Making effective use of smaller class size to facilitate better teaching and learning

Background

The Chief Executive announced in his 2007 Policy Address that the Government will implement small class teaching (SCT) in public-sector primary schools by phases, starting from the cohort of primary one students in the 2009-10 school year and extending it to all classes from primary one to primary six by 2014-15.

Will smaller class size necessarily bring about better teaching and learning?

Lorin W. Anderson (2000) pointed out in his research entitled "Why should reduced class size lead to increased student achievement?", that smaller classes provide opportunities for teachers to teach better; they do not cause teachers to do so. In order to take advantage of these opportunities, teachers must understand the types of changes they need to make when teaching in smaller classes and be helped to learn how to make these changes.

The school is one of the 37 primary schools participating in the SCT pilot study in 2004. Since then, the initiative was extended to all levels and subjects. Through holistic planning and effective use of resources, the school was able to create more time and space for teachers to make improvement in teaching and learning.

Level

P5

Strategies used

Strategy	Detail
Setting up a focus group	With the additional resources, the Principal and the Vice Principal played an active role in steering the initiative and setting up a task group to support the project. They worked out a systematic plan with short-term and long-term goals, collaborative planning and peer observation sessions and regular monitoring of progress and review of goals with the teachers involved.
Systematic and strategic planning	Understanding that SCT is a favourable context rather than a strategy to maximise the opportunities of teaching and learning, the school first conducted a SWOT analysis by identifying the facilitating factors for implementation and possible obstacles they might encounter. They then formulated a practical action plan with clear goals, strategies, expected outcomes and a time for collecting evidence of learning. Constant review was conducted to track the progress.
Extending the impact from one level to another	In order to extend the good impact from one level to other levels, the school used a variety of means such as internal panel sharing and peer lesson observation to nurture a collaborative culture among teachers. This gradually enhanced the professional capacity of teachers.

What happened

Management of resources:

The following table shows how the schools made use of the resources economically to create more time and space for teachers to facilitate better teaching and learning under the SCT context.

Type of resource	What they are	How to use them
Human	• support from Language Learning Support Section • setting up a focus group • one additional teacher • one additional teaching assistant	Apart from setting up the task group to support the project, one additional teacher was employed to release workload of other teachers so that they could undertake school-based professional programmes, and play a leading role in sharing with the panel members on the implementation of SCT. One extra teaching assistant was employed to support teachers on administrative duties and preparation of teaching materials. The LLSS officer guided teachers to adapt the curriculum and develop materials to facilitate better teaching and learning through co-planning.
Time	extra time created because of teachers' reduced workload	In order to cater for learner diversity, the management level made special time-tabling arrangements to facilitate ability-grouping in different classes. Teachers therefore had more time to think about how to plan the lesson systematically and use a variety of strategies and activities to cater for students with different abilities.
Physical	extra space in the classroom	Teachers made use of the extra space by exploiting existing resources such as the blackboard, display boards and furniture to support classroom learning and facilitate cooperative learning. They designed a broad range of co-operative activities to enhance student-to-student interaction and the interactive and authentic use of the language.
Financial	funding from the government	The management flexibly integrated different kinds of funding with the SCT funding to purchase resources and equipment to facilitate better teaching and learning in a small class environment.
Outside	educational providers	In order to release time for teachers to focus more on developing the curriculum and pedagogy, the management hired some external providers as tutors to take up the duties of teachers by conducting extra-curricular activities.

Curriculum:

Analysis and Finding	Action taken	Benefit gained
With the help of Territory-wide System Assessment and internal assessment data, teachers were able to identify problems in curriculum planning as follows: • lack of transition between levels • lack of alignment between learning, teaching and assessment • textbook-bound teaching • gaps identified between objectives and learning outcomes	**Vertical planning** Teachers mapped out the Territory-wide System Assessment skills descriptors and language forms and functions in P1-P6 curriculum plans according to their level of difficulty and complexity. They also integrated a variety of text types into all levels, ensuring students have a balanced and comprehensive exposure to different kinds of text types. **Horizontal planning** A balanced coverage of objectives, learning outcomes, text types and values and attitudes, etc. were included in unit and module planning.	• Teachers were able to free some space to inject new ideas into curriculum design and adaptation. • There was space created to support teachers to adapt the curriculum to cater for the diverse needs of students.

Teaching and Learning:

With the extra time and space created, the teachers could spend more time on curriculum and pedagogical adaptation. The following case illustrates how the teachers use different strategies to cater for learner diversity.

Focus: From Reading to Writing

Topic: A good citizen

Level: P5

Stage	Strategy		Action taken
Pre-task	Varying the input 	Vocabulary building	Identify the core vocabulary and include additional vocabulary to be learned by more able students
		Use of language arts and a variety of text types	• Use different language arts elements and a variety of text types to motivate students and enrich their learning experiences • e.g. poems, songs, stories, chants and advertisements
While-task	Differentiating the tasks 		➢ Use a broader range of tasks and activities to develop students' multiple-intelligences (MI) and to provide them with an enjoyable experience: • Musical: listen to the song "I'd like to teach the world to sing" • Interpersonal: work in groups to create poems to express real and imaginative ideas • Linguistic: write letters to "Friends of the Earth" to share their opinions and feelings • Visual: draw pictures to show an ideal world ➢ Watch PowerPoint slides and pictures to explore the themes in the poems and songs

	Varying the amount and style of support and guidance	Task analysis: • Break down the reading texts into smaller and manageable chunks for the less able students to digest • Use visual and pictorial cues and gestures to help students understand the text
Post-task	Varying the amount of expected output to help students achieve the final task	• Guide and support through scaffolding at the pre-writing stage to help students generate and organise ideas • Provide the skeleton and ideas for less able students to write a letter to "Friends of the Earth" to share ideas and opinions • Ask more able students to work in groups to create a poem about helping teachers with creative ideas and rhyming words

Professional capacity building:

Purpose	Strategy used	Party concerned
to exchange ideas and experiences	**Inter-school workshop** The school was invited by other schools to share their pilot experience on SCT. The Principal and the core subject panel heads shared how they maximised the benefits of SCT to improve teaching and learning.	The Principal and the subject panel heads
to improve teaching, learning and assessment practices	**Co-planning among teachers** Collaborative lesson planning was implemented in P5 level. Joint effort had been made among teachers in formulating teaching plans, sharing experiences and reviewing teaching and learning effectiveness. This allowed better achievement of consensus building and communication among panel members.	All P5 teachers and the officer

to reflect and share views and ideas on teaching	**Peer lesson observation** Teachers were willing to open up their classrooms for peer observation and discussion. They were able to exchange ideas and experiences and make reflection upon teaching and learning practices.	All P5 teachers and the officer
to sustain impact and extend the practices from one level to another	**Internal panel sharing** A platform for reflection and collaboration was built in the English panel to allow teachers to share the difficulties and successes in implementing the programmes and pursue continuous improvement of the English panel members.	All English teachers, the Principal and the officer

Impact on teachers

1. With a smaller number of students in the classroom, the teachers could pay more attention to the **individual needs** of students. More wait time was given to them to answer questions and provide constructive feedback. They also differentiated the types of questions asked in order to develop students' critical thinking skills.

