MANAGING CURRICULUM IN THE CLASSROOM

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In most school systems in the Pacific, teachers are given a detailed curriculum plan to be followed, delineating expected levels of attainment for precisely specified objectives. Experts in the various academic disciplines taught in schools select and elaborate the knowledge and skills which students are expected to acquire, as well as the correct sequencing and teaching methods; teachers are expected to be faithful implementers of the intentions of the curriculum developers.

However, in reality, the intentions of the curriculum developers as contained in the curriculum documents are reinterpreted in ways to suit various classroom contexts and also as perceived by the teachers who have the ultimate responsibility of implementing the given curriculum. This process necessarily involves a transformation and modification of curricula by teachers for classroom instruction.

In any normal classroom there are differences between the curriculum actually covered and the formal curriculum requirements as specified. Common differences are evident in content coverage, the amount of time allocated for instruction among subject areas, variations in instruction provided to groups of students of different academic abilities and in instructional emphases for low and high-achieving students.

Research on teaching and the implementation of curriculum and instructional programmes consistently reveals that teachers adapt the goals, objectives and content of formal curricula to their specific classroom contexts.[1] Despite mandates from state departments of education and local districts, teachers routinely modify curricula by additions, deletions and changes in sequence and emphasis.[2]

In the process of translating formal curriculum into specific instructional tasks and activities, teachers need to make several critical decisions. In order to make defensible professional decisions they need to:

(a) consider the characteristics of the curriculum, including its goals and objectives, content and emphases;

(b) examine the recommended tasks and activities and their sequencing as well as the instructional materials available for teaching the curriculum;

(c) weigh the various characteristics of curriculum against their students' interests, abilities, and learning needs as well as their expectations for student academic performance.

(d) consider the implications of curriculum implementation with respect to maintaining student attention and involvement in instructional activity and the problem of student control. For example, a teacher may consider certain parts of the curriculum too difficult, complex, or abstract for students and decide on ways of modifying it to avoid boredom, inattention, disengagement, failure, frustration and misbehaviour of students.

Given the important decisions that a teacher is required to make in carrying out managerial responsibility for implementing a curriculum in the classroom, she should make proactive planning decisions. This would shape the broad outlines of what curricula are likely to be taught, how much content is covered, the likely areas of emphasis and the teaching strategies that are likely to be used during classroom instruction.[3] The decisions may be altered taking into account students' responses, students' level of attention, involvement, interest, etc.

To enable teachers to carry out their curriculum implementation task effectively they need to be given ample opportunities to familiarise themselves with the curriculum and curriculum related issues. Two core aspects of curriculum implementation strategies involve choices about in-service or development activities, and information systems. There is a compelling body of research which demonstrates that little change in practice occurs when staff development activities are absent, or when they consist of one-off orientation sessions without follow-up. By contrast when staff development activities are conducted prior to and during implementation, significant change in classroom practice can occur.[4]

There are a number of practical steps that can be taken by educational planners, administrators and teachers to further improve curriculum implementation. Pre-service teacher training programmes can be designed to develop curriculum literacy and critical competency in curriculum planning. The formation of subject associations can encourage the active participation of teachers in these organisations. Various subject groups and Curriculum Development Units might contribute to the growing literature from their own perspectives, and support discussion at school level through seminars and staff development sessions. Steps should be taken to promote curriculum evaluation and the regular review of curriculum offerings; at the very least, this would help to make the content manageable. Finally, examinations need to be designed in a way which targets the desired higher-level educational objectives and not just those matters of recall that might encourage rote learning.

Teachers make a number of far-reaching decisions with respect to the implementation of any given curriculum. To reach these decisions they need to take into account the learning abilities of their students, the curriculum documents, resources available and their own strengths. By taking advantage of opportunities for further training and development teachers can improve their ability to make professional decisions concerning how to implement the curriculum in their classrooms and thereby facilitate student learning.

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