THE STUDY OF STRATEGIES OF CURRICULUM LEADERSHIP UNDER THE CURRICULUM REFORM – CASE STUDY OF TAIWAN PRESCHOOLS

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Abstract

Curriculum leadership is a commonly discussed issue on different educational stages. And it has been proved to be helpful for promoting the quality of school curriculum and the results of students' learning. But in Taiwan, most preschools are still in the beginning on curriculum leadership. They lack stable systems and the outcomes. Due to the low birth rate, the pressure of recruiting students is high. Most preschools focus their characteristics on the equipment, buildings and the environment. Curriculum leadership has been neglected because it takes a longer period of time to show the result. In addition, the organization of a preschool itself, which is small and short of professional leaders, has led to their ignorance on curriculum leadership. Some preschools emphasize on man leadership too much. That is also not good for a sound curriculum leadership system and has bad influences on the curriculum’s quality. Therefore, curriculum leadership of preschools in Taiwan should get higher attention than before.

Meanwhile preschools in Taiwan are facing the curriculum reform. Ministry of Education started temporary “Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework” in October, 2012. And formal edition has been bringing into practice since December, 2016. For the past five years, many preschools changed the way and habit of curriculum planning. They adopted “Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework” to plan curriculum and also inspected the contents, but the results among the preschools are quite different. According to many researches of Taiwan’s curriculum framework’s practicing, preschool educator’s needs on the teaching scenes couldn’t be fully satisfied, even though the government or some teacher’s learning centers held many seminars or workshops. The preschool itself must provide stable systems both in curriculum plan and teachers’ professional developments to help them face the curriculum reform. Besides, researches also suggested that if a preschool has a better and stable curriculum leadership system, the results of carrying out curriculum framework are better, such as the teachers’ educational concepts are more correct, the quality of curriculum is higher and teachers’ performances are more professional.

The aim of this study was to discover the strategies of curriculum leadership for preschools while facing the curriculum reform and to find out what conditions and resources are required. This study contained three aspects: First, what’s the influence of curriculum reform for preschools? Second, what are the strategies of curriculum leadership under the curriculum reform? Third, what are the conditions and resources required to carry out curriculum leadership? This study described the current situation of preschools curriculum leadership and curriculum reform in Taiwan. The content also consisted of six interviews with preschool directors on how they put curriculum leadership into practice and how it worked. Through the survey of actual situation about preschools’ curriculum leadership, the study will help understand the strategies of curriculum leadership under the curriculum reform has been done and what resources are required. In addition, this study will provide helpful information for improving the effects of Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, as well as promote preschools’ curriculum quality and school characteristics.

Keywords: curriculum leadership, curriculum reform, Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework (ECECCF), preschool.

1 INTRODUCTION

This section includes two parts, the curriculum reform of preschools in Taiwan and the current situation of preschool curriculum leadership in Taiwan.
1.1 Curriculum Reform of Preschools in Taiwan

In the past two decades, there has been a flourishing development in Taiwan’s preschools. Complying with the concept of open, self-managing and multiple curriculum modules, preschools in Taiwan provide rich resources for children to learn. Through intimate interactions between teachers and students, children have more creative ways of thinking and they have better school performances. The progress in Taiwan’s preschool education came not just from the preschool’s own efforts, the government also did its part. Ministry of Education in Taiwan invited many scholars to work on “Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework” (ECECCF) in the past ten years. And after five year’s research on the teaching scenes and information collecting, the official version has come out and has been put into practice in December, 2016.

The contents of ECECCF includes following main points:

1. It clearly points out six core competencies for children, which are awareness and identification, expression and communication, care and cooperation, reasoning and appreciation, imagination and creation, and self-regulation. These six core competencies also indicate the points of evaluation on children’s learning.

2. To cultivate the six core competencies, ECECCF separates preschool curriculum into six fields, including physical movement and health, cognition, languages, sociology, emotions and sense of beauty. It also provides field goals, curriculum goals and learning goals in each field as references for teachers to plan curriculum and activities.

3. When preschool teachers plan activities, they can focus on the curriculum goals and learning indexes. They can use them to check if their lesson plans cover different fields for children to learn.

4. ECECCF emphasizes that preschool teachers must plan their curriculum integrated and systematically, and what children learn must relate to their living environment.

To help preschool teachers understand better and to increase their abilities to carry out ECECCF, Taiwan's Ministry of Education has five main strategies.

1. Ministry of Education put the contents, E-learning lecture and examples on its official website for preschool teachers to go on-line learning.

2. Holding a series of workshops based on different levels and situations when carrying out ECECCF. Preschool teachers can choose the workshops according to their personal needs.

3. Gathering about 200 experts and scholars of early childhood education and making them realize correctly about ECECCF. Afterwards, they can help preschool teachers carry it out.

4. Establishing six regional consulting and promoting centers. They offer preschool teachers different kinds of learning community and resources. This helps teachers understand better about ECECCF and increases their abilities to implement it.

5. Offering budget to encourage preschools to invite experts and scholars to do clinical counseling regularly. Thus, teachers can do a better job practicing ECECCF.

According to Ministry of Education’s promotion and preschools’ efforts, ECECCF is more and more commonly adopted. Many studies showed that children learned much better with the multiple and complete curriculum planned by ECECCF in comparison with those who didn’t. In addition, preschool teachers can focus on children’s learning and find out what needs to be improved through ECECCF.

However, ECECCF also encountered some difficulties when being promoted. And its results differed from school to school.

1. Many preschool teachers, especially senior ones, found it difficult to cope with the new ways of curriculum planning and teaching. It contents and methods of ECECCF.

2. There are numerous preschools in Taiwan. Even if Ministry of Education provides many workshops, it still can’t meet all the teachers’ needs. So, preschools’ own system of professional developments become very decisive.

3. Preschools need a complete leading mechanism to see the curriculum’s quality wholly. But because curriculum leadership is still in the beginning stage, preschools need resources and scholars’ help to obviously present the achievements of practicing ECECCF.
In the future, these are the three problems that need to be solved when implementing ECECCF.

### 1.2 The Situation of Preschools’ Curriculum Leadership in Taiwan

Taiwan’s universities, secondary schools and elementary schools have done a good job on curriculum leadership with well system and procedure. We can therefore see the influence on the quality of curriculum. In contrast to preschools, the practice of curriculum leadership is not mature enough, which can be attributed to the following five causes. First, most preschools’ principals were teachers promoted to the positions or part-timers. They lack management administration and leadership skills in spite of the professional training programs whether during orientation training or on-the-job training. Consequently, without first-hand experience, principals cannot equip themselves with complete and precise knowledge and skills on curriculum leadership. Second, most preschools in Taiwan put emphasis on the curriculum and instruction, but they focus on teachers’ performances with one single theme instead of the preschools’ systematic planning and application of overall curriculum. As a result, principals have less practical experience in curriculum leadership. Third, the birth rate is very low in Taiwan. In order to have sustainable operations, many preschools enroll students with no holds barred. Meanwhile, nice environment and well-equipped facilities which can immediately draw parents' attention will be highly valued by principals. By contrast, the quality and effectiveness of curriculum leadership may be neglected because it requires more time. Fourth, principals in Taiwan public preschools change in rotation for a year or two. Thus, the principals who used to be teachers keep a “service-minded” attitude instead of “leadership” while they are taking the lead. That is why the leadership effectiveness appears to be low. In addition, with term limit and rotation shift, the efficiency of leadership cannot be seen easily although principals have undergone specific leadership. Fifth, Taiwan’s preschools are often small in size which are shorthanded and without a sound system of personnel and job duties. Consequently, principals have to share more responsibilities and unable to concentrate on curriculum leadership. The lack of a sound system will lead to rule of human and cause curriculum leadership approach differently. Therefore, the long term stability cannot be sustainable.

For the above five reasons which illustrated the dilemma and phenomena that Taiwan’s preschools have encountered for the past few years. However, in recent years ECECCF has been under implementation and Taiwan's Ministry of Education has offered solutions to the problems and assisted preschools to carry out the project. Three major strategies which are as follows: First, Taiwan's Ministry of Education organize training courses related to curriculum leadership to help principals and teachers understand its concept and operation. Second, Taiwan's Ministry of Education collect real examples, compile them a book, and release them online. Third, to improve principals' knowledge on curriculum leadership, Taiwan's Ministry of Education plan a series of courses for principals, set up workshops and teacher learning community.

Over the few years, the implementation of ECECCF (including interim version) has not only upgraded the quality of curriculum and teachers’ profession, but it has also had Taiwan Ministry of Education and preschools realize the current situation and offer them help as well. The main purpose of this study, through in-depth interview, is to understand how preschools perform curriculum leadership after ECECCF was issued. This may provide preschools a right direction of curriculum leadership and elevate their operational efficiency which can establish their curriculum quality and features.

### 2 METHODOLOGY

Interview is the main research method in this study. It focuses on the strategies of curriculum leadership under the curriculum reform. Six preschool principals are interviewed. The researchers of this study did the interviews in person to gather all the information, then classified and analyzed the information. By checking each other’s point of views, the reliability and validity is reinforced.

There are eleven questions in interview. Question 1 is the number of class, children and teacher. Question 2 is the length of service of preschool principal. Other nine important questions are followings:

1. What is your definition of curriculum reform?
2. What is the influence brought by curriculum reform to your preschool?
3. What is your definition of curriculum leadership?
4. What are you doing about curriculum leadership?
5 What is the impact of "Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework" on your preschool?

6 What have you done facing the implement of "Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework"?

7 Do you have any difficulties when doing what was mentioned above?

8 What resources do you need to make above job go more smoothly?

9 What does it take to make preschool's curriculum leadership work? What is your opinion about this?

3 RESULTS

3.1 Definition of Curriculum Reform

Nearly all the interviewees had the right perspective about curriculum reform. They all thought curriculum reform brought suitable courses that complied with the world trend. They found out what needed to be improved in preschool teachers' teaching and then gradually adjusted their methods and directions. One of them mentioned that the role of teachers in curriculum reform should be highly regarded. Preschool teachers should know how to work on it and they should reinforce professional knowledge and abilities.

3.2 Influences of Curriculum Reform

After sorting out the interviewees' thoughts, the effects of curriculum mainly included these parts:

1 On preschool children's part: Compared with the past, children were more active in participating and more willing to express their thoughts when there were group activities.

2 On teachers' part: Preschool teachers reconsidered the definition of curriculum, broke through old teaching habits and increased professional knowledge and abilities. The quality of education also improved. Besides, they planned the curriculum stressed on children's developments and preschools' local cultures.

3 On the preschools' part: The curriculum structures has become clearer and more systematic.

3.3 Definition of Curriculum Leadership

Most of the interviewees' recognized the concept of curriculum leadership, they all mentioned about the important contents of curriculum leadership as follows.

1 First of all, knowing the preschool's prospects and belief for running the school and the characteristics of curriculum.

2 Estimating the current situation of the preschool to decide the methods of curriculum leadership, make periodical plans and gradually accomplish them.

3 Guiding and supporting teachers in curriculum planning and practicing.

4 Being able to communicate with teachers through discussion and to give them suggestions and strategies.

5 Curriculum leadership is the key to the success of curriculum reform.

3.4 Doing about Curriculum Leadership

The replies of the interviewees mainly included:

1 Recording teaching and making related files based on the preschool's current situation and demands, such as teaching journals, records of incidents and case counseling and charts for learning area observations.

2 Encouraging teachers to have open leadership while they are teaching. Providing examples through curriculum development meeting or teaching conferences, so as to improve teachers' thinking abilities on curriculum and teaching activities.
3 Making plans for developing the characteristics of the preschool and carrying out the plans gradually.
4 Holding workshops and applying for counseling to make teachers know better about the spirit of curriculum reform and how to practice it.

3.5 Impact of Implementing ECECCF
The replies of the interviewees mainly included:
1 Reexamining curriculum and its application.
2 Emphasizing the curriculum on different fields to avoid being biased.
3 Provoking more themes for teaching.
4 Reconsidering the preschool’s current situation on curriculum through curriculum leadership.
5 Assessing children’s abilities to offer teachers a clear goal and direction when teaching.
6 Amending and reminding teachers how to use learning indexes to improve teaching quality and teachers’ profession. So they can win parents’ approval.

3.6 Doing When Facing ECECCF
The replies of the interviewees mainly included:
1 Participating seminars to clear the concept.
2 Applying for consultation to assist teachers know better about the new curriculum framework and how to practice them.
3 Purchasing relevant books about curriculum framework for teachers to read.
4 Making and editing charts and files of teaching records, such as teaching journals, records of incidents and case counselling, charts for learning area observations, evaluation charts of children’s learning on theme curriculum.

3.7 Difficulties When Facing ECECCF
The replies of the interviewees mainly included:
1 Teachers’ individual differences, including teachers’ individual motive on professional development and unclear points.
2 Being unfamiliar with the methods of curriculum leadership.
3 Being difficult to implement the belief of the preschool.
4 Persuading teachers to cooperate and provide suggestions for teachers to improve their curriculum.
5 Teachers’ turnover rate is relatively high. No enough stability.
6 It’s not easy to cultivate teachers.

3.8 What Resources Are Needed When Facing ECECCF
The replies of the interviewees mainly included:
1 Administrative sustainment and support.
2 Having professional support and intervention from outside the school to help with teachers’ professional development through association and workshops.

3.9 Resources Needs of Curriculum Leadership
The replies of lots interviewees included:
1 Specific leading goals and directions are required.
2 It’s important to know teachers’ demands.
3 It takes enthusiasm to create a wonderful learning environment.
4 Arrange suitable workshops.
5 Form a stable group of core teachers.
6 Have a full-time principle and professional assistants to help with administration work
7 Establish a consensus among the faculty.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In the past five years, ECECCF did bring lots of changes in the curriculum of Taiwan's preschools. Many researches, including this study, all showed that curriculum reform has made the preschool children learn better and it had positive impacts on the preschool teachers' teaching concept and their curriculum planning. But we also found that curriculum leadership didn’t work out as well as expected.

Curriculum leadership is still in the beginning stage in Taiwan. It’s affected by the preschools’ organizations, human resources and their own cultures. Despite all that, this study discovered that some senior principals with long years of service who were interviewed did have adoptable methods to be learned from.

This study concluded all the information from six interviewees on three research questions as follows:

1 The influences of curriculum reform for preschools.

All the interviewees held positive attitudes toward curriculum reform and took it as a result of social changes and a progress. Instead of ignoring it, they faced curriculum reform actively. They had clear thoughts about the impacts brought by curriculum reform in three aspects, including children's part, teachers’ part and preschools’ part. The interviewees all indicated that ECECCF in Taiwan had positive impacts on those three parts. The results of implementing ECECCF indelible, even though some teachers had to change their points of view and teaching habits.

2 Strategies of curriculum leadership under the curriculum reform.

Most of the six interviewees could define curriculum leadership clearly. But when asked about how it should be carried out, they were not very sure of what to do, especially about the procedure and the integration. This study showed that most of them may have the right perspective about curriculum leadership, yet they couldn’t clarify what should be done about it. After analyzing these interviewees’ lengths of service, some of them who have longer years of service have ideas and experiences of curriculum leadership. According to these interviewees’ experiences and the study results of Lin (2016), followings are the strategies suggested:

- Understanding the background conditions of preschools and setting up goals and visions
- Having a sound organization structure, creating administrative support and simplifying working and content process
- Developing curriculum targets and establishing curriculum implementation
- Creating a positive teamwork atmosphere
- Framing a supportive work environment
- Developing and promoting teachers’ professional learning communities
- Applying for consultation to assist teachers when needed
- Revising and promoting charts and files of teaching records
- Conducting curriculum evaluation and valuing self-improvement

Furthermore, the interviewees mentioned that “teachers” was a dominant element which led to difficulties when implementing curriculum leadership. Teachers’ individual differences, consensus, cooperation and their turnover rate were all the reasons for the ineffective curriculum leadership. Thus, this study also suggests that principals should regard teachers as important working partners in order to have successful curriculum leadership.

3 Conditions and resources required to carry out curriculum leadership.

All the interviewees mentioned the administrative support from inside the preschool and the assistance of experts and scholars from outside the preschool were very important foundations of curriculum leadership. Besides, setting goals, managing teamwork, coworkers’ professional
developments and enthusiastic organizational cultures were all crucial to when implementing curriculum leadership.

Furthermore, most interviewees called that principal is the key person in curriculum leadership, but not everyone can be or suit for a curriculum leader. Many studies also prove that and suggest curriculum leaders need specific qualities to bear the multiple roles (Glatthorn, 2000; Huang, 2003; Ou, 2004; Cheng, 2008). Lin (2016) elucidated an excellent curriculum leader has good personality and professional knowledge. In personality respect, curriculum leaders need to be integral, profound, logical, introspective with correct attitude, sociable and decisive. In terms of professional knowledge, the following six abilities are required:

- Understanding the government decrees on early childhood education
- Understanding and practicing early childhood curriculum
- Being able to implement
- Being able to elucidate phenomena and submit solutions through self-reflection
- Being able to establish and lead learning communities
- Being able to create positive organizational culture

While preschools in Taiwan are flourishing, there is an unstable factor, the curriculum reform. But with the principals' right perspectives and multiple resources coming from the society, the quality of Taiwan's early childhood education has been improved and children has learned a lot better than before. In addition, curriculum leadership in Taiwan may still need to be promoted and worked on, but with the right perspective and direction, a sound system, teamwork, and supportive organizational cultures, we believe that curriculum leadership is very promising and its better results are to be seen in the future.

REFERENCES