2. The teachers have become more aware of using the extra space in the classroom to increase **interaction among students** and to build up a **language-rich environment** to enhance teaching and learning.

Impact on students

1. Based on the research findings, students' **interest in learning** was increased. They enjoyed participating in the co-operative learning activities. More opportunities were given to them to speak in English and the relaxed classroom atmosphere enabled them to **express freely and participate actively** in the learning process.

2. With the integration of authentic learning materials with the textbooks, students were able to apply the language in meaningful contexts. This gradually enhanced their **motivation and confidence** in using English.

Facilitating factors

1. Support from the management

The Principal and Vice Principal were committed leaders in the 3-year SCT pilot study. They showed strong support to the officer and teachers by facilitating the analysis of data, supporting the professional sharing of teachers and keeping abreast of the development of the project.

2. Strong professional leadership of the panel head

The panel head was open-minded and receptive to changes. She started early planning with the officer prior to the commencement of the new term. She often took a proactive role in collecting information and analysing data and trying out new ideas. She was able to apply her learning to develop other members of the English panel through internal sharing.

Difficulties and suggestions

Difficulties	Suggestions
Time constraint Time was a concern to the school as it was under QAD inspection in March. There was stress and tension among teachers when they needed to prepare both for the inspection and the SCT project.	Set priorities and select achievable goals at different stages before the implementation.
Limited knowledge on SCT The teachers involved in the project knew little about SCT. They didn't know how to make use of SCT to enhance teaching and learning.	Spell out clearly how teachers can make use of the reduction of class size and the physical space to improve teaching and learning.

Way forward

In order to sustain the impact further, the P5 teachers who participated in the co-planning projects will be equipped as core leaders to lead the teachers at different levels to maximise the benefits of SCT. Next year, more focus will be placed on developing students' writing skills.

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Effective use of funding to effect educational changes

Background

Flashback to March 2006, when schools were invited to apply for the English Enhancement Grant (EEG), resources were provided to support the teaching and learning of English in schools adopting Chinese-medium teaching. Schools, whose proposals were approved, were provided with a time-limited grant spanning a period of 6 years. The maximum amount each school could get in a year was $500,000, amounting to 3 million in total.

Most schools used the English Enhancement Grant to employ extra staff, like teachers and teaching assistants, to buy services from outsourced providers, to subsidise student activities and teacher development programmes and to purchase hardware and software, e.g. on-line programmes. Money was spent. However, to what extent have these measures helped achieve the objectives put down in the proposals? It may be too early to draw any conclusions before interim reviews with all participating schools are carried out. But, as reflected by many teachers, quite a lot of difficulties were encountered in the planning, implementation and evaluation (PIE) process.

Difficulties encountered

Stage	Difficulties
Planning	• Not possible to plan as far ahead as 6 years • Not easy to make alignment with the past, the present and the future →a lot of add-ons and stand alone measures • Panel chair is always in charge of writing up the plan while other teachers have little or no involvement →fail to develop ownership in what they do • Writing up a plan is often perceived as an administrative duty rather than as a learning opportunity for the professional development of teachers • So many things can be done to raise students' English standard →teachers have no idea what to include and how to prioritise
Implementation	• A lack of coherence between the objectives and different measures plus alignment between the objectives set and the output targets to achieve • An over-reliance on hire of service →difficult to sustain the impact of different measures • An ineffective use of the extra staff being employed →released teachers have little idea about what to do with the space created + free periods often shared evenly among teachers instead of deploying staff strategically to undertake tasks by stages • Under-utilisation of the hardware and software (e.g. on-line programmes) purchased • Difficult for the programmes to be carried through over a long span of six years
Evaluation	• Not easy to monitor the quality of service offered by the outsourced provider • Unsure how to sustain the impact on school once the service is over • No idea what evaluation tools to use and develop to assess how well the students learn • In the absence of measurable and observable output targets, no directions for further improvement in the learning and teaching process are provided.

Strategies used

In face of these difficulties, schools have tried to employ different strategies to cope. What follows are a few school cases illustrating attempts to deal with the problems encountered when **drawing up the English enhancement plan**, **deploying the released teachers**, **implementing and monitoring the outsourced programmes**.

Case A: Holistic planning of the curriculum

1. Curriculum Planning Processes:
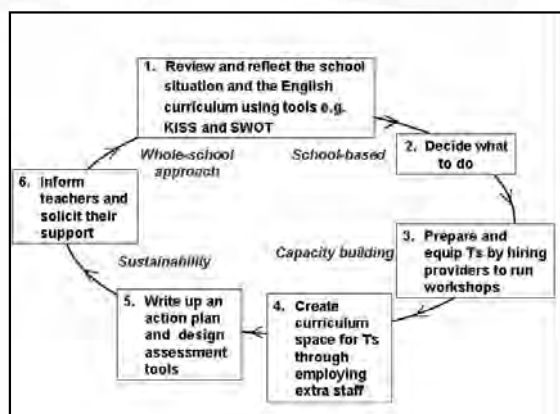
2. Development of a 6-year school-based holistic plan:

Area of focus	What	When	Who	How
Infusion of language arts into the English curriculum at junior secondary in preparation for language arts electives at NSS	Story-reading & story-telling	Year 1	S1	Read-to Speak Programme (Reading ➔ Speaking)
	Drama	Year 2	S1 + S2	More speaking ➔ Dramatised reading
	Popular Culture	Year 3	S1 + S2 +S3	Getting to know the different kinds of popular culture: newspaper, magazines, advertisements
	Short stories	Year 4	S1 + S2 +S3 + S4	Reading ➔ Discussion
	Drama & Film	Year 5	S1 + S2 +S3 + S4 + S5	Acting out & Script writing
	Popular Culture	Year 6	S1 + S2 +S3 + S4 + S5 + S6	Writing reviews, newspaper /magazine columns, advertisements

3. Factors taken into account when drawing up the holistic plan:

(i) When doing any kind of holistic curriculum planning, it is important that the school **knows what educational trends lie ahead** and what they imply, then **lines up the resources in hand** and **makes effective use of them to do early preparation**. Language Arts was chosen as the focus area because teachers were not confident enough to handle this Elective Part in the NSS.

(ii) The school adopted a **step-by-step approach** when carrying out the 6-year plan. First, the school started off with Short Stories which teachers had experience and confidence in teaching. This was followed by Drama, which teachers had organised as an extra-curricular activity but not taught as part of the formal curriculum. In view of its complexity and teachers' unfamiliarity with Popular Culture, this LA elective is being dealt with in the third year to allow teachers more time to learn about it through attending courses, workshops and seminars. After the first cycle of implementation at the junior secondary level, they will enter the second cycle with senior secondary to teach with more breadth and in greater depth.

(iii) The school actually engaged in a **curriculum renewal process** when drawing up the holistic plan. Together they identified what kind of challenges lay ahead and set the direction (*preparation for the NSS*). Next they employed tools like KISS and SWOT to examine their present state of play and more importantly, find out any gaps to fill. Once teachers became aware of what actions to take and why (*consensus building*), the school worked out when these things had to be implemented (*setting of time-line*) and how each party might be affected and involved. This involved the strategic deployment of human resources and the building up of teachers' capacity. This is the reason why an extra teacher was employed to release two teachers to work on the school-based short stories programme in Year 1 (*creation of space*). In the second year of implementation, the expertise of a drama service provider was sought to provide training for teachers and to run lessons for students (*capacity building*).

Case B: Effective deployment of released teachers to improve learning and teaching and to try out new strategies

With the space created, the teachers could make improvements in the following areas:

Area	Before	With the space created …
Choice of teaching materials	Stories were taken from one reader	• Teachers could afford more time to look for stories from **different sources** to ensure **variety in story genre** and **story origin**. | The Rich Man and the Shoemaker	a fable by a French writer
The Pied Piper of Hamelin	a folk tale from a town in Germany
The Gift	a story written by O Henry, an American writer
George's Marvellous Medicine	a story written by Roald Dahl, a British writer
The Eight-headed Dragon	a Japanese myth	 Some example stories chosen for S1
Approaches to teaching & design of worksheets	Teachers mainly read aloud and went through the vocabulary items while teaching the story text Most of the questions set in the worksheets were factual to check students' comprehension of the story	• Teachers used **various ways to introduce the story** such as jigsaw reading, provision of visual input like pictures, power point slides, etc. • Teachers designed worksheets that **encouraged creativity** in students and related to their personal experiences like this: *Worksheet set on George's Marvellous Medicine* Imagine that you are George. You have the power to make any marvellous medicine you like. Think of the types of medicine you will invent to help the following people: "I live in Pakistan. I am poor, starving and I have no parents." "I have too much homework! I do not have enough time to do my homework and study for tests and exams!" "The world is too dirty and polluted for us to live in. My friends and I will all die very soon." Name of medicine: Name of medicine: Name of medicine: Effects of medicine: Effects of medicine: Effects of medicine: An S1 worksheet designed on George's Marvellous Medicine
Teaching focus	Focus was mainly placed on the teaching of the story plot and the vocabulary items	• Teachers looked at **story elements** such as characterisation, how the **language** was used to create certain effects with students, etc. • Teachers also developed students' **reading and speaking skills** alongside the teaching of the story by making reference to the corresponding parts in the **Curriculum Guide** which they did not have time to look into in the past.

Not only did the released teachers have more time to explore extra teaching resources and learning materials, but also play a **better coordination role in collaborative lesson planning sessions** as well as to do a **better job in resource management**.

Case C: Effective deployment of the released teachers to conduct on-going reviews

With the space created, the teachers could improve the **use of data to give more timely feedback** on the teaching and learning processes and **intervene earlier** than was possible in the past. This is some of the work done:

Before	With the space created …	
	After	**Implementation detail**
Evaluation of curriculum projects used to be scheduled toward the end of the school year upon completion of the whole project	➢ Teachers **could schedule evaluation tasks in time for remedial action** ➢ Teachers could **give more thought to the design of the evaluation tasks** • set a clear evaluation focus • define the objective(s) in observable and measurable outcomes • choose cost-effective tools • make effective use of tools: match the evaluation content with the objective(s)	Teachers … 1) started a curriculum development project on language arts (LA), mainly poems and songs in S1 from the beginning of the school year. 𝓎 2) decided to review the teaching and learning effectiveness of the planned curriculum halfway through the project i.e. at the end of the first term so that they could discover any gaps between curriculum planning and implementation to inform subsequent planning in the project in the second term. 𝓎 3) planned to focus on checking students' learning of poems and songs, the main development project focus, in the interim evaluation. 𝓎 4) defined the pre-set objective of teaching poems and songs in terms of observable learning outcomes and used the existing S1 mid-term reading assessment paper as an evaluation tool to collect evidence of whether the learning outcomes were achieved.
The evaluation tasks were not as well-planned		

<table>
<tr><th>Objective for teaching poems and songs</th><th>Examples of observable learning outcomes</th></tr>
<tr><td>◆ To develop students' knowledge and skills in understanding and responding to poems and songs</td><td>Students should be able to
✦ identify the poetic features of poems and songs e.g. rhymes
✦ express opinions and feelings to the topic or theme of the poems and songs</td></tr>
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𝓎

5) designed assessment items for the reading assessment paper that fit in well with the objectives of poems and songs by integrating into the paper the text type of poem and the corresponding questions such as identifying rhymes and giving personal responses. 𝓎

➢ Teachers could **coordinate the task of data collection and analysis more efficiently**
• schedule timely evaluation meetings
• make evidence-based judgments by collecting quantitative and qualitative data through document study, discussion and observation

6) decided on the kind of data to collect from all S1 classes for the assessment results of the poems and songs component in the reading paper:

Quantitative data	Qualitative data
Figures showing students' overall performance in the poems and songs component i.e. the number of students in each mark range	Teachers' comments about students' performance in each of the test items in the poems and songs component

𝓎

		7) scheduled evaluation meetings soon after the mid-term examination to analyse the data collected. To do the analysis, teachers

7) scheduled evaluation meetings soon after the mid-term examination to analyse the data collected. To do the analysis, teachers

i) scrutinised the documents gathered:

Teacher's comments on specific test items for poems and songs

Some figures showing general class performance

ii) discussed the student performance data with teachers teaching at the same level

iii) summarised the evaluation findings to identify students' strengths and weaknesses in learning poems and songs

Unsure about what to do after collecting the data

➢ Teachers could **use the data to give more timely feedback** on the teaching and learning process and **intervene earlier** to improve student learning
  • draw up action plan(s)
  • translate remedial measures into immediate actions

8) mapped out improvement measures to overcome the learning problems reflected in the analysis

Students' weaknesses to address	Improvement measures planned
◆ Weak in responding to the theme of the poem	✦ Include a response journal to give students more opportunities to express opinions and feelings
◆ Expressed opinions and feelings with limited vocabulary	✦ Introduce more language e.g. adjectives about feelings
◆ Failed to support views with reasons	✦ Build in more practice on giving supporting reasons

9) co-planned the next unit of work on poems and developed teaching resources needed to translate the improvement measures into immediate actions

10) examined the effectiveness of the improvement measures by reviewing some samples of students' work:

I like shopping. I think shopping is wonderful and enjoyable. Because I can buy a lot of trendy thing(s) and I can relax myself. ..

Signs of progress noticed in a student's response journal about a poem on 'shopping': opinions expressed with reasons using more vocabulary

11) shared the findings made in observing student assignments to identify students' learning progress. In the discussion, evaluated the impact of the improvement measures so that good teaching practices could be identified and sustained in the curriculum.

Case D: Effective monitoring of a one-off outsourced programme to control quality

The school outsourced an S2 English Day Camp to a service provider. To optimise students' learning in the programme, teachers monitored closely and made early intervention **at the preparation stage** to ensure that the programme design met the planned objectives.

