

Area: Curriculum Planning, Writing Skills, Teacher Development

**Title: Revamping the School-based Writing Curriculum in a Collaborative Approach:
A Journey of Student Empowerment & Teacher Development**

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Introduction

English teachers always have a number of questions in mind when it comes to the teaching of writing. They need to consider what writing tasks should be developed for students, what writing skills and strategies should be taught in the writing process and what teaching strategies should be adopted to facilitate learning etc.. The English panel chairpersons from Lui Cheung Kwong Lutheran Primary School also had these queries when they started collaborating with the School-based Curriculum Development (Primary) Section two years ago. Particularly, they were concerned about what English teachers could do to help students improve their narrative and descriptive writing. It was their eagerness for having an effective writing curriculum which would help all English teachers in the school get a better understanding of what they should teach in the classroom, when they should do so and why that ignited the thought of revamping their existing curriculum.

As the panel heads agreed that a good curriculum should promote continuity of experience and should ensure smooth transition for students to move from one grade to another (Saylor & Alexander, 1966), they decided to revamp the school-based writing curriculum to make certain that teaching is purposefully structured and logically sequenced across P.1 to P.6 and students can build on what they have previously learned and develop essential writing skills and strategies progressively. The teachers aspired the initiative would be in line with the notion of progression of knowledge and skills (The Curriculum Development Council, 2004).

Revamping the curriculum with collaborative efforts

With the support of the Principal, a task group consisting of six teachers was formed and each member took up the role of level coordinator for one level. In an attempt to put the ideal into practice, the task group met regularly before the summer to discuss the curriculum design and the strategy or skill focuses for each level. With concerted effort, a vertical framework of the writing curriculum was developed with reference to the curriculum documents, which outlines the learning focuses to be covered for each level and the teaching strategies to be adopted at different stages to help students improve their writing, in particular descriptive and narrative compositions. The writing framework includes information about what and when writing skills and strategies should be taught in the writing process, such as how to generate ideas, how to put words in a logical order to make meaningful phrases, sentences and paragraphs, how to elaborate ideas, connect ideas and show cohesion in different ways and how to use various techniques to plan, enrich the story development and end a story.

The principles of scaffolding and recycling were applied in the planning process. The task group tried to establish a close link between the writing tasks and the contents of the course books for the first term. One main writing task was developed based on two textbook units. Backward planning was adopted to ensure that students would be led through reading, speaking, listening, class writing or group writing in a connected and sequenced manner so that they could learn and practice using the target vocabulary items and sentence structures with support before attempting the main writing task on their own. To build students' confidence and allow them to recycle what they learn, one mini-writing task was designed for each unit for students to use the target grammar items and sentence patterns in a relatively more controlled manner before they were asked to apply their previous learning to the writing assignment.

The curriculum was also developed on the basis of Bruner's notion of spiral curriculum – 'A curriculum as it develops should revisit the basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them' (Bruner, 1966, p.13). The framework was planned in a way that allows students to build on their foundation by revisiting the target skills and strategies taught previously before applying them in new and meaningful contexts. In addition, the task group took into consideration a balanced coverage of text types through discussing what writing genres would be suitable for various themes in the course books across the six levels.

Extending the impact across levels

Since the core members had grasped a good understanding of the curriculum design as well as the learning focuses for different levels in the task group meetings, they played the role of level coordinator explaining the rationales of the design to teachers teaching the same level and leading them to design writing tasks that were linked to textbook units in the second term based on the vertical framework. They also oversaw what teaching strategies should be used to deliver the skills needed for the writing tasks. To establish a rapport among themselves, the task group functioned as a 'think tank' tackling issues collectively, including examining if the writing tasks could facilitate the application of the target knowledge and skills planned, discussing the implementation procedures of learning activities and peer observation, and collecting student work for analysis.

