

## School-based curriculum innovations: A case study in mainland China

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### Abstract

*Decentralisation of curriculum decision-making has been a subject of key debates in international discussions on change strategies for enhancing school improvement, teacher development, and pupil learning. This movement impacts on policy changes in curriculum and pedagogical orientations in mainland China. However, there is a dearth of empirical research proving the manner by which schools have come to respond to challenges imposed by the central agencies. This paper documents an investigation of a school in Southern China, focusing on the structural and strategic measures employed by the school and its teachers in responding to these challenges. The paper concludes with moderate reservations on the effect of policy change based on empirical data from interviews with the school leadership and teachers.*

**Keywords:** school-based approaches to curriculum innovations, China education, educational changes

### Context of change

Decentralisation of curriculum decision-making has been the subject of key international debates on change strategies for enhancing school improvement, teacher development, and pupil learning in the past several decades (Skilbeck 1984; Hopkins 2001; Fullan 2001). The urge for decentralisation has resulted from the central agencies' failure to design and plan new curricula for implementation in schools. It is likewise triggered by the call for professional teachers' democratic participation in school and curriculum decision-making in the 1960s and 1970s in developed countries such as the USA and Australia, with the exception of England. The latter opted to move towards a comparatively more centralised system of managing school curriculum practices (e.g., Wang 1995; Lawton 1993; Australian Education Union 2004). Decentralisation entails the exercise of authority over the process of determining which relevant courses to teach, how to teach more effectively, and how to assess more accurately. These are all geared towards edging closer to where learning occurs to meet the pupils' diverse needs in mixed ability classrooms, which resulted from the introduction of compulsory education in the 1970s.

Therefore, it likewise entails shifting the roles of educators — from being traditional curriculum users to curriculum developers — and assuming increased responsibilities in formulating curriculum decisions for pupil learning (Wallace, Nesbit, and Miller 1999; Stenhouse 1975; Ovens 1999; Marsh 1997; Harris 2003). This decentralisation movement has impacted on the reorientation of curriculum policies and change strategies in mainland China. Curriculum reform has been prevalent among countries around the globe in their bid to produce graduates fit for globalisation and the knowledge-based economy and (Chan and Mok, 2001). In an educational policy document, "An outline of curriculum reforms for basic education (tentative)" published on 8 June 2001, the Chinese Government admitted that its current curriculum policies and practices are outdated, thus failing to meet the needs of the 21st century. The document outlines the curricular goals of education in mainland China and proposes that these should be re-designed to respond to the needs of international scholarship and trends in education and curriculum. The reforms' objectives are as follows: Cultivation of nationalism, socialism, community spirit, and traditional values;

1. Promotion of democratic and lawful consciousness among students;
2. Acquisition of world views and proper values;
3. Awareness of responsibility to others and to the community;
4. Importance of creativity, practical ability, awareness of environmental needs, and knowledge in science and the humanities;
5. Acquisition of lifelong learning skills and knowledge; and
6. Healthy body, balanced psychology of the human mind, aesthetic appreciation, and a balanced life style.

The document has likewise outlined the directions of change, which are summarised in the table below.

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There has been a dearth of empirical research on how these policy changes in curriculum and pedagogy have impacted on schools, particularly when change challenges traditional practices (Zhong 2006; Xu 2009; Huang 2004).

This paper begins with a case study in an attempt to document how a school and its teachers have responded strategically and structurally to a host of challenges that have recently come up. Research procedures and methods A case study approach was adopted, and a subject was selected in light of its close partnership with a national institute of research and its uniqueness in possessing a clear and explicit educational philosophy. The school is located in a new but experimental area in Shenzhen city, with little historical and cultural background and traditions (Interview with Head Teacher Wu, 11 July 2007, reading: 02'28- 03'33'). It is touted as a city of the future, which former Premier Deng Xiaoping referred to in a 1992 speech as a city to be modelled freely upon the Western capitalist concept and upon its colonial sister city, Hong Kong (XinHuaNet, n.d.). In the present study, two field visits and interviews were conducted. The first visit on 11 July 2007 aimed at collecting relevant documents and information related to the school's policies and organisation. Among those interviewed were the principal, Mr. Li and his vice-principal, Mr. XXX Chen. We likewise interviewed the head teachers and regular teachers of the faculty. A profile of participants in the school hierarchy was thus drawn. The interview revolved around three research questions:

- (1) What are the educational and curricular changes in policies and practices in mainland China, and how do stakeholders view these changes?
- (2) How does the school respond to these policy changes?
- (3) What are the expectations on future educational innovations?