Major steps undertaken by the teacher-in-charge in monitoring at the preparation stage:

Strategy	Detail
➤ Set **clear programme objectives** with **relevant, verifiable and explicit indicators**	1) Discussed the objectives and their expectations for the English Camp with the service provider before the activity day, steering the provider towards the right direction in the design of the camp activities and the teaching and learning materials.

Strategy	Detail
➤ Draw up a **work plan** to guide programme implementation and monitor throughout the different stages i.e. planning, implementation and evaluation	2) Mapped out a work plan with the major tasks and the roles of the two parties clearly specified, enabling teachers to check who should be doing what at when: before, during and after the camp.

Strategy	Detail

➢ Identify the main **evaluation focus**
 	
➢ **Collect and analyse on-going information** about the programme through the **scrutiny of documents, observation** and **discussion** to check the indicators and to identify problems in time for remedial action
	3) To ensure that the programme design aligned with the planned objectives, evaluation began upon receipt of the details such as the teaching and learning resources from the provider by:
	  i) comparing the quality of the camp materials with the camp components expected to measure the extent to which alignment was achieved between the programme design and the objectives
	  ii) conducting a site visit to find out if the camp activities exploited the physical space available and discussed with the provider to ensure that the manpower at hand was utilised to reduce the size of the student groups
	  iii) discussing the observations made with other S2 teachers
	
	Gaps identified between the camp components expected and the existing programme design because of close monitoring

Strategy	Detail

➢ Make **prompt arrangements** to **improve** the programme performance:
  • Give **immediate feedback** to the people involved in the implementation
  • **Compile documents** for reviews to hold the provider accountable and to facilitate the next round of monitoring if problems arise again
	4) To make certain that the provider was correcting the problems and was on the right track, irregularities were handled through:
	  i) meeting with the provider and all the S2 teachers to clarify the programme objectives and expectations, as well as reach consensus on the solutions
	  ii) documenting the decisions in the discussions and sending the record to the provider for reference
	  iii) monitoring the follow-up work via phone calls and e-mails after the meetings
	
	5) Observed the improvements made in the programme design to check the provider's progress towards achieving the objectives.

As a result of **early intervention** in the program development, teachers could **fix most of the problems** spotted in the programme design **before** the actual language camp. The **improved camp activities** were **better aligned** with the **programme objectives.**

Case E: Effective monitoring of a 1-year programme to bring about professional development in teachers

The school hired the service provider to run a one-year short stories programme for S3 students to prepare them to take up this LA elective in the NSS for the coming year. In the collaboration process, teachers found they had **learned much** in the following areas:

1. When and how to give feedback on the course materials received

Instead of digesting all the materials sent in and giving feedback within a short period of time before the programme commenced in September, teachers could simply **study one story at a time on paper** as well as in the light of **classroom implementation**. With the **relief of time pressure** and **spreading out of workload** throughout the year, they could optimise their efficiency and effectiveness.

2. When and how to communicate with the service provider

Teachers scheduled **regular meetings with the service provider** so that they could **discuss** face to face **the problems** observed in teaching the current story and **suggest ideas** for teaching the upcoming one. Although they were asked to fill in the **observation forms**, they just needed to jot down **notes in point form** and the information would simply **serve as notes of meeting** in the meetings. Through this kind of **professional exchange** with the service provider, they developed a deeper understanding of how stories could be taught. Through active participation, the transfer of skills and knowledge was sped up.

3. What role to play in the short stories lesson

Unlike the service provider who went into the classroom once a week, the teachers have a **good knowledge of their students**. So they decided to **make good use of the regular meetings with the service provider** to reflect the problems as well as to suggest solutions and share their ideas on the teaching emphasis and lesson design. It took some time to **change their mindset that they need not bother about how the service provider should run the programme**. The transition from realisation to action meant they had to **put in more time and effort into preparing for the meetings**. But in return, they derived a greater **sense of ownership** and **satisfaction** when they saw student learning improve and when they acquired the skill of teaching short stories.

4. What evaluation tools to use and when

All along teachers felt there were problems with the design of the **pre- and post-tests** as well as the lack of evaluation tools to track students' progress between the pre- and post-tests. With regular meetings scheduled, they had more time to voice out their concerns to the service provider. They also had more time to work out some valid evaluation tools like **revision tests**, **students' performance in mini dramas in class** and **structured speaking assessments**.

Examples of evaluation tools used:

1. Put these words under the stories they come from. (12 marks)

Strong Wind	King Adovis	Cambodia	an old man
the maiden	Cinderella	a donkey foal	the shores of Atlantic Ocean
the grandson	to hunt deer	an invisible warrior	an old jar

To Sell A Donkey	The Pumpkin in a Jar	A Native American Cinderella

Revision test to check students' grasp of the story plot, story elements like character, setting and theme

Choose one character from one of the stories you learned. Write a first person account. You can talk about the following things:

Character	I am _____ (name of the character) from the story _____. I would like to tell you my adventures.
Setting (background)	Let me begin with when and where I live and the people around me.
Plot (what actually happened)	Talk about what actually happened in the order of problem → events → resolution
Lesson learnt from your angle	

Modified speaking assessment for a more focussed check on students' use of the stories covered

Conclusion

1. In effecting any kind of educational change, it is important that schools undergo the **PIE process**. Planning, Implementation and Evaluation are in fact three **inter-woven** processes and teachers should always **keep all stages in mind when working on one stage**. Take planning as an example, this process does not just involve the writing up of a proposal with measures listed. Issues like the scale of implementation, the deployment of human resources, the setting of a time-line or even the design of evaluation tools to measure the achievement of the objectives have to be in the mind of teachers at the initial stage. Of course, it is impossible to come up with a plan that is flawless at the start. So **on-going evaluation and constant modification** is encouraged as the plan evolves.

2. If resources are to be put into effective use to bring about developments in the curriculum (attainment of vertical continuity and horizontal coherence), the school (establishment of a reflective culture), the teachers (nurturing of curriculum leadership qualities) as well as in student learning (improvement in the standard of English), **communication** between various parties, **consensus** building in the team, **coordination** work by curriculum leaders as well as **constant review and reflection** by all parties involved are all indispensable factors that facilitate such developments.

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From explicit vocabulary instruction to a fun "Games Day" to celebrate learning

Background

Recently, there has been a strong emphasis placed on reading in the curriculum reform. A large vocabulary opens students up to a wider range of reading materials and enables them to read with fluency. Enriching students' vocabulary can also improve their ability to communicate through speaking, listening and writing. Teachers may ask questions like "How can I expand students' vocabulary? Do I need to give them vocabulary lists and ask them to memorise more new words every day?"

There is no doubt that the simple answer to the questions is "No" because the curriculum guide tells us that "Teachers should not overburden learners in primary schools with too many vocabulary items in each lesson, although they need to set reasonably high expectations of them" (English Language Curriculum Guide (P1-6), p.165). So, what can teachers do to help students expand their vocabulary? There are a few suggestions given in the English Language Curriculum Guide (Primary 1-6) such as:

➤ Introduce vocabulary in context such as through language games and tasks
➤ Encourage students to read extensively to help them acquire vocabulary in context
➤ Include the teaching of vocabulary building skills in the plan for a school-based English Language curriculum
➤ Model ways in which learners can attack and organise words

With reference to the suggestions given, teachers all feel the need for strengthening the teaching of vocabulary building skills as students do need to acquire skills to tackle unfamiliar words, learn new words, organise and remember them. With teachers' enthusiasm in promoting the explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills, a "Be a smart reader, be a word builder" Games Day was organised to provide a platform for students to apply those skills in reading and celebrate their learning.

Level

P5

Strategies used

To promote the learning and teaching of vocabulary building skills, teachers have to start reviewing their existing English curriculum and see how those skills can be infused into their day-to-day teaching. It is also important to align the core curriculum with the informal curriculum so that what has been learned in the classroom can be consolidated. With careful holistic curriculum planning, the following strategies were adopted to promote vocabulary learning:

Strategy	Mode	Action
1. Put more emphasis on vocabulary development in regular English lessons	Core English curriculum	• Identify relevant vocabulary building skills to teach in each unit such as word formation skills, word association skill, sight words, etc • Provide opportunities for students to tackle unfamiliar words • Set writing and speaking tasks which allow students to put the vocabulary learned in use
2. Encourage peer learning of sight words and the creation of a personal word bank	Peer and independent learning	A learning tool, "*Sight Word Builder*", is produced to promote sight word learning. Teachers spend five minutes to teach sight words in each lesson and students do peer checking of each others' learning progress. Students are guided to record new words learned in the "*Word Master*" booklet. They have to write the meanings of the words as well as to use the words to write sentences.
3. Promote independent learning and cater for learner diversity so as to sustain students' interest in learning vocabulary building skills	Reading Value-Added Station (VAS)	Set up a self-access corner in school which can be called the "*Reading Value-Added Station*" for students to choose learning materials which they like to work on and work according to their own pace of learning.
4. Use of activities to promote vocabulary learning and enhance reading fluency	Extra-curricular activity	A Games Day, an inter-school competition, is organised to provide a fun platform for students to celebrate learning and put the vocabulary building skills learned to use.

What happened

Case 1: Holy Family Canossian School (Kowloon Tong)

Timeline	Action at different stage	Feature/ Observation
September 2008	1. **Building up teachers' capacity in teaching vocabulary building skills** Teachers from the whole English panel attended the professional development activity "Vocabulary teaching – Giving primary students the key to learning English" organised by the Language Learning Support Section (LLSS) to acquire knowledge on what vocabulary building skills should be taught to students and how to teach them.	 Teachers learning how to teach vocabulary building skills

October 2008 – May 2009	**2. Infusing the teaching of vocabulary building skills into the core English curriculum and providing opportunities for students to put the vocabulary learned to use**	
	(i) Relevant vocabulary building skills were selected from each unit and the skills were taught through games and worksheets. In the P5 curriculum, the following vocabulary building skills were introduced to students using different activities: • Sight words • Compounding • Derivation • Prefixes and suffixes • Dictionary skills Teachers made use of some curriculum planning tools to keep track of the coverage of the lessons.	Students learning the concept of derivation
	(ii) There was a five-minute sight word teaching time allocated to each lesson to help students master sight words better in the hope of improving their reading fluency. Peer learning was promoted through guiding students to conduct peer-assessment on the sight words learned.	Students learning how to use a dictionary
	(iii) Various vocabulary games were infused into the lessons. As students would be participating in an inter-school Vocabulary Games Day in February 2009, games for the Games Day also formed a part of the lessons so that the core curriculum could be aligned with the extra-curricular activities and students could be better prepared for Games Day.	Teacher doing five-minute sight word teaching
	(iv) The self-learning booklet "Word Master" was introduced to students. Students had to make use of the booklet to record new words learned. There were pages in the booklet which could help students visualise how words are formed and associated. Students' vocabulary was gradually expanded.	Students playing games of Games Day in class
	(v) Throughout the year, students in all the P5 classes worked in groups and took turns to prepare word display boards in class. Such practice helped build up a print-rich environment for consolidating the learning of word formation and word association skills.	Students building up their word bank using the Word Master
	(vi) Two of the teachers agreed to be the core teachers of the Primary Literacy Network and they helped plan the "Be a smart reader, be a word builder" inter-school Games Day and conduct filler games on Games Day.	A word chart on compounding prepared by students

	(vii)On 13 February 2009, twelve student representatives participated in the "Be a smart reader, be a word builder" inter-school Games Day. They took part in three games, namely "Speed up, speak up", "Word detective" and "Super reader" in which their knowledge of sight words, application of word formation and word association skills to decode unfamiliar words, ability to comprehend texts and fluency in reading were tested. Students won the championship of Games Day.	Network teachers leading games on Games Day Students participated in Games Day and they won the trophy
June 2009 onwards	**3. Planning to set up Reading Value-Added Station (VAS)** In order to strengthen the learning and teaching of vocabulary building skills, a self-access learning corner, "Reading Value-Added Station", will be considered to enable students to select vocabulary and reading worksheets to do in their free time. Such an arrangement allows students to work at their own pace and have autonomy to choose different topics to work on according to their interests.	Worksheets on various vocabulary building skills are prepared for the Reading Value-Added Station and students have to make a record of their own learning

Case 2: Lam Tin Methodist Primary School

Timeline	Action at different stage	Feature/ Observation
August - September 2008	**1. Awakening teachers' awareness of and building up their confidence in teaching vocabulary building skills explicitly** (i) An overview on approaches to vocabulary teaching was introduced to all P5 English teachers with reference to the vocabulary building skills list. They were also encouraged to attend the same workshop organised by LLSS to better equip themselves with vocabulary teaching strategies, and build up their confidence in teaching vocabulary building skills explicitly in class. (ii) Two core teachers joined the Primary Literacy Network to plan and participate in Games Day held in mid February 2009. Games Day served as a platform to demonstrate students' learning and application of vocabulary building skills and an opportunity for them to interact with students from other schools.	Teachers became core members on Games Day
October 2008 – June 2009	**2. Infusing explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills into the core English curriculum** (i) Apart from teaching sight words on a regular basis and having students assess each other in the lessons, P5 teachers identified specific vocabulary building skills relevant to each unit, e.g. antonyms, synonyms, compounding, derivation, prefixes and suffixes. Worksheets were designed to help students visualise how words are formed. Teachers used the curriculum planning tools devised by LLSS to record vocabulary building skills taught. (ii) To arouse students' interest and strengthen their knowledge of vocabulary building skills, teachers played lots of interesting vocabulary building games with them such as "Forming compound words with picture cards" and "Breaking vocabulary code in Word detective". These games not only helped students consolidate the learning of particular vocabulary building skills, but also familiarised the twelve participants who took part in Games Day with the approaches used on that day. This built up students' confidence in tackling questions on various vocabulary building skills.	Students assessed each other on sight word learning "Sunflower!" A compound word was formed with cards Students consolidated the learning of compound words in a fun way Students described and guessed words in "Word detective"

(iii) Teachers helped students retain, retrieve and apply learned vocabulary by having them work on a school-based "Word Bank Book". In this booklet, students were encouraged to collate words related to different vocabulary building skills, and then make use of those newly learned words to make up their sentences. Their vocabulary expanded as a consequence.

