A model for school-based curriculum development

Peter Ramsay, Barbara Harold, David Hill,
Catherine Lang and Russell Yates
School of Education, University of Waikato

Introduction

Curriculum development usually involves both content and teacher change. The way this happens influences the extent to which developments are implemented in schools. New Zealand has for many years followed a centre-periphery model. This is essentially a top-down model in which a central authority decides what changes are required, and then expects all parts of the country to implement them. However, there has, over time, been considerable dissatisfaction expressed about the use of this model. Shipman (1974), for example, has shown the dangers of allowing the centre to become isolated from the periphery. Some teachers further away from the centre can feel as lonely and ill-informed about change a lighthouse keepers!

In New Zealand, traditionally officers within the Department of Education, in cooperation with the School Advisory Service and selected teachers, took major responsibility for ongoing revision of the curriculum. Many people, particularly those in provincial centres, felt this was too centralised and open to political manipulation. Moreover, it was claimed that the curriculum was controlled by too few people and that the interests of minority groups - especially Maori - were often overlooked.

Prior to the administrative reforms, therefore, some experimentation had occurred with a more localised approach. One of these experiments, described by Ramsay et al (1993), involved an external consultant developer, together with a researcher, working with teachers and parents in clusters of schools to try to improve curriculum decision making and delivery. The results showed up some problems with the model. First, it was very expensive and second, some schools seemed unable to sustain the impetus achieved once the developer was no longer available.

The reform of educational administration in New Zealand - sometimes viewed as the most radical in the world - brought with it significant changes in responsibilities in the areas of teacher's professional development and curriculum renewal. The dissolution of the Curriculum Development Unit within the then central Department of Education and the abolition of regional Education Boards left a hiatus which local school Boards of Trustees had to fill. These changes provided renewed interest in the possibilities of school based curriculum development. The model described in this

paper arose from a Ministry of Education Contract* let in 1993, the major purpose of which was to investigate improved methods of curriculum development and teacher renewal.

First, however, to give a perspective to the model, it is useful to review some of the relevant literature about school-based curriculum development, and the process of teacher change.

Views about school-based curriculum development

As long ago as 1980, there were efforts in New Zealand to break away from the centre-periphery model of curriculum development. For instance, Nisbet (1980) argued a convincing case for increasing the autonomy of schools to allow them to decide - within broader frameworks - the content of teaching programmes. He suggested that in order for curriculum projects to be maintained over long periods of time, those doing the actual implementation needed to assume some ownership of the innovations. Writing in the same volume, Weeds (1980) drew attention to some potential problems of school-based curriculum development. Arguing from the perspective of a rural school teacher he worried about the potential of "the blind leading the blind". Weeds suggested that many school teachers not only appreciated, but also needed, outside facilitation. Both of these perspectives reflected the large scale debate on school-based curriculum development which had occurred in the 1970s and continued well into the 1980s.

Skilbeck (1984) brought together much of the evidence then existing on procedures for successful school-based curriculum development (SCBD). He recognised the problems associated with isolation, as well as problems arising from too much direction from the centre. He argued a case for an integrated approach involving on the one hand a core curriculum, and on the other considerable autonomy at local level based on self-reflection, problem-solving and the development of networks within schools.

Not all research supports SBCD. There are those critics who claim that it is "... piecemeal, partial and paradoxical" (Prideaux, 1993, p.169). This is especially the case where devolution has allowed schools to move too far away from a common core. However, we argue that if SBCD becomes inclusive and is supported by outside consultants and inner change brokers then this is a very strong method for bringing about curriculum renewal, a conclusion which is in line with most international research (Marsh, Day, Hannay and McCutchen, 1991).

---

* The research contract for 18 months and involved two representative clusters of North Island primary/intermediate schools, nine in each.

Views about change

In her brief review of change theory literature, Oliver (1992) has suggested that two broad types of change theory exist. The first, labelled by Woodman and Pasmore (1987) as "implementation theory", described what needs to be done to induce change and how to ensure that a change attempt becomes successful. The second type has been labelled "change process theory". This theory endeavours to explain the dynamics of the change process. Of course, these two fields are closely related and one would expect the latter to inform the former. Recently a considerable amount of work has been done in both of these areas by researchers such as Barnett (1990), Corbett, Firestone and Rossman (1987), Deal (1990), and Fullan(1986). In New Zealand, Ramsay and his colleagues (Ramsay, Harold, Hawk, Kaai, Marriott and Poskit, 1990) have undertaken a careful examination of the change process and dynamics involved in the development of collaborative curriculum decision making in a range of New Zealand schools. Taken together, the arguments of these researchers indicate some key conditions which are necessary for successful change. These fall into three main areas:

(i)   The implementors of the change must come to own the change. This implies and inclusive rather than an exclusive process in which there are numerous opportunities for as many people as possible for involvement, and for discussion and debate of critical issues.