Impact on teaching and learning

With the vertical framework, all English teachers in the school could obtain a clearer understanding of what writing skills and strategies students should develop at different levels and what they should do to help students meet the targets. This brought about an increasing awareness of the shift from content teaching to skills and strategies development of students. It provided more concrete ideas for teachers to develop mini-writing tasks and main writing tasks that help students apply the writing skills, target sentence patterns and grammar items they had learned in writing. The notion of backward planning also helped teachers discern whether the scaffolding tasks were sequenced in a way that facilitates students to apply what they had learned in the main tasks. With more consensus among teachers on what to teach and how to teach, they were more confident about being on the right track in paving the road for students to achieve academic success.

It was found that students of high, middle and low abilities showed good progress after the reform and their writing improved in terms of length, content development and organization. Generally speaking, students showed a better understanding of the features and organization of narrative and descriptive writing. Student writing exhibited consistent application of grade level expectations and

essential features of particular genres. For example, the majority of P.2 students could generate ideas with simple writing frames like mind maps and put ideas into at least two paragraphs. Students from P.3 or above were inclined to use dialogues to enrich their stories and use time phrases and cohesive devices to show the sequence of events and connect ideas in a logical manner while senior primary students were able to write more vivid descriptions of events and elaborate ideas using a wider range of strategies.

Embracing the power of collaboration

As mentioned above, the core members agreed that the vertical framework provided English teachers with a better understanding of the essential knowledge and skills that students at each level should acquire, which enabled them to exchange perspectives and ideas with their grade-level teachers on how each level's work could contribute to achieving a coherent overall plan through designing new writing tasks, rewriting the teaching and learning materials, as well as selecting appropriate teaching strategies and learning activities based on the framework. Teachers' professional exchange and participation in the process of revamping the curriculum not only nurtured a more collaborative and sharing culture but resulted in a learning experience. Teachers came to the realization that introduction of new strategies in an isolated or fragmented manner would not be workable. They learned that measures promoting collective wisdom to tackle challenges, such as using a "think-tank" approach, and extending the impact through strategic deployment of staff are vital. In addition, factors like common teaching rationales and shared teaching practices must come into play for a successful implementation of any new initiatives. This heightened understanding and awareness of the power of teacher collaboration "indicated a degree of social development – another important teacher achievement necessary for effective curriculum change and overall school development" (Fung, 2000, p.153).

Teachers as curriculum makers

What came as a gradual revelation to the core members was that they were developed and changed as they were involved in the decision making process and their identity as curriculum makers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) grew in the pursuit of achieving vertical continuity and horizontal coherence in the revised curriculum. Their active participation in the whole decision making process gave rise to a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the school-based reform (Korostoff, Beck & Gibb, 1998), which empowered them to take up the leadership roles to implement change at the classroom and curriculum levels and to continue refining the curriculum as necessary.

Way forward: Refining the revamped curriculum

The school has successfully developed a vertical writing framework covering the key learning targets as well as the main writing tasks across the six levels. However, after the evaluation meeting with the task group, it was agreed that the framework should be refined and there are a few areas that deserve attention. The core members will scrutinize the framework to see if all the knowledge and skills suggested in the Curriculum Guide have been systematically infused into it and to see if there is a balanced coverage of text types and genres. Some members shared the concern that despite the availability of the framework, sometimes teachers might miss the point when they just focused on what knowledge and skills to teach without pay attention to the question of "how". Therefore, more thought will be given to how the writing skills and strategies should be taught to students in context and how writing lessons (pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing) should be more effectively conducted.

In this sharing session, the teacher presenters will share with participants their journey of planning and implementing the revamped curriculum and the problems that they encountered. Apart from showing the impact of the reform on learning and teaching, the presenters will also share how their belief in teachers as curriculum makers was shaped and how a collaborative and sharing culture was nurtured through this challenging but meaningful endeavour. The last part on the limitations of the revamped curriculum and the teachers' follow-up actions should be illuminating to participants as they may gain some sights into what to take notice of when revamping and implementing their own school-based curricula.

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