(iv) Teachers built up a print-rich environment by posting sight words along the corridors and displaying vocabulary on word walls inside the classrooms. These word walls were contributed both by the teachers and their students. After completing a unit, teachers assigned students in groups to collate and display words relevant to a particular vocabulary building skill or theme. Individual students were encouraged to add words on the word walls using the blank coloured cards placed inside the classrooms. Teachers acknowledged individual contributions when revisiting these word walls. A supportive vocabulary learning atmosphere was thus cultivated.

(v) In the next academic year, a Value-Added Station (VAS) will be established to promote independent learning. Students can challenge themselves by selecting, completing and self-checking activity sheets on different kinds of vocabulary building skills such as phonics and affixes.

Questions on vocabulary building skills? No problem!

See how beautiful the cover of students' word bank book was!

Students made sentences with antonyms

Word walls displaying pairs of antonyms collated by students

Thematic word walls presenting target vocabulary learned

Impact on students

Confidence enhanced and vocabulary building skills developed

Students showed confidence and improvement in recognising basic sight words. They were more motivated to read words aloud with fluency to their peers. With different vocabulary building skills introduced, students had clearer concepts about how words are formed and associated with one another. They were more able to apply the skills acquired to tackle unfamiliar words and comprehend texts with confidence. Through recording new words, creating words walls, learning dictionary skills and conducting peer-assessment on sight words, students' vocabulary bank has been enriched and independent learning has been fostered.

Impact on teachers

➢ **Knowledge and skills for teaching vocabulary skills strengthened**

An increasing awareness on the importance of explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills was noted among teachers. They were more able to infuse the teaching and consolidate the learning of vocabulary building skills in the core English curriculum. With the help of different learning tools such as "Word Master" and "Sight Word Builder", teachers were more able to strengthen students' vocabulary learning by promoting peer learning and independent learning in the informal curriculum.

➢ **Link between formal and informal curricula realised**

Through participating in the Primary Literacy Network, teachers had the opportunity to share knowledge and skills for vocabulary teaching with others. This increased teachers' awareness of the importance of infusing explicit instruction of vocabulary building skills in the core English curriculum. By organising Games Day for students to celebrate their learning success, teachers realised the way to build the link between formal and informal curricula.

Facilitating factors

➢ **Timely vocabulary training offered**

With a view to equipping teachers with relevant knowledge and skills in vocabulary teaching and learning, a workshop on vocabulary teaching was conducted at an appropriate time - at the beginning of the academic year. By attending this workshop, teachers had clearer directions to plan a holistic literacy curriculum at their schools before actual implementation.

➢ **Sharing platform for teachers provided**

To facilitate inter-school professional sharing on vocabulary teaching and learning, a network was formed. Three network meetings provided opportunities for teachers to share their experiences as well as materials on vocabulary teaching and learning. This kind of inter-school exchange promotes the establishment of a learning community.

➢ **User-friendly resources devised**

In order to help teachers implement the teaching of vocabulary building skills at their schools, various learning kits and curriculum planning tools were provided. These resources assisted teachers to promote peer learning and independent learning among students and also helped them keep track of their progress in vocabulary teaching.

➢ **Approaches adopted in Games Day infused into daily teaching**
The inter-school Games Day was a means to facilitate the learning and teaching of vocabulary building skills. As teachers had already infused games adopted in Games Day into their daily vocabulary teaching, students were familiar with the approaches and thus they were all well prepared for the fun day.

Difficulties and suggestions

Since teachers have a heavy workload in schools, the explicit teaching of vocabulary building skills through games in the core English curriculum may be one of their concerns. They found that the teaching schedule was tight because they had to incorporate this aspect into each unit. Teachers mentioned that they need more time to explore ways of teaching vocabulary learning skills. In order to help teachers plan the literacy curriculum holistically, there is an urgent need to raise their awareness of the importance of infusing teaching vocabulary building skills in the mainstream curriculum, and to develop them to be curriculum leaders to bring about changes at their schools. Encouraging teachers to participate and share their expertise in the Primary Literacy Network did help establish a learning community. To further cultivate inter-school collaboration and exchanges, more teachers will be invited to join the Primary Literacy Network to promote an effective learning community with the support of LLSS officers.

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Using a social network for curriculum improvement, enhancement of student learning and leadership development

Background

Many teachers in Tuen Mun primary schools found that their students have not mastered speaking skills well, though it is a major language skill to be developed in language learners. Students need a wider exposure to and more opportunities for using English outside their own school to boost confidence and develop English speaking skills. Thus teachers from some primary schools in the Tuen Mun district set up a social network called STEP (The Speaking Towards Excellence Project). They worked hand in hand to improve their school-based English curricula, enhance student learning, particularly focussing on speaking skills, and were nurtured into curriculum leaders themselves. Objectives of the project are listed below:

Objectives of the project:

1. To provide community support by developing potential student leaders in Tuen Mun for conducting speaking activities
2. To develop potential curriculum leaders to share experience among network schools and reach out to other schools in Tuen Mun
3. To boost students'confidence in speaking English by providing opportunities for students from different schools to take part in English speaking activities (e.g. Speaking Fair) so as to develop their speaking skills (e.g. communication, collaboration, storytelling) progressively
4. To link the formal and informal curricula by infusing speaking into classroom learning

Levels

P4, S1-4

Strategies used

1. Using networking to teach speaking skills

In the English curriculum, speaking is always an important domain yet an area difficult for teachers to handle as it is not rare to hear comments from teachers such as "Students are too shy to speak up.", "There are not enough opportunities for students to interact in class." and "It is hard to integrate speaking into the curriculum.". A way out to this problem is to use networking as a tool to teach speaking skills.

Networking refers to the facilitation of collaboration among schools. A social network, on the other hand, refers to a human community established on the basis of a common interest and they share a mutual goal for their action. According to Scharmann (2007), school collaboration can take the form of integrating teaching methods, professional seminars, interpersonal relations, classroom management, reading strategies and so on. This kind of collaborative learning can take "a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by students, or students and teachers together" (William, 1999, p.20).

In this project, teachers in the network facilitate cross-school collaboration through working on a social network in Tuen Mun. As a result, there can be better mobilisation of community resources to give intensive support for students with less exposure to English. In doing so, students are offered the opportunities to learn through interacting with others, especially students from other schools.

2. Linking the formal and informal curricula

Having formed the social network in Tuen Mun, teachers worked together to organise an English Speaking Fair to provide a platform to teach speaking skills. Students from the core schools had the learning activities conducted outside classroom beyond class hours. To prepare for this, teachers did not treat it as a one-off or standalone event. Instead, with the Speaking Fair, they provided opportunities for students to revisit their classroom learning and thus linked the formal and informal curricula in a coherent manner. Not only could students consolidate their knowledge and skills gained in English lessons, but they could also see the need for using English in a meaningful context. Teachers also designed the Speaking Fair activities in order to develop speaking skills progressively. They did so to ensure that at different stages of learning, students can learn and strengthen appropriate speaking skills.