(ii)   A repertoire of change strategies is required since many different decision making situation need to be employed.

(iii)   There needs to be provision of what has been referred to as "quality reflection time" (Ramsay, Harold, Hawk, Kaai, Marriott and Poskit, 1990).

In addition, recent research has paid considerable attention to the culture of the institution within which it is hoped the change can be obtained. Deal (1990) concludes that breaking through the structures of the culture requires transformation rather than restructuring. As he puts it,

> *Transforming schools entails a fundamental renegotiation of cherished myths and sacred rituals by multiple constituencies: parents, local politicians or residents, as well as administrators, teachers, staff and students. The entire community must reweave or reshape the symbolic tapestry that gives meaning to the educational process, and this takes time.* (Deal, 1990, p.9)

Deal identified three phases in changes processes, the third of which is a trapeze-like event of letting go of the past and grabbing on to the new ideas. In this stage, people let go of old values, beliefs and their practices, and begin to experiment with new forms. It involves a change not only of ways of doing things, but of the very culture of the institution itself. These theories, which Ramsay and his colleagues (1990, 1993) have substantiated empirically, are very important in the introduction of

new ideas into school cultures. The research contract, out of which the model of SBCD described in the next section of this paper was constructed, was based on the principals emanating from change theory.

A model of school-based curriculum development

The model was pioneered in Project CRRISP (Ramsay et al., 1993) and refined during the research and development contract mentioned earlier. It consists of three main elements, namely a review process, the use of an outside developer(s), and the involvement of an inside implementor(s).

Review process

This requires a school to establish its own curriculum goals, taking into account national requirements, through an analysis of strengths and weaknesses. Four questions guide this process:

- Where are we at?
- Where do we want to be?
- How are we going to get there?
- How will we know when we have got there?

Developer

The developer is a respected outsider who assists staff, especially the implementor.

- to undertake the initial review.
- develop an appropriate and flexible strategic plan to achieve the goals established,
- build confidence in their collective ability to engage in the curriculum development process,
- by making documents accessible and 'user friendly',
- take a critical stance towards such documents,
- undertake careful, systematic and critical analysis of new ideas,
- forge a network with staff in other schools engaged in similar development so that ideas can be shared and compared, and
- generally create a climate of change or culture of innovation in the school.

Implementor

The implementor is a respected member of staff who acts as a 'change broker' within the school. It may be anyone from the principal to a junior member of staff. However, if it is a junior member of staff then for the period of the development it is recommended that the teacher be included as a member of the management team at least for curriculum discussions. The task of the implementor is to lead the implementation of solutions and innovations so that teachers on the staff take ownership of the change.

This includes
* initiating (if necessary) and leading discussions, debates, systematic analysis and periods of reflection,
* helping colleagues maintain links with staff in other schools to enable common understanding across teachers and curriculum developers of levels of attainment expected of children, and
* facilitating a regular review of the strategic plan.

A strong recommendation is that the notion of 'implementor' be built into one of a '**lead team**' whereby people from all parts of the school are jointly involved in leading curriculum development. The team could well include a Board of Trustee member and perhaps for particular curriculum projects a member of the non-teaching staff.

Observations of the model at work

Overall, the schools which used the model achieved positive results, although there was considerable variation depending on such factors as stability of staffing and the extent to which schools had tried a school-based development approach themselves prior to their involvement in the research contract. Particular things that stood out for the authors were:

* The implementor needed considerable training in their role.
* Teachers and parents needed help in analysing critically key documents such as national curriculum statement. However, when this was provided, some thoughtful analyses emerged, such as the comment of a principal who reflected that in terms of the structure of the curriculum documents, " ... the levels are just a waste of time".
* The impact of reforms, especially the **rate** of change, on teachers' and Board members' lives needs to be carefully monitored, otherwise overload can occur. As one principal said, "implementation is evolutionary" and cannot be driven by Ministry edict. Others talked especially so in the area of assessment. One implementor, commenting on the pace of change in curriculum and assessment development, said, "Teachers are starting to comment on the time data gathering takes away from teaching time", while other teachers felt that time was being wasted recording the same information in more than one place.
* Schools which were in the vanguard of innovation put in place mechanisms to ensure that new ideas were sought, analysed critically and adapted to the needs of the school. For example, in one school the implementor placed a chart in a prominent position in the staffroom on which all staff could make notations about goals for curriculum change.
* Schools preferred the whole school development model to the 'trickle-down' model used in the teacher development contracts let by the Ministry of Education

whereby the two or so staff members who attended a professional development course were expected to share their expertise when they returned to school. One school, for instance, reviewed its classroom approaches in mathematics and achieved remarkable changes in teaching styles in a relatively short period of time using the whole school development model. These changes included more problem solving, discussion, co-operation learning and the use of calculators, and less teacher talk in the classroom.

- Teachers appreciated the facilitative role of the outside consultant (the developer), for example, in identifying barriers to learning. As one principal said, involvement in school-based curriculum development "... gave fresh meaning to my life as a professional". Indeed, within the model, we found the role of the developer to be critical.

- The barriers to learning tended to be interpreted differently by various staff and Board of Trustees members, which meant that there were different views about the kinds of strategies needed to overcome them.

- A number of principals, and some Board of Trustees members took on managerial language very quickly but, as Codd (1990) warns there is a danger that the technocratic rationality of managerialism, with its emphasis on economic values, will distort or distract from the achievement of sound educational goals.

- Although some staff were initially reluctant to engage in school-based curriculum development because they saw it as yet more work, in the event almost all teachers participated positively. As one principal noted, "I'm really pleased with the way staff willingly become involved. Very young teachers are taking huge responsibilities."

- A large amount of groundwork needed to be completed before strategic planning could be implemented. For example, frequent visiting of schools - at least one a week - by the developer in the early stages of a school-based curriculum development project was needed. We also found that a cautious approach needed to be adopted and that sound relationships needed to be established in the first instance, especially with senior staff.

- Teachers came to believe in the idea that they could meet their own self-determined goals. This was reflected in many principals' attitudes towards reviews conducted by the Education Review Office. At the beginning of the research contract we noted that schools were thrown into an assessment frenzy prior to visits by review officers but by the end of the 18 months many principals were stating categorically that they would establish their own goals and would seek to be reviewed in the light of these goals rather than beliefs generated by some outside agency. It is our view that this was a sign of growing professional autonomy amongst principals who participated in this

research project.

Conclusion

The school-based curriculum development model described in this paper was a flexible and powerful model which should prove to be valuable if implemented elsewhere, particularly if the implementor is part of a 'lead team'. There is now no question that teachers, senior staff and most Board members who were involved in this research project appreciate the importance of regular, systematic, yet flexible planning procedures as far as curriculum development is concerned.

References

Barnett, B. G. (1990) Peer-assisted leadership: Expanding principals' knowledge through reflective practice. *Journal of Educational Administration,* 28, 3, 67-76.

Codd, J. (1990) Managerialism: The problem with today's schools *Delta,* 44, 17-25.

Corbett, H. D., Firestone, W. A. And Rossman, G. B. (1987) Resistance to planning change and the sacred in school cultures. *Educational Administration Quarterly,* 23, 4, 36-59.

Deal, T. E. (1990) Reframing reform. *Educational Leadership,* 47, 8, 6-12.

Fullan, M. G. (1986) Improving the implementation of educational change. *School Organisation,* 6, 3, 321-326.

March, C., Day, C., Hannay, L. and McCutchen G. (1991) *Reconceptualising school-based curriculum development.* Lewes: Falmer Press.

Nisbet, J. (1980) Curriculum process: International perspectives. In P. Ramsay (ed) *curriculum issues in New Zealand.* Wellington: NZEI.

Oliver, D. A. (1992) Reviewing the BEd/DipT programme and organisational structure of the School of Education through an institutional merger: An investigation into the process of change. A research study in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Science. Hamilton: The University of Waikato.

Prideaux, D. (1993) School-based curriculum development: Partial, paradoxical and piecemeal. *Journal of Curriculum Studies,* 25, 2, 169-178.

Ramsay, P., Harold, B., Hawk, K., Kaai, T., Marriott, R. and Poskitt J. (1990) "There's no going back". collaborative decision making in education. Final Report: Curriculum Review Research in Schools Project. Hamilton: The University of Waikato.

Ramsay, P., Hawk, K., Harold, B., Marriott, R. and Poskitt, J. (1993) *Developing partnerships : Collaboration between teachers and parents.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Shipman, M. (1974) *Inside a curriculum project: A case study in the process of curriculum change.* London: Methuen.

Skilbeck, M. (1984) *School based curriculum development.* London: Routledge.

Weeds, G. (1980) Curriculum process: A practitioner's viewpoint. In P. Ramsay (ed) *Curriculum issues in New Zealand.* Wellington: NZEI.

Woodman, R. W. and Pasmore, W. A. (1987) *Research in organisational change and development,* Vol. 1. London: Jai Press.

Note: Readers are welcome to contact any of the authors for further information.