After preliminary analysis of transcriptions and documents, the second visit and interview were slated on 20 March 2008. During the second visit, among those interviewed were head teachers and students, as well as the research assistant, Miss Hu Jing, who attended a subsequent lesson and pedagogical research meeting. The meetings were videotaped; the school head also consented to the paper's future publication in international journals.

### ***A case study in Shenzhen City***

Shenzhen City is located in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, one of the first exclusive zones for foreign investments as promulgated in the Fifth National People's Congress on 26 August 1980 (The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 1980). The city's economy has flourished since its inception, attesting to the success of introducing capitalist practices and management styles in a country with deep communist traditions. Proof to this is the average annual income of individual citizens that has consistently topped the list of major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2002). Adjacent to Hong Kong, the city's population reached approximately 8,460,000 in 2006. Of this number, over 76% are "immigrants" from other provinces and nearby cities. The influx of migrants has brought the population to 10 million as of the present. The city has the second largest number of ethnic minorities, which has a total of 56 groups, just trailing behind the Chinese capital Beijing. Shenzhen is young and energetic, possessing a symbolic and pragmatic relevance to modernisation and the open-door policy engineered by former Premier Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s while in the throes of Communist China.

Further, Shenzhen is one of two cities aside from Shanghai which was allowed to establish a stock exchange in 1990. Shenzhen Nanshan School, whose 40 classes comprise approximately 1,725 students and 131 teachers, was established in July 2002 by the China National Institute for Educational Research. The institute is directly under the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in Beijing (China National Institute for Educational Research, 2008), in partnership with the local Nanshan Educational Authority. The power relationship can be exemplified by the principal's direct appointment by the National Institute; the vice-principal was appointed by the local Nanshan Educational Authority (Interview with the vice-principal, 11 July 2007, reading: 05'07-05'34').

The school's accountability, which is removed from the local educational authority and its monitoring system, allows greater flexibility in employing qualified teachers. This new form of partnership allows a certain number of "paying" students in addition to the 1,700 students who are publicly funded by the school, thus infusing additional resources and support for the management (Interview with the vice-principal, 7 January 2008, reading: 04'00-04'28'; Shenzhen Nanshan School 2004, chap. 1). It is worth mentioning, however, that the disparate student composition, comprising both high and low socioeconomic classes, is aggravated by the fact that the majority are assigned by the central allocation system, with no intervention from the school authority. Though a fair system, this has resulted in a student population divided by contrasting socioeconomic backgrounds (Interview with the vice-principal, 7 January 2008, reading: 00'16-00'43'). There are three main reasons behind the choice of this school for the present study. First, Shenzhen is the first city purposely engineered by the mainland government according to capitalist standards and management models. It would be interesting to determine the extent to which education as a social policy has exemplified China's intention of closing the gap with international norms and practices.

Second, the local Nanshan educational authority in Shenzhen is among six authorities specifically assigned by the Ministry of Education as the first batch of educational authorities to conduct experimental studies on the new educational and curriculum reforms approved in 2001 by the Central Government (Bureau of Education of Shenzhen City, n.d.; Interview with the vice-principal, 11 July 2007, reading: 12'11-12'26'). A case study of a school in this local educational authority will provide important empirical evidence on the extent to which the current educational and curriculum reforms will impact upon the school's mission, infrastructure, and strategic innovations. Third, Shenzhen is half an hour away from Hong Kong by train, and its proximity has allowed the researchers to conduct interviews, observations, and school visits.

### **Mission and leadership**

The school was established to play an essential role in educational research and innovations in modern China. Its mission is stated in its school regulations:

“[U]sing school establishments as a major structure, establishing educational research bases at [the] national level, focusing on research, enhancing development by innovations, establishing more liberty, more freedom, more enriching cultural values in schools.....establishing these schools as the gateways and bridges between the Chinese basic education and foreign cultural exchange.” (Shenzhen Nanshan School 2004, chap. 2)

The school head, though merely in his 40s, draws on a wide spectrum of experiences in academic theory and practice. He has been a practitioner in the “field education” theory, combining modern movements in academic principles such as phenomenology, Marxist educational philosophy, postmodernist thoughts on critical thinking, and traditional Chinese educational principles. As former vice-principal of an experimental primary school on Chong Ming Island off the coast of Shanghai, he values the humanistic aspects of education and its transformative functions; he also values the importance of interaction between children and their social and natural environments in accumulating experience (Li 2007; Li 2005; *Tian yuan jiao yu dui hua*, “A Dialogue with Field Education”). His theories and practical experiences in “field education” have evident impact upon this philosophical reorientation of the school when he was appointed by the China National Institute for Educational Research, the sole management board of the school, in January 2004.

