

A CASE STUDY ON THE OUTSOURCING OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN HONG KONG: ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract: In Hong Kong, many school principals outsourced their extra-curricular activities to reduce the workload of teachers and provide more activity options for students. This study reports on a qualitative study aiming at examining the views of a group of sixteen teaching professionals from ten primary schools in Hong Kong on the effectiveness as well as the major concerns about outsourcing extra-curricular activities. Findings indicate that three themes emerged from the data regarding effectiveness of outsourcing extra-curricular activities to external organizations including (1) reducing teachers' workload and cost saving; (2) enhancing the expertise of teachers; and (3) catering for the needs of both parents and students. On the contrary, the major concerns about outsourcing activities were (1) increasing administrative duties; (2) quality of the activities; (3) linking activities to school curricula; and (4) student discipline. It is recommended that school, government and parent representatives be involved in monitoring outsourcing activities.

Keywords: outsourcing; extra-curricular activities; school management; service providers

I. INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, the Hong Kong Education Department (HKED) has initiated Curriculum Reform in primary and secondary schools during which the students are expected to be equipped with five core values and nine generic skills through eight key learning areas of the curriculum in basic education (Curriculum Development Council 2001). It is believed that extra-curricular activities (ECAs) take care of the students' different developmental needs such as their sense of moral values and attitudes, skills and creativity. Through their participation in ECAs, students can learn to communicate, to cooperate with other people and in addition to enrich their life experience. If students are given the opportunities to organize ECAs, they will gain first-hand experience of programme planning and leadership, thus enabling themselves to discover and develop their potential (Hong Kong Education Department 1997). In addition to formal classroom activities, the HKED also encourages school principals to enhance students' generic skills through other learning experiences. Since then, many school principals have organized varieties of after-class or extra-curricular activities (ECAs) for students and their parents to choose to participate. Students' achievement through participating in such activities has also become one of the performance indicators that are to be evaluated by the Education Bureau (EDB) in the external school evaluation exercise since 2003 (Education Bureau 2002). Nevertheless, organizing such varieties of activities may increase tremendous workload of teaching professionals in a school. It is noticed that using external agencies and companies to replace teaching professionals to run educational activities for students is becoming a trend and widely practiced in Hong Kong schools. Both the scale and intensity of such outsourcing activities differ between schools to a great

extent. Since then, there have been a lot of views regarding pros and cons of outsourcing activities such as complaints from parents concerning the expenses of the activities and from teachers regarding increase in workload. The quality and the results of such practice are also subject to arguments. How to effectively manage outsourcing activities in school becomes one of the concerns of the school management. In view of lack of research findings with regard to outsourcing educational services and activities in school, it is worth looking into the issues and considerations of outsourcing. This paper aims to report on a qualitative study which illuminates the situation of outsourcing ECAs in educational settings that has seldom been investigated across schools. With the overarching question, "what is going on about outsourcing ECAs in school?" in mind, the investigators conducted a qualitative study in which in-depth interviews with sixteen teaching professionals coming from ten primary schools. The finding of this study does not attempt to come to any generalization but is expected to contribute to an illuminative and interpretive analysis of the phenomenon of outsourcing ECAs in school. Ultimately, it can help inform teachers and school authorities of the impact of outsourcing on their educational activities and can then help improve the way to effectively manage outsourcing activities in the school sector.

II. OUTSOURCING: A MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

"Do more with less" has become a golden rule not only in business but also becoming prominent in the school sector. Outsourcing, a management strategy employed by commercial firms whereby various functions and operations are contracted out to outside companies (Corbett 2004) has been touted as a powerful means to obtain lower cost, higher quality, and greater flexibility for business organizations. In the education sector, there has been an increasing commercialization and marketization of educational services (Ng 2012). Recent research on privatization of education has demonstrated that schools are being conceived of undergoing significant change (e.g. Ball 2007; Burch 2009). The act of outsourcing educational services has already been adopted as a management strategy by many publicly funded schools so as to increase efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. The study of Karimi, Agharahimi & Yaghoubi (2012) has confirmed that the services that have been outsourced in educational hospitals in Iran can lead to increase service quality. Moreover, McKenzie & Bishop (2009) indicate that outsourcing special education services in Massachusetts has realized cost savings in operating budget and led to a drop in administrative overhead. In the survey of Hohman & Kollmeyer (2013), they reported that over 60 percent of Michigan schools have contracted out one or some of their

educational services. Privatization of school support services in terms of outsourcing in Michigan is a promising opportunity for many districts to save money without reducing educational opportunities. Thus, what is the situation of outsourcing in the education field in Hong Kong?

Outsourcing is defined as the state or process of procuring goods and services from external suppliers (Mol 2007; Williams, Hay & Macdonald 2011). Businesses that utilize outsourcing have been more successful in today's highly competitive and increasingly global marketplace (Yourdon 2004). Davis-Blake & Broschak (2009) have argued that outsourcing is a multidimensional and heterogeneous practice that varies in its complexity on the basis of: the range of goods and services outsourced; the amount of control exercised by an outsourcer over a supplier; the embeddedness of the social relationship between outsourcer and supplier; and, the level of formality governing the outsourcing arrangement. Outsourcing arrangements and strategies covering the full gamut of this complexity are the focus of this study.

III. OUTSOURCING EXTRA- CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN SCHOOL

In Hong Kong, it has now become a common practice for schools to contract out some of their ECAs since the mid of the 2000's where education has been regarded as an industry (Tsang 2007) and where neo-liberal values with regard to efficiency, economy and cost-effectiveness have exerted great impacts on Hong Kong's education services (Ng 2011). ECAs in schools refer to classes and programmes not considered to be part of the core curriculum; they are perceived as peripheral programmes of study and education (Eccles & Barber 1999; Mahoney & Cairns 1997). The core curriculum traditionally includes such class programmes as reading, writing, language instruction, social studies, general science, and various types of mathematics (e.g., general, algebra, geometry, calculus, etc.), civics, history etc. While core curriculum is always specifically spelled out in the documents, extra-curricular programmes include, but not limited to, art and craft courses, athletics, music and drama, scholastically oriented clubs, recreational sports, outdoor trips and excursions, and various types of other out-of-classroom activities. In Hong Kong, the HKED defines ECAs as follows:

Extra-curricular activities are activities that take place outside regular class teaching and yet are related to student learning. As such, they fall within the scope of the school curriculum (Hong Kong Education Department 1997, p. 11).

In the prevailing school system in Hong Kong, there is the established post of "ECA Coordinator". He/she is responsible for organizing the ECAs of the school, helping to arrange and to coordinate inter-school activities and major school functions. He/she participates in the setting up of goals, directions and policies for the implementation of ECAs. The ECA Coordinator also guides students towards proper concepts and encourages them to participate in the activities. As part of the middle management in school, the ECA Coordinator is expected to be accountable to the school principal in carrying out the following tasks regarding ECAs: manpower planning, activity planning,

promotion and support, evaluation and appraisal (Hong Kong Education Department 1997).

McKown (1952) noted that early cultures such as Ancient Greece believed that participation in leisure and sports had a positive effect on the development of a well-rounded individual. On the whole these activities were aimed at increasing developmental skills and providing intellectual stimulus. Over the last few decades, a number of studies have been devoted to investigations of the effects of participation in ECAs. These studies focused on academic outcomes (Black 2002; Fredericks & Eccles 2006; Holloway 2000; Jordan & Nettles 1999; Watkins 2004). Several studies (e.g. Frederick & Eccles 2006; Marsh & Kleitman 2003) found that participation in ECAs related to an increase in psychological outcomes. Students who participated in ECAs showed increased interest in school, consistent attendance, and increased positive attitudes, all of which led to an increase in academic achievement (Darling 2005; Gerber 1996; Holland & André 1987; Kirsch 1999). In the light of these positive findings, ECAs have been envisaged by all stakeholders as an indispensable part of school education. Parents and citizens are very much concerned that if schools discontinue ECAs or reduce the scale due to funding issues, developmental needs of their children will not be met. However, due to policy decisions and/or the shortage of specialist teachers for these ECAs, there is often a reliance on generalist classroom teachers for the delivery of these activities in these settings and it ultimately restricts programme effectiveness. Comparisons have been made between businesses and schools in respect of financial management and implementing cost savings measures (Williams, Hay & Macdonald 2011). It has been suggested that school systems adopt principles similar to those of business organizations and use outsourcing as a means of more effectively managing their financial resources. As Whipp, Hutton, Grove & Jackson (2011) highlighted in their study regarding externally provided programmes, outsourcing physical activity programmes are potentially an effective method for offering primary school students specialist physical education instruction. In sum, schools envisage outsourcing ECAs as a way of meeting the needs of the students within limited financial resources. However, with more and more schools actually outsourcing their services, little is known about outcomes for schools that do outsource services.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The purposes of this article are (1) to report on an exploratory study designed to illuminate the impact of outsourcing ECAs on school effectiveness in primary schools and (2) to examine the perceptions of teacher professionals on issues and considerations of outsourcing ECAs. The qualitative research that informs this paper is conceptualized within the interpretive paradigm since it aims at understanding the thoughts of sixteen teaching professionals including twelve teachers and four principals with regarding to the outsourcing of ECRs in times of promoting other learning experiences in schools as specified in the operational framework of Curriculum Reform. This interpretive paradigm emphasizes naturalistic methods of inquiry. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry is appropriate for handling data 'where there are multiple constructed realities that can only be studied

holistically' (p.37). The essence of interpretive approach is to capture the participants' points of view (Denzin & Lincoln 1998; Radnor 2001). The perceptions of these sixteen samples from ten schools on issues concerning outsourcing ECRs constitute "multiple constructed realities". The author recognized the need to adopt "theoretical sampling" (Strauss 1987, p.38) to ensure that maximum variation to the analysis could best be achieved through illuminating these teaching professionals' perceptions. In this study, being a human instrument, the author had to respond effectively to the phenomenon, and be capable of recognