The Impact Study on the Implementation of the Current Phase of the School Development and Accountability (SDA) Framework for Enhancing School Improvement in Hong Kong

Findings and Recommendations

An Independent Study by
Education Policy Unit,
The University of Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Background

1.1   The current phase of the School Development and Accountability (SDA) framework has been implemented since the 2015/16 school year[1]. While School Self-evaluation (SSE), complemented by External School Review (ESR) and Focus Inspection (FI), is still fundamental to refining schools' development work for their continuous self-improvement, enhanced measures have been taken by the Education Bureau (EDB) to continue to validate schools' self-evaluation and its impact on school development in a more flexible manner. Suggestions are provided accordingly for facilitating their sustainable improvement and development.

1.2   A more flexible approach to conducting ESR is adopted in the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework. For example, schools are selected at random; ESR is not bound by a fixed cycle; and the School Sponsoring Bodies (SSBs) are invited to nominate schools under their purview to undergo ESR. In addition, more FI have been conducted covering various Key Learning Areas (KLAs)/subjects and designated themes related to the curriculum development trends and policy initiatives. The presentation of the ESR report has also been revised to highlight schools' key strengths and areas for improvement in relation to the school contexts and their priority tasks in a concise and focused manner. Training for External Reviewers (ERs) has been included in the designated professional development programme for Newly Appointed Principals (NAPs).

1.3   Similar to the previous two cycles of the implementation of the SDA framework, the EDB considered it necessary to gauge the effectiveness of the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework, particularly the enhanced measures adopted. Therefore, the EDB has commissioned the Education Policy Unit, the Faculty of Education of the University of Hong Kong to carry out an Impact Study (Study) to gather views from stakeholders involved in schools' continuous development.

Objectives of the Study

1.4   The objectives of the Study are to provide an independent and external review on

   a)   the mechanism and effectiveness of the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework starting from the 2015/16 school year;

   b)   the appropriateness of the modus operandi in supporting school-specific ESR and FI and forging professional partnership between schools and the EDB for continuous school improvement;

   c)   the impact of ESR and FI on schools; and

---

[1] The 1st cycle and the 2nd cycle of the SDA framework were implemented from the 2003/04 to 2007/08 school years and the 2008/09 to 2014/15 school years respectively. The current phase of the SDA framework mentioned in this report has been implemented since the 2015/16 school year. It was called the new phase of the SDA framework when this Impact Study was launched.

d) the impact of embedding SSE in the on-going school practice on (i) sustaining school development; (ii) enhancing schools' awareness of internal accountability; (iii) building schools' capacity for meeting the challenges of change and curriculum reforms; and (iv) developing reflective practice and culture in schools.

2. Methodology

2.1 A literature review was conducted on similar practices in other countries and regions, including Korea, England, Estonia, Scotland, Sweden, Czech Republic, Italy, Australia and New Zealand.

2.2 Feedback from Online Questionnaire on ESR (Post-ESR Surveys), Online Questionnaire on FI (Post-FI Surveys) and Questionnaire Surveys for ESR External Reviewer (ER Surveys), which covered a number of stakeholders, was gathered and reviewed. The data obtained from these surveys could be regarded as representative of the majority views of respective stakeholders.

2.3 Twelve case studies were conducted covering schools that had gone through the process of ESR or FI since the 2015/16 school year, including eight ESR cases and four FI cases. Stratified random sampling was adopted in the selection process, supplemented by information on the findings of the Post-ESR Surveys and Post-FI Surveys.

2.4 55 focus group discussions were conducted with 155 participants from different stakeholder groups, including school principals, teachers, students, parents, members of the School Improvement Team or middle managers (collectively named as SIT), representatives of SSBs, representatives of School Management Committee (SMC)/ Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) and members of the External School Review Team (Review Team) or Focus Inspection Team (Inspection Team).

3. Study findings

The SDA framework in its current phase

3.1 The SDA framework has helped schools explore and find their directions for future development. Commendable efforts have been made by schools to ensure that the school tasks are strategically planned, implemented and evaluated, through establishing committees and teams, exploring ways and means, gathering feedback from school stakeholders and adopting an evidence-based approach.

3.2 The implementation of SSE using the Planning-Implementation-Evaluation (P-I-E) cycle, supplemented with ESR and FI, has a significant role in the development of a reflective culture within schools and among teachers. Schools have enhanced their awareness of the importance of SSE in the implementation of the current

phase of the SDA framework through putting in place the P-I-E cycle in their day-to-day practices. Most schools have adopted different methods for SSE, such as adopting Action Research or 'Keep, Improve, Start, Stop' (KISS) model, participating in school improvement programmes supported by professionals from tertiary institutions and adopting school-based evaluation tools that suit their own needs. Given that the use of evaluation data to inform planning and the depth of reflection vary across schools and among teachers, there is still room for improving SSE.

3.3   Education initiatives, such as self-directed learning (SDL), Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, information technology (IT) in education and gifted education, have been included in school development planning and promoted to enhance learning and teaching effectiveness. The conduct of ESR and FI has helped monitor the progress of policy implementation, and review the issues and difficulties encountered by schools.

3.4   Compared to the 2nd cycle of the implementation of the SDA framework, there is an increased awareness of and confidence in the use of evidence and data in conducting SSE, while the capacity to generate, interpret and use data varies among teachers.

3.5   There is increasing transparency and accountability within schools, with more active involvement of different stakeholders in the schools' decision-making process and better practice of peer lesson observation. Nevertheless, there have been concerns expressed by some stakeholders consulted about the possibility of misinterpretation of the inspection findings and creating a labelling effect on schools, if the public can have access to the inspection reports.

3.6   In the current phase, some schools have adopted different strategies to engage more teachers in the SSE and there is also a higher level of involvement of the SSBs in facilitating schools' continuous development and improvement. However, the level of involvement of teachers in the process of SSE and the extent to which SMC/IMC members are familiar with SSE, ESR and FI vary. Nevertheless, schools have become more aware of the importance of engaging parents, including parent representatives in the IMCs, in providing their suggestions to schools. More formal and informal channels, such as Stakeholder Survey and school-based questionnaires, have been deployed by schools to gather students' opinions on learning and teaching. However, the participation of students in setting the direction of school development has remained low.

3.7   There has been a significant progress in strengthening the professional partnership between schools and the EDB in the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework, with ESR and FI continually adopting an improvement-oriented approach.   The Review and Inspection Teams' professionalism, attitude and empathy have been well appreciated by the school personnel.

ESR

3.8 The flexible measures adopted in ESR in the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework have reduced pressure of school personnel in preparing for ESR and better catered for schools' operational and development needs. As such, teachers are more willing and confident to have professional exchange with EDB officers in ESR and make improvement based on feedback received in ESR.

3.9 ESR conducted in a school-specific and focused manner has helped schools identify the strengths and weaknesses of school work and facilitated school improvement through SSE, despite the minority view that ESR has failed to take into full account the specific context of individual schools.

3.10 It was evident that ESR could complement SSE, giving schools a clear perspective and facilitating schools' sustainable development. The implementation of ESR has also increased teachers' awareness of the need to continually review the quality of learning and teaching, by adjusting their teaching approaches and adopting diversified teaching strategies in the current phase of the implementation of the SDA framework. The appointment of NAPs to be the ERs of the Review Team has helped enhance their professional growth and specialism.

FI

3.11 Stakeholders consulted in the case studies and focus groups were very positive about the role played by FI. Schools have been able to capitalise on FI, through the student-oriented discussions and interactions between the teachers and Inspection Teams. Apart from enhancing teachers' professional development and growth, FI has guided schools to make strategic improvement in curriculum planning.

3.12 More positive responses to FI on the aspects of pressure and workload were found from respondents of Post-FI Surveys and focus group discussions when compared with those for ESR. FI has contributed to the improvement of teaching strategies, such as the use of information technology in the classroom, and raised teachers' receptiveness to peer lesson observations and collaborative teaching.

4. Way forward

Strengthening support to schools for continuous school development

4.1 To facilitate continuous development, it is necessary to further enhance schools' capacity for adapting and applying SSE tools more effectively to better suit schools' specific contexts and needs.

4.2 More peer learning and sharing opportunities arranged by schools should be encouraged so that schools could lead teachers to embed SSE in their daily work more effectively.

4.3 The potential of professional learning community could further be explored and exploited, for example, by organising "Learning Networks" and "Mentorship Scheme", to encourage schools and teachers to share the experience gained in formulating improvement strategies with reference to recommendations made in the course of ESR and FI. This could enhance cross-school sharing and collaboration, build up the capacity of school members and spark off synergy.

Further enhancing ESR and FI arrangements

4.4 There are merits in tailoring the frequency of ESR to address the needs of different schools according to criteria such as the performance of schools concerned and the findings of previous rounds of ESR.

4.5 Greater flexibility could be built into FI in terms of the selection of schools, KLAs/subjects and the themes of FI, with schools' views and needs taken into further consideration. Similar to the current practice of allowing SSBs to make nominations of schools to undergo ESR, SSBs' views could also be taken into account in the selection of schools for undergoing FI.

4.6 The professionalism of the Review Team is well recognised by the school personnel. Building on the current success of the implementation of the current phase of the SDA framework and to meet the rising expectations of schools, consideration could be given to further enriching the mix of expertise of the Review Team. Subject to the availability of resources, more experienced principals, including newly retired principals, could be invited to serve on the Review Team to further enhance the professional partnership between schools and the Review Team.

Enhancing school accountability and transparency

4.7 Apart from nominating schools to undergo ESR, the role of SSBs in ESR and FI is mainly discharged through the SSBs' representatives in the SMC/IMC. Consideration should be given to including representatives of SSBs into the list of attendance, for example, at the oral feedback sessions of ESR. Furthermore, though schools have made use of a variety of formal and informal means to involve parents and students in school development, engaging parents and students in SSE, ESR and FI remains a challenge. Consideration could be given to inviting parents and students to participate in the pre-ESR meetings. With the above arrangements, SSBs', parents' as well as students' understanding of the school development and their involvement in SSE and ESR could be enhanced.

4.8 It is more desirable for schools to give public access to the inspection reports in the spirit of transparency and accountability. Nonetheless, it is still not a common practice among schools. More thought could be given to publishing the key findings and major recommendations in the inspection reports.