Mr. Li viewed himself as a “designer” of school education and its practice. He drafted “a framework of the school curriculum reforms” and negotiated with government officers on curriculum design to maintain a stable system. According to him, “... he is probably the only school head who has been able to attend most of his teachers’ lessons and joined most of the collaborative lesson meetings with his teachers” (Literal translation, Interview with the school head, 11 July 2007, reading: 05'30'-09'32'). His annual target was to attend 100 lessons and join 50 lesson planning sessions with teachers. The school head referred to this as “spiritual leadership in action,” as he viewed himself as a leader of multiple roles and talents (MacBeath and Myers, 1999; MacBeath, 2004, 1998). Mr. Li was well respected by his teachers (Interviews with Teacher Li1, 20 March 2008, reading: 42'30'-48'00'; and Teacher Wang, 20 March 2008, reading: 29'50' - 30'20'). In the interviews with the other teachers and vice-principal Chen, his leadership was cited as a key factor in the quality of the school. His academic philosophy was clearly delineated among his colleagues. He earned the respect of his teachers because of the “liberal attitude,” he espoused which allowed teachers to express different viewpoints and different teaching styles. Under his leadership, the school flourished and developed into an “accommodating” institution (Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 10'08'-10'30').

The impact of Mr. Li's leadership was likewise evident in the consensus among stakeholders regarding the school's curriculum objectives and implementation, thereby cultivating an “ethos” which positively influenced the teachers' work (Interview with Head Teacher Wu, responsible for Pedagogical Research Centre, 11 July 2007, reading: 28'03'-28'57'). His efforts at engineering consensus and enhancing motivational level among teachers were vividly described in an interview with members of the Pedagogical Research Centre, the unit that manages and initiates pedagogical innovations.

“...[T]his school head has been doing a lot more effective work on building team spirit among teachers than other heads...” (Literal translation, Interview with Head Teacher Wu, 11 July 2007, reading: 16'50'-16'58')

“...[T]he success of our school relies, first, on the establishment of a sound orientation and conceptual framework... I believe a good school should have a good school head...like every Friday, we have a ‘culture meeting’ for teachers, watching films, all classic and great films are chosen by the school head, together we enjoy...” (Literal translation, Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 08'50'-09'30', 11'27'-11'40')

In the interview, Mr. Li expressed a critical attitude towards curriculum reforms initiated by the government in 1999, particularly the lack of a critical approach to the underlying cultural values in the reforms.

He asked the concerned officials to clarify whether the new reforms were based on the values of traditionalism, modernism, or post-modernism (Interview with the school head, 11 July 2007, reading: 00'48'-01'56').

### **School structure**

The structure of the school organisation is characterised by a two-tier system:

- 1) The school's management board
- 2) Communist Party management

Under the school's management board, there are seven centres supported by an administrative unit.

The following tree diagram outlines the school's structure:

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This study focuses on the elements of the school mechanism directly related to curricular and pedagogical innovations and teachers' professional development. Therefore, there is a deliberate effort to concentrate on the school mechanism, with special responsibility in the following important areas:

- 1) Curriculum;
- 2) Pedagogy; and
- 3) Teacher development

### ***Development of school-based curriculum policy and principles***

The Curriculum Research and Development Centre was established with a clear aim of providing organisational leadership in curriculum research, development, and evaluation. A curriculum document for all teachers has outlined in great detail the school curriculum's aims and principles, with emphasis on culture, humanism, unity, and diversity. It has likewise outlined the relationship among the national curriculum framework, regional curriculum requirements, school-based curriculum activities, and professional role of teacher participation in curriculum development. The document likewise highlights key curriculum reorientations such as moving the current curriculum practices towards more integrated studies. There is a special focus on the application and problem solving aspects of learning as a response to criticisms against traditional and fragmented subject-based curriculum issues. It reiterates the importance of deep learning, with emphasis on the acquisition of generic skills such as collaboration and problem solving for lifelong purposes, rather than producing alienated citizens because of critical thinking and creativity (Shenzhen Nanshan School, 2004). Further, the document highlights the policy of introducing school-based curriculum activities into the formal school curriculum, differentiating instructions organised by each individual school and another mandatory segment required by the Central Government. It outlines the necessity of annually organising three to four theme-based learning activities anchored on a whole school approach to strengthen the impact on student learning (Shenzhen Nanshan School, 2004).

