher participation in curriculum delivery at all stages is one way of maintaining clarity through a complex process. Studies related to the implementation of change indicate that participation in decision-making at all levels of an organisation helps develop a clearer understanding of the aims of the implementation and this in turn develops a sense of commitment to the innovation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; White, 1988). It can be inferred from this that the Thai curriculum reform under discussion here would benefit from close participation in decision-making by educators at all levels in the system, but especially by teachers, considering their pivotal role.

- **Workability**

Workability is described by Fullan as an attribute of changes ‘that fit in well with the teacher’s situation that are focused and include how-to-do-it possibilities’(1991: 72). In this sense, workability relates to planning, the mobilisation of people and resources, and the actual practices used when individuals are accommodating to change. Success in these areas determines whether the change becomes an ongoing, integral part of the system, or whether it disappears (Fullan, 1991). From this it could be argued that those implementing change need to consider carefully a range of practical issues that relate to the specific context in which it is placed. As the context of Thai school is so radically different from those in the USA, the UK and other countries where learner-centred curricula have been introduced, it would seem that workability (specifically here, adaptation to the cultural context) would be a key aspect of a successful approach to innovation in Thai schools.

The question of flexibility raised under Fullan’s treatment of complexity above, but which relates also to workability, deserves further comment here. Williamson and Cowley (1998) have argued for a model of implementation that involves matching national curriculum guidelines with localized interpretation and implementation at a pace determined by the schools and their teachers:

Teachers were able to become involved in the innovation as and when they wished, and to adopt changes at their own pace. To encourage teachers to become involved and to be open to new ideas, professional development was provided as and when necessary, and teachers worked collegially on developing new programmes and resources and learning new teaching and learning strategies, with a generally supportive environment being engendered in the school. Thus, for implementation of national curricula to be successful, it is suggested that a flexibility model is preferable to an over-prescriptive model (Williamson and Cowley, 1998: 91).

One further issue raised in Williamson & Cowley's paper but as yet undiscussed here is the importance of a supportive environment for innovation. Blackler and Shimmin (1984) point out that when teachers are making a transition to new pedagogical beliefs, their individual and personal 'network of meaning' has to be given time to take up the new ideas and experiences. While this is happening, teachers often need support and reassurance to reduce feelings of insecurity. Because they find it difficult to carry out the change alone, isolated as they usually are with their students in the classroom, the support of a group of colleagues or an expert advisor helps them to feel more confident (Blackler & Shimmin, 1984, cited in Fullan, M. 1992: 72). Bottomley, Dalto, Corbel and Brindley (1994) note that ongoing support from administrators and skilled teachers promoting change is important to teachers' continuing commitment to the innovation. This is especially applicable to new teachers. They also emphasise that implementation support should include the provision of training sessions to help teachers cope with the innovation, the resources necessary to bring it about, time allocation for attending meetings and workshops, and rewards to maintain motivation (Bottomley, Dalton, Corbel & Brindley, 1994: 84). An advocate or consultant provides vital assistance in successful implementation. It is accepted that individuals find it difficult to carry out the implementation of the innovation alone, so good consultants can help the change proceed smoothly and effectively by providing concrete, practical advice either in the classroom or in professional development workshops. Fullan (1991) emphasises that strong advocacy at the administrative level is essential for change, while Bottomley, Dalton, Corbel & Brindley (1994: 27) demonstrate that teacher advocacy builds peer networks that impact positively on the capacity for change.

Summing up, the position established by Fullan and others on successful curriculum innovation suggests: the innovation must be perceived to be needed by those who are to implement it, and they should be clear about the change and how it will be accomplished. This process is recognised to be complex, so practical – and flexible – plans need to be drawn

up for it which allow for input from those who will carry it out. This spirit of consultation, attention to detail, practicality, flexibility and commitment needs to be sustained through the implementation phase if the change is to become on-going, and teachers are more likely to feel confident in accomplishing the transition in a supportive school environment.

A coaching approach as an agent of change

Coaching has been recognized as an effective way of facilitating the change process. Coaching aims to assist in the acquisition of new concepts by reducing a complex task to simple steps; a training programme devised on coaching principles would help trainees to gain success at each step, leading eventually to achieving the goal of mastering a complex skill. In a coaching approach to curriculum change, teachers would be assisted to develop effective ways of implementing innovation by simplifying an extremely complex task into manageable components. Joyce and Showers (1980) developed a model of professional development coaching for teachers which consists of five explicit stages, steps by which practitioners might achieve changes in methodology. They linked these to the levels of impact each stage had on the teacher undertaking such a programme in the following way:

- **Presentation of theory: level of impact – awareness.**

Presentation of theory, according to Joyce and Showers (1980), can raise awareness and increase conceptual control of an area to some extent. However, it is for relatively few teachers that it results in skill acquisition or the transfer of skills into the classroom situation. On the other hand, when the presentation of the theory is used in combination with other training components, it appears to boost conceptual control, skill development, and transfer.

- **Modelling or demonstration: level of impact – awareness, some knowledge.**

Modelling appears to have an effect on awareness and some on knowledge acquisition. Demonstration also increases the mastery of theory. Many teachers can imitate demonstrated skills fairly readily and a number will transfer them to classroom practice. However, for most teachers, modelling alone is unlikely to result in the acquisition and transfer of skills unless it is accompanied by other components.

- **Practice under simulated conditions: level of impact – skill.**

When awareness and knowledge have been achieved, practice is a very efficient way of acquiring skills and strategies whether related to the changing of teaching style or the mastery of a new approach.