3. Developing potential curriculum leaders

In this social network, curriculum leaders were nurtured in order to professionally develop teachers and student leaders on the one hand while making the positive learning impacts sustainable. Curriculum leaders can be the panel heads, PSM(CD)s, local teachers, the NETs and even student leaders. According to Lee and Dimmock (1999), curriculum leadership encompasses goal-setting and planning, monitoring, reviewing and developing the educational programme of the school, culture building, allocating resources and so on. The social network mentioned in this project does create space for a range of curriculum leaders to grow and get equipped with essential skills.

4. Developing student leaders

Besides nurturing teachers as curriculum leaders, students were trained as leaders too. Junior secondary students in the district were recruited to lead activities in the Speaking Fair. As a result, they have become important players in the network. Below are some of the roles played by them.

Roles played by student leaders
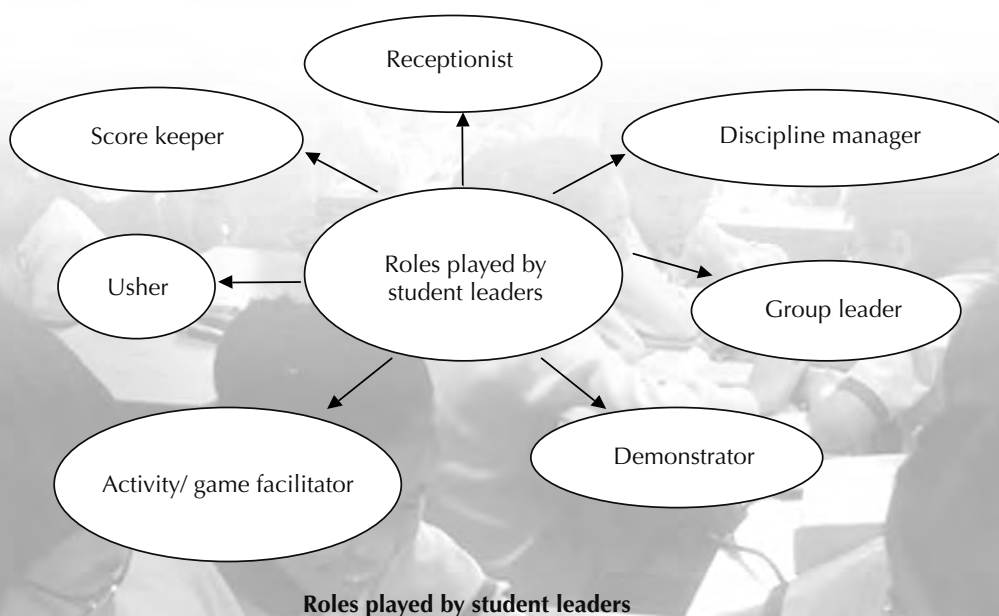
What happened

Since the set up of the STEP (Primary) network, three speaking fairs have been organised. Below is the flow of what had happened when preparing for an English Speaking Fair. They are divided into three stages – planning, implementation and evaluation.

Stage	Detail	Purpose
Planning 2006-2007 2007-2008 2008-2009	**Preparation stage** ➢ Core schools analysed various sets of textbooks, made reference to the Curriculum Guide and decided on the theme and target objectives for the English Speaking Fair ➢ Individual schools developed a common theme based upon the target objectives ➢ Teachers from different core schools shared school-based experiences in developing speaking skills ➢ Core schools co-planned activities for the English Speaking Fair ➢ Recruited and trained secondary school students in the same district to be student leaders in the English Speaking Fair ➢ Invited other primary school teachers in the same district to be observers in the Speaking Fair	➢ To set common objectives among core schools ➢ To link the formal and informal curricula ➢ To build a learning community to foster the teaching and learning of speaking skills ➢ To nurture curriculum leaders ➢ To receive feedback from teacher observers
Implementation Camp log Quiz Outstanding students	**During the English Speaking Fair** ➢ Teachers from core schools led the activities ➢ Secondary students took on the role of leaders to help out in the Speaking Fair ➢ Primary school teachers from other schools observed the Speaking Fair ➢ Primary school students from the core schools took part in the English Speaking Fair which consisted of three parts **Part A**: Students took part in the activities below with students from the same school • Pledge and camp song • Performance by schools • Quiz **Part B**: Teachers split students into mixed groups. They had ice-breaking activities, language-focussed activities and also drama. Teachers led the activities and selected outstanding students who spoke English all the time and showed enthusiasm. (See table on the next page for examples and snapshots of games) **Part C**: Students gathered together with their fellow students for the presentation of the Outstanding Students Award. They sang the camp song before dismissal.	➢ To link the formal and informal curricula ➢ To consolidate students' knowledge and skills gained in English lessons ➢ To recognise students' good work ➢ To offer students opportunities to use English in a meaningful context ➢ To use community resources to support students to develop speaking skills ➢ To offer a platform for secondary students to develop their speaking and leadership skills ➢ To nurture curriculum leaders ➢ To share good practice with teacher observers

Evaluation	**Conceptualisation and way forward** ➢ Evaluated and conceptualised the work done ➢ Prepared for the dissemination of experiences ➢ Modified existing school-based curriculum design and Speaking Fair materials ➢ Drew up plans for next year	➢ To conceptualise experiences and ensure sustainability

The table below shows some of the games teachers designed for the fairs:

Ice-breaking activities

The purpose of the ice-breaking activities is to break down the barrier between students from different schools. These activities also help students come out from their shyness. Students are mixed among schools and they are asked to communicate with each other through self-introduction and simple memory games.

"What's your name? When's your birthday?" Students are eager to learn more about their new friends through ice-breaking activities.

Language-focussed activities

Different language-focussed activities are prepared for students to apply their classroom learning:

i.   **Told and Retold** – Students repeat the same sentence they hear from their group member to the member behind them. The quickest row wins the round.

ii. **Looking for Partners** – Each student has a word clipped on his/her back. They have to walk around the room to find a student with a word card that matches with a given theme (e.g. Mid-Autumn Festival – play with lanterns).

iii. **Tell me, tell me, what do I like?** – After listening to all the students talking about their hobbies, students from different teams have to compete against one another by calling out one another's hobbies.

iv. **Picture Relay** – With one member as the painter, the other members have to run to the other side of the room, observe a picture, and describe it to the painter using prepositional phrases like "below the chair", "next to the tree", etc.

i. **Told and Retold**	ii. **Looking for Partners**
  Students are trying to repeat the sentence as quickly and accurately as possible to their teammates.	 Students are looking for their match by asking for their friends' help.

iii. Tell me, tell me, what do I like?

Students are trying to call out their opponents' hobbies when the cloth is lowered.

iv. Picture Relay

Does the drawing look good?

Drama / Storytelling

Through practices with the student leaders and their teammates, students will perform a play or story by acting out the characters. This is a confident booster as students not only have to speak English aloud, but they also have to do it in front of others using proper gesture and tone of voice.

Students are performing their play in front of other groups.
Can you tell who the Ox is and who the Lion is?

Impact

1. A social network built

As mentioned above, the English Speaking Fair was not the only event of the network. In each network meeting, for example, teachers would share their school-based teaching materials as well as some good practices with the other network members. Since all teachers are from the Tuen Mun district, with students having a similar background, they always find ideas from other network members useful. Besides sharing school-based practices, teachers worked more closely together after each Speaking Fair. Thus, the core members have developed a strong sense of cooperation and found it easier to reach a compromise.

2. Development of curriculum leaders

In this network, not only English panel heads and PSM(CD)s are involved, but also English teachers and the NETs. They work hand in hand and organise the Speaking Fairs together. In doing so, they need to refer to the curriculum plans, liaise with different parties, make logistical arrangements and so on. After all the planning and organisation, teachers in the network find themselves more professionally developed and they are happy to have shared these good practices in some territory-wide activities with other teachers.

3. Benefits for primary student participants

Responses from the primary student participants have been very positive. Students reflected that they have gained much from the English Speaking Fair. For example, they have gained confidence in speaking English and they have met many new friends from other schools. Below is some of the feedback given by students:

In the English Speaking Fair, I have made two new friends.

From this activity, I can improve my English. I enjoy it very much.

I got my new friend's email address. I think I will write to them in the future.

I feel English speaking fair is very interesting because I have candies and learned more words … I am satisfied with the English speaking fair, too and thank you Miss Chan.

In this English Fair, I can learn a lot of English. I am more confident to speak in English.

I wish I could attend once more!

4. Benefits for secondary student leaders

Throughout the whole process of preparation and implementation of the project, we found that student leaders did not only contribute, but they also gained much from it. Student leaders shared that they gained much confidence in speaking English. It was achieved through their interaction with the mentees, the primary students. Also, they were glad that they became more mature and patient and they learned how to take care of others. We are delighted to see that student leaders treasure the opportunity to interact with others. Below are some of the responses given by the student leaders:

It was a good experience being a student leader. I've learned how to be more patient to students.

During this speaking fair, I have learned many things such as how to communicate with little boys and girls in English and this has increased my confidence in speaking English.

The primary students were very cute. Some of them were shy, but finally they tried to speak English, too. I've known some new friends in this fair. I hope I can keep in touch with them.

Facilitating factors

1. Inter-departmental collaboration

The success of the network owes a great deal to the strong inter-divisional support from within the Bureau. With the support from the Tuen Mun District School Development Section, some teachers were invited to come and observe the Speaking Fair and gave valuable comments to the core schools. Secondary students were also recruited with their help to serve as student leaders. Most important of all is their liaison with different parties concerned.

2. Support from school principals

To build up and sustain a social network is never an easy task. Support from school principals is indeed a must. For example, they see the Speaking Fair as a built-in activity in the school's annual plan and this helps a great deal in the deployment of manpower. Also, when holding network meetings and network activities, school principals can help lend the school venue and also make logistical arrangements for us. All these can greatly facilitate collaboration among the network schools.
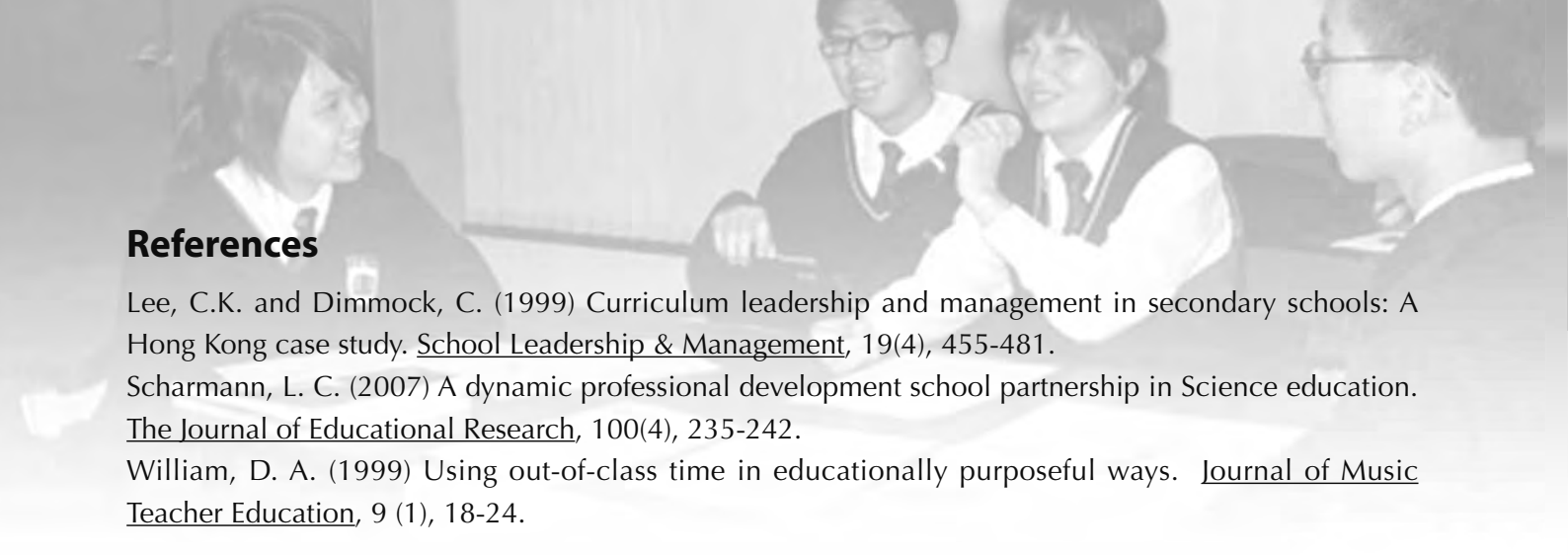
3. Geographical convenience

Core schools of this network are all primary schools in Tuen Mun. This is really convenient in a geographical sense. For instance, teachers do not have to travel far to attend network meetings and students find it more convenient to join the network speaking activities around the neighbourhood.

4. Students with similar background

In this network, as mentioned in the previous section, students are from Tuen Mun. They share a very similar background such as having similar learning needs and English ability. This facilitates a lot in terms of the design of activities and teachers always find it easy to reach some understanding among themselves.

Difficulties and suggestions

As most teachers have a tight schedule, it is challenging to organise such a large scale activity involving teachers from different schools. That said, planning is the key to success. For example, to schedule a network meeting, it is better to plan ahead so that teachers can compromise among themselves on the timeline. Besides, it is important to have clear division of work among different schools so that there will not be overlap of job allocation and the workload can be shared fairly.

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H.K.R.S.S. Tuen Mun Primary School
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Po Leung Kuk Horizon East Primary School
S.R.B.C.E.P.S.A. Ho Sau Ki School

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