### ***Pedagogical research and innovations***

The capacity to conduct pedagogical research in schools has been considered an essential ingredient in achieving school effectiveness in modern education and reforms (Marshall, 2004). The school has adopted a structural approach to integrating research activities among teachers with pedagogical innovations. First, it has purposefully institutionalised research activities as part of the functional roles of key leaders in the school hierarchy. Second, it stipulates mandatory teacher participation in the research activities. Third, it has established a Pedagogical Research Centre as a core unit within the school infrastructure to provide leadership in planning, reviewing, designing, and conducting research activities within the school. In the formal school document, lesson design, classroom behaviours, instructional design, support for learning difficulties, and assessment are all considered as the essential functions of this centre. It emphasises that the classroom should be the base of all research activities (*Wen Hua Li Xiao, Jian Zao Jiao Yu De Du Shi Tian Yuan*, 2007).

The centre is expected to extend support as teachers conduct research related to field studies, situational analysis and pedagogical enhancement, using methods such as action research, reflection, and case studies. The organisation of research-based pedagogical activities is complex yet subject-based. Each subject team plays a dual role of managing daily administration and conducting pedagogical research work. Two examples illustrate each subject team's pedagogical function. Every week, each subject team conducts a meeting on lesson preparation focusing on planning, reviewing, designing, and assessing the objectives, pedagogical strategies, learning activities, learning outcomes, and objects of learning. Another type of pedagogical meeting is conducted, with discussions focusing on a "public lesson." Organising "public lessons" is a common feature of schools in mainland China (Tu 2007). For example, in this school, every teacher is expected to schedule two lessons for public viewing every semester. All teachers, including subject leaders and school heads, are free to join and conduct observations. After viewing, meetings are scheduled for public discussions on their effectiveness.

One “public lesson” and its corresponding meeting focused on design issues, problems with textual attractiveness on power-point presentations, and instructions for student activities (Public lesson [video-taped], 20 March 2008, 00:00:15-00:42:15; teacher evaluation meeting [video-taped], 20 March 2008, 00:00:01-01:01:22). Examples of pedagogical research projects conducted by the teachers are “Design and production of cartoons for children,” “Using stories in the newspapers in teaching children,” “Reading aloud as a form of singing – a case study,” “A study of Moon Culture in poems during the Tang Dynasty,” and “Folk beliefs and scientific culture.” Internal meetings among teachers were also organised for presenting these projects and findings for professional development purposes (Shenzhen Nanshan School, 2007). Majority of these research reports are available in the school’s Web site, <http://www.szyangxiao.net/list.aspx?cid=45>.

### ***School-based professional development activities***

Previous descriptions of activities conducted by the two centres, the Curriculum Research and Development Centre and the Pedagogical Research Centre, imply a strong orientation towards professional development in pedagogical and curricular innovations. The school authority, however, has undertaken specific measures in its organisation, emphasising the school’s role as a professional development centre with additional but formal responsibilities in developing teachers. The Centre for Teachers’ Culture was thus established specifically with modern schools’ changing role in contemporary world education in mind; it aims to transform the school from a solely teaching community to a learning community as well (Bainer, Cantrell, and Barron, 2000; Lachance, Benton, and Klein, 2007). The centre focuses on the teaching community’s “acculturation” in the school, organising school-based professional development activities covering the broad perspectives of the teaching culture (*Wen Hua Li Xiao, Jian Zao Jiao Yu De Du Shi Tian Yuan*, 2007).

Through activities such as film appreciation days, culture salons, and culture fora, the centre aims at enriching the teaching community’s cultural horizon and experiences, adding an extended version of professionalism to its members (Newton and Hoyle, 1994; Hoyle, 1982). For example, programmes under the culture salon include self-initiated and organised meetings on discussion topics such as teachers’ rights, God as a geometrician, teachers and philosophy, opening doors for children, and so on. These meetings aim at creating opportunities for critical thinking and promoting a broad perspective among teachers (Shenzhen Nanshan School, 2007). These meetings may take various forms such as blogs and are conducted in comfortable venues such as cafés and clubs. Attendance is free, thus attracting as many as 40 to 50 participants per session. Teachers from nearby kindergarten and primary schools are likewise occasionally invited (interview with Teacher Li1, 20 March 2008, reading: 04’15’-04’53’). Another teacher, teacher Li attended three meetings covering the following topics: “What is education?” “What is the future education for Chinese?” and “Eternal Fairy-tales for Children.”

“...[E]ach meeting has a hot topic in China, very attractive. The theme is flexible, atmosphere is exciting, very focused. Not everyone can join the discussion, but it is open [to] parents, teachers from kindergartens, ... teachers in the Nanshan region. ... The leaders are stimulating, participants like speaking up. [The] leaders are humorous [and there is a] harmonious atmosphere. ... There is no distinction between leaders and ordinary teachers, [and you] can object to the views of the school head. [It is designed] for academic and research...” (Literal translation, Interview with Teacher Li2, 20 March 2008, reading: 07’34- 12’22’.)

The impact on other teachers has been well recorded (Third Teacher Culture Salon, “Eternal Fairy Tales” [school internal circulation]). In the first round of interviews, teacher Zhou was asked regarding a personal example of an experience which impacted on his personal professional development in school. Choosing culture salon programmes as an example, he and six other teachers received additional resources from the school to organise a series of “meetings” on the topic, “Do teachers need philosophy?” (Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 12’25- 13’04’). He expressed appreciation for the freedom accorded to them by the school.

### ***School-based curriculum innovations***

The following is a selection of the key curricular and pedagogical innovations developed by the school in the past few years, in response to educational policy changes and students’ diverse needs. The selection illustrates the school and its leadership’s capability to review, plan, design, and evaluate its current curricular provision in light of the changing educational and societal milieu, and the subsequent challenges they bring. The selected innovations are regarded by interviewees as the most salient features of the school’s achievements.

A whole school approach to theme-based integrated learning. The curriculum reform, which began in 1999 in mainland China, is expected to eliminate the boundaries of subject-based curriculum, encouraging various types of integration between subjects and among different learning elements (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2001).

In this manner, learners are expected to appreciate the interconnectedness between different learning components and elements in all subjects. Further, integration is expected to focus on developing generic skills such as critical thinking and study skills among learners for lifelong purposes (Jacobs, 1991; Beane, 1995). The reforms stipulate that each school should allocate a certain proportion of time for curriculum activities organised and designed in accordance with the schools' own needs and environment (Appendix 1). School-based curriculum development in mainland China is understood as learning activities undertaken by schools or teachers (Zhou, 2006; Cui, Wu, and Fu, 2003). However, to address the conflict between the central curriculum's demands and the perceived need for a curriculum that is diverse and flexible enough to meet the needs of individual schools and children in different localities, the educational policy suggests adopting a "separation" model. This allows the curriculum to accommodate the needs resulting from the identification of the two curricula: central and school-based. Majority of schools in mainland China have adopted a separation policy, featuring both subject-based and school-based curricula, the latter being integrated in the curriculum organisation.

However, many innovation projects are related to the central curriculum (Huang, 2004; Gu, 1999). The school studied in this paper shares this similarity and trends with other mainland schools and allocates a proportion of curriculum time for weekly integrated studies. For example, the school has organised an entire learning module for each semester. The curriculum is theme-based and integrated, combining all possible learning elements in the semester. Themes such as "Voice of Spring" and "Rhythm of Autumn" are two examples. The learning dimensions for these themes include mathematics, culture, information technology, sociology, and so on. Learning activities include games, school competitions, Web design, and essay writing. At the same time, teacher-led research-based activities are also organised. Methods include situational analysis, action research, and case studies. These activities are designed for teachers' reflection and improvement as part of their professional development (Culture Learning Module, "Rhythms of Autumn," [school internal circulation]).

### ***Reading culture programmes***

Another school-based innovation unique to the school is a reading programme for all students. The school strongly believes that reading creates a new culture as well as life possibilities for children. Thus, establishing a culture of reading is deemed an effective means of cultivating moral and civic thinking among the younger set (Shenzhen Nanshan School, 2004). The reading list covers both Eastern and Western classics, ancient and contemporary works, as well as science fiction and reports on human tragedy. To date, the school has released two edited and illustrated volumes of select readings, underpinning the close relationship between reading and the development of moral thinking in Chinese culture and the history of education. Thirty-five moral themes have been chosen for this programme, with texts classified according to low, medium, and high levels of difficulty.