- **Structured and open-ended feedback: level of impact – skill and transfer.**

Feedback can result in considerable awareness of one's teaching behaviour and knowledge about alternatives. With respect to the fine-tuning of styles, it has reasonable power for acquisition of skills and their transfer to the classroom situation. However, feedback alone does not appear to provide permanent changes, but regular and consistent feedback is necessary to maintain those changes.

- **Coaching for application: level of impact – application of the new skill.** When the other training components are used in combination, the levels of impact are considerable for most teachers up through the skill levels. For many others, however, direct coaching on how to apply the new skills and models appears to be necessary. Coaching can be provided by other teachers, supervisors, professors, curriculum consultants or others. Coaching for application involves helping teachers analyse the content to be taught and the approach to be taken, and making very specific plans to help the students adapt to the new teaching approach (Joyce, B., & Showers, B.,1980: 379-385).

As the coaching model became established in teacher professional development, other attributes were found in its approach, and other elements in its use were stressed. Caccia (1996), for instance, emphasised the important role of trust in the coaching process:

Coaching exists in name only unless the coach and the person being coached share trust and a sense of purpose. The last important aspect of successful coaching is a flexibility which teachers might need some helps in specific participation such as predetermined issues or in non-specific participation such as an outsider to determine areas for improvement (Caccia ,P.,1996: 18). Twenty years after the model's original formulation, Joyce and Showers had identified three further major functions that they believed it served:

- **Provision of companionship**

This function of coaching provides interchange with another over the change process. The coaching relationship results in the possibility of mutual reflection, the checking of perceptions, the sharing of frustrations and successes, and the informal thinking through of mutual problems. Companionship provides reassurance that the problems are normal. The

companionship not only makes the training process technically easier, it enhances the quality of the experience. It is a lot more pleasurable to share a new thing than to do it in isolation.

- **Extending executive control**

This function of coaching provides teachers with the capacity to make adjustments in their own way. They may choose how to use the new pedagogy appropriately during the transfer period, to select the right occasions to use a particular teaching strategy, to examine curriculum materials and plans and to practise the application of the new teaching method they will be using later.

- **Feedback and adaptation.**

Success with a new methodology requires teachers to practise with feedback on their early attempts so that they can improve their teaching skills. It is important for teachers' confidence that feedback is positive from students, colleagues and change agents during this trial period. The coaching approach in general, it is important to remember, is to assist change, not to evaluate teachers' performance

Many researchers (Knowles, M., 1978; Smith, R. M.,1982; Brookfield, S. D., 1986; Burns, R., 1995; and Tight, M., 1996) have described the key principles of adult learning. Among these, Brundage and Mackeracher (1980) emphasise that voluntary participation is vital to the effective engagement of adults. Voluntary participation as an element of adult learning assists in ensuring that the learners do not feel threatened and that there is a positive learning atmosphere developed. In the case of teachers this atmosphere or climate of learning would apply to the school and to the staff of the school in their approach to their professional development. The same researchers demonstrate that the provision of regular feedback enhances adult learners in developing their continued learning.

In the teaching profession, feedback can be obtained in a variety of ways. Teachers are encouraged to be reflective in their practice. Reflective practice in itself is a form of feedback. Teachers working in collegial teams, teachers conducting peer observation, teachers in study groups and other forms of professional interaction all provide feedback to each other on aspects of their learning together. Another principle of adult learning, which is relevant to the success of any professional development programme, is that adults expect that what they are learning is immediately useful to their situation (Brookfield, S. D.,1986).

This model, with refinement and application to particular settings, has proved to be a powerful method of assisting teachers to change their classroom practices in a range of subject areas. Ballard (2001), for example, reported on her experiences during three years as coach assisting mathematics teachers in Michigan public schools. She found that using a coaching approach successfully helped the mathematics teachers to adopt curriculum reforms expected of them. The study also showed that the coaching approach increased the teachers' understanding of mathematics and of how students learned. In addition, coaching assisted these teachers to implement classroom management strategies that led to a more positive environment of learning and inquiry in the classroom (Ballard, T. I., 2001:160-175). Slater and Simmons (2001) conducted a study with 17 volunteer teachers at a Texas high school which involved peer coaching to enhance the teachers' use of the new teaching strategies, and to overcome the teachers' feelings of isolation. The study showed that the programme did in fact help these teachers to enhance their teaching skills. The programme evaluation results indicated high agreement among teachers that they had learned new professional ideas, gained knowledge and ideas about practice, and brought about positive attitude and behaviour changes in students.

Conclusion

This article has described the theoretical concepts related to managing a significant curriculum change of the kind teachers confront in attempting to change their thinking and teaching behaviours currently in Thailand. It has considered research studies concerned primarily with the process of change and the major factors affecting the success of efforts to implement change. More specifically, this literature review provides theoretical frameworks related to changes in the curriculum and how the curriculum mandated by the Thai National Education Act of 1999 might be implemented successfully in classrooms.

The proposed systemic reform requires teachers to change their role from being one of dominating the classroom to becoming a facilitator in a learner-centred classroom. Top-down innovation has previously proven difficult in many educational contexts, and Thai teachers would appear to be no different in this respect from their colleagues internationally. However, a coaching approach has elsewhere been found to be an effective means of assisting a smooth and successful implementation of new curricula. The chapter provides a detailed account of the coaching approach and how it can be used in teacher professional development.

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