These themes include collaboration, children's heart, optimism, democracy, responsibility, wealth, confidence, life, conscience, love, and characteristics of being a gentleman (*Wen Hua Li Xiao, Jian Zao Jiao Yu De Du Shi Tian Yuan*, 2007). These are geared towards initiating children into a world of broad life experiences, full of possibilities and imagination, and with deep respect for culture and ethnicity. The reading drive is expected to produce a generation immersed in rich discourse, possessing spiritual enlightenment and civilized morality. For example, texts contain the history of other nations such as India, Hawaii, and Muslim countries, ghost stories of China and the West, love stories of Chinese minorities, and Western classics such as *Swan Lake*. The reading programmes combine aesthetics, imagination, minority culture, local folk culture, and world history (Li, n.d., n.d.). The reading programmes' impact is evident in interviews among teachers and students.

Head Teacher Wu reported on the reading club's progress and stated that inviting both teachers and students to read the same books was "a new gesture" that helped develop critical thinking. Conclusions were derived from discussions and any conflicting opinions were not resolved by coercion nor power relations. In addition, the students were also encouraged to develop a new perspective (Interview with Head Teacher Wu, 11 July 2007, reading: 15'13'-16'06'). Teacher Zhou commented that inviting famous authors and writers to meet and converse with the students' created a direct and personal impact on the latter's life experiences (Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 17'50'-18'09'). When asked regarding the school's key feature, three primary-six students confirmed the extensive reading programmes' impact on them (Interview, 20 March 2008, reading: 06'10'-07'37'). A junior-three student expressed critical observation when asked regarding the same question:

"...I think this school has created a reading culture. [It] is ok, though it may not be very effective, the school has been doing a lot to improve this aspect. The school has done a lot of activities. I feel [that] the school emphasises on the reading culture..." (Literal translation, Interview with One junior three student, 20 March 2008, reading: 14'10'-14'27'.)

### ***Discussion and conclusion***

The school's striking characteristics affirm a number of research findings and observations on effective schools in other parts of the world (Marshall, 2004; Lachance, Benton, and Klein, 2007). This is not to say that effective schools are necessarily causally related to those actively engaged in research. What this paper presents is a case in mainland China, a country which has been emerging in contemporary world politics and economy as an influential entity that aspires to achieve international standards and morality. Leadership has been committed to an education which is deeply rooted in an integration of principles from the West and the East. It focuses on child-centred approaches in organising learning activities and developing generic skills for lifelong learning, and infuses approaches to moral training and cultivation of civic responsibilities (Interview with vice-principal Chen, 11 July 2007, reading: 25'30' - 27'10'). Freedom is likewise an important element in its leadership. Power coercive models of eliciting change among teachers have been tempered by a re-educative approach. Teachers have been accorded freedom in organising activities aimed at developing a broad outlook, specifically a global culture, in an extended version of professionalism.

“... Talking about [the] personal development of a teacher like me, this one and a half year under the leadership of the school, I feel the ethos is liberal and free, can hold different views and styles, personalities. [The] school head and the school authority are very accommodating. We can read many books, we can listen to the invited speakers, many of [whom] are from other disciplines, having achievements of different kinds, with broad knowledge. This is a form of liberal studies. This is important to me, enhancing my horizon, [allowing me to think deeply]. I think in [the] long term, our teachers here will be very different from other schools...” (Literal translation, Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 10'10' - 11'26'.)

School-based development activities have been well organised with a specific purpose in mind. Teacher lesson preparation aims at cultivating team spirit at a pedagogical level, with emphasis on improving teaching and learning. This is supported by another type of professional development meetings aimed at developing a broader outlook and a professional community with critical-mindedness and openness to criticisms. These activities create a community with reflections on both personal and institutional levels (Interview with Head Teacher Wu, 11 July 2007, reading: 24'20' - 25'20'). The school-based innovations, whole school theme-based learning, and extensive reading programmes focus on innovative pedagogies, moving the traditional assessment-oriented curriculum towards a school-based one, which is broad enough to meet the diverse needs of students. In mainland China, the school curriculum is commonly divided into compulsory (organised according to centralised guidelines) and regional or school-based (emphasises local curriculum initiatives). According to the school head, the school-based curriculum was reorganised into three categories to accommodate internal conflicts between a curriculum for all, which might suppress the development of individual talents, and a curriculum which is biased and elitist.

In this new curriculum, students are allowed to select electives from different categories of learning components (Interview, 11 July 2007, reading: 01'20' - 03'33'). This specific curricular strategy creates equal opportunities for both the advantaged and the less privileged. However, the policy per se and its impact on student learning require further investigation. Engineering an education which may be considered radical in traditional Chinese education is innately problematic. Like other countries who underwent educational reform, resistance from teachers has been recorded in China, owing mainly to confusion in role differentiation as well as additional tasks occasionally being assigned. Being a user or developer of a curriculum is a complex issue for many teachers (Interview with vice-principal Chen, 11 July 2007, reading: 32'23' - 33'56'). The traditional argument for a school-based model in both curriculum and professional development rely heavily on consensus among teachers that participation is “good.” However, this underlying assumption appears to face serious challenges. A certain form of division of labour will result in increased work focus. However, would this re-orientation of school-based models change the original arguments for school-based curriculum development? How to sustain innovation and change is a chronic issue in school-based innovation.

“... Traditionally, it is [the] Beijing Duck type education (spoon feeding), now it aims at independent learning. This is good among the reforms. Student participation enhances their abilities, at least with some improvements in being aware of the essential learning approaches, but this must be long term. Only implementing for a time is not enough. The new innovations must become permanent behaviours and habits, or students and teachers will return to the old traditional practice...” (Literal translation, Interview with vice-principal Chen, 11 July 2007, reading: 38'18' - 39'40'.)

Other problems have likewise emerged in reforms in mainland China, such as the mismatch between the demands of an innovative curriculum and the traditional role of assessment in a highly selective and competitive system. This mismatch can be observed in the teachers' qualities and the newly integrated curriculum's demand for those who can teach across subjects. Increased autonomy was highlighted in interviews with teachers as well (Interviews with Head Teacher Wu, reading: 19'55' - 20'55', and Teacher Zhou, reading: 23'36' - 24'15', 11 July 2007). With an evident pessimism, Teacher Zhou expressed criticism over the current reforms' effectiveness. He expressed concern about pragmatism among teachers and a general lack of commitment. He likewise expressed concern over the superficial changes in the use of the latest pedagogical strategies, which he believed was less effective than a deep approach to adopting the new pedagogy and enhancing learning among students.

“... They model some surface techniques from the veteran teachers, some changes in techniques, but I feel they have not changed their concepts and perceptions...” (literal translation, Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 04'25'-05'58'.)

Teacher Zhou stated that the clash between the traditional approach to Chinese language learning and the innovative version lay in the emphasis on culture and humanism learning, de-emphasising language learning and its pragmatics in the innovative curriculum (Interview with Teacher Zhou, 11 July 2007, reading: 06'28' - 08'33'). These observations may be true among many teachers in mainland China. Their experiences in planning, designing, and implementing the current educational and curricular reforms are possibly similar to educational systems in both developed and developing countries. The case study above affirms these observations. This case study, however, cannot be adopted to generalize the manner by which other schools in different Chinese counties and provinces have been responding to challenges imposed by the Central Government, such as increased responsibilities. However, this case study presents a concrete evidence of the way a number of educators at the grassroots level have been contributing to the betterment of education by using their own academic theories and practical wisdom. This, in the author's judgment, effectively illustrates how East meets West and vice versa.

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**Appendix 1. Curriculum Plan of the Nine-Year Compulsory Education in Shenzhen City**

Duration	Subject discipline	Year									Total class hours	Proportion of total class hours in nine years (%)	
		1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>			
Required Course	Morality & Life	2	2								140	7.3	
	Morality & Society			2	2	3	3				350		
	Ideological & Moral Education							2	2	2	206		
	Chinese Language	9	8	7	7	6	6	6	5	5	2055	21.2	
	Mathematics	3	4	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	1322	13.9	
	English Language			3	3	3	3	4	4	4	832	8.7	
	Science	Integrated			2	2	2	2	4	5	5	760	8.0
		Biology							2	2			
		Physics								2	3		
		Chemistry									3		
	History & Society	Integrated							3	3	3	309	3.2
		History							2	2	2		
		Geography							2	2			
	Physical Education	Physical Education	4	4	3	3	3	3				700	10.6
		P.E. & Health							3	3	3	309	
	Arts	Music	2	2	2/1	2/1	2/1	2/1	1	1	1	906	10.6
		Fine Arts	2	2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1/2	1	1	1		
Information Technology	Information Technology				1	1	1	1	1	1	208	7.3	
	Integrated Practical Activities			2	2	2	2	2	2	2	486		
	Total	22	22	26	28	28	28	31	31	31	8583		90.1
Elective Course								2	2	2	206		
Local and school-based curriculum		4	4	4	2	2	2	1	1	1	733	9.9	
Total weekly class hours		26	26	30	30	30	30	34	34	34			

Note: For details on the guidance for setting up the local, school-based curriculum, please refer to “*Shenzhen Shi Yi Wu Jiao Yu Ke Cheng Ji Hua Shuo Ming*” (Descriptions on Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan of Shenzhen City). (Source: Shenzhen Government, 2008)

**Table 1. Reorientations of Curriculum Policies and Change Strategies in mainland China**

Dimensions of innovations	From	To
Approaches to teaching	Didactic and unidirectional	Highly self-motivated and taking initiative in learning; learning to learn; emphasis on values
Curriculum contents	Complicated, extremely difficult, academic-oriented and outdated materials	Emphasis on students' life experiences, scientific experiences, and individual interests and needs
Learning processes	Receptive learning Rote learning Mechanistic training	Active participation Enquiry-based learning Data collection Process information Hands-on experience Ability to construct knowledge Analytical skills Problem-solving Communication and collaboration
Assessment	For selection, elitist philosophy	Enhancing student learning Developing teachers Improving teaching
Administration	Centralized system	Tripartite relationship among central government, provincial agencies, and schools

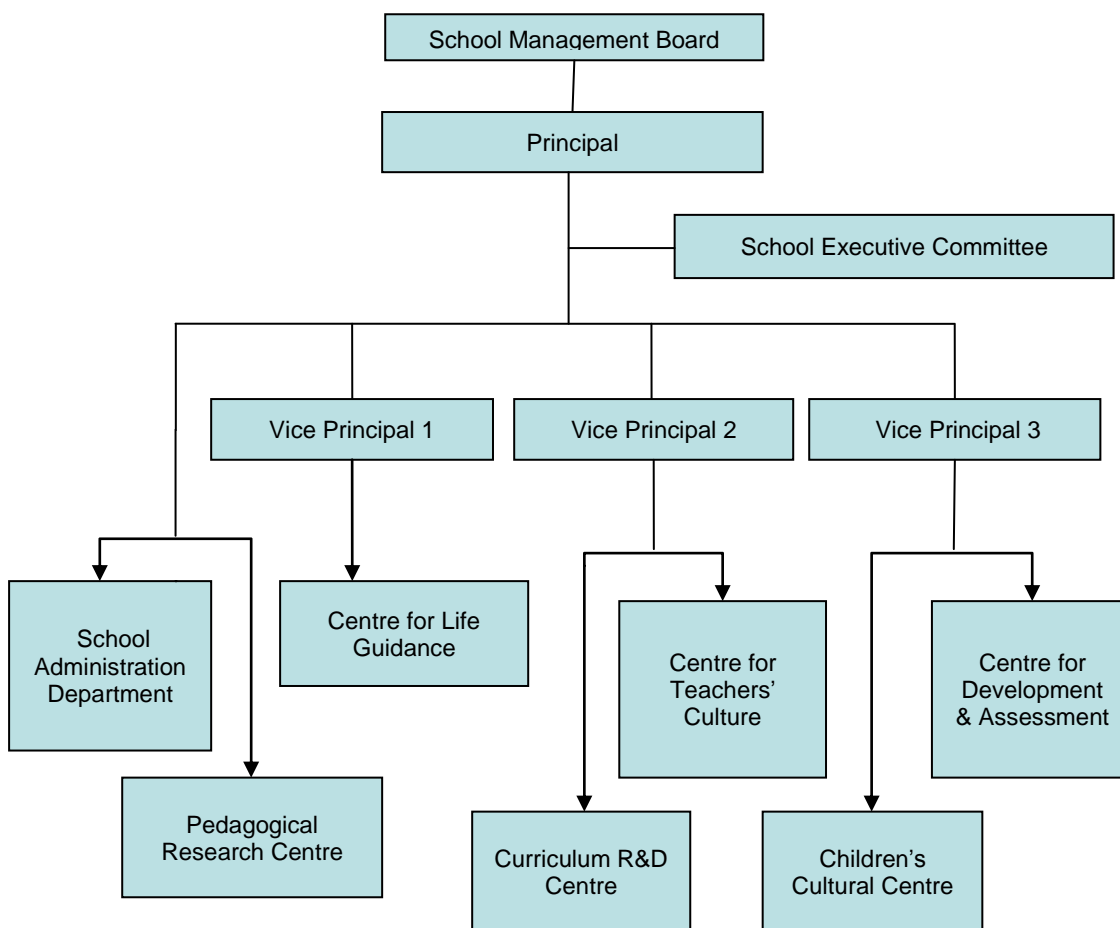


Figure: Organizational Structure of the Shenzhen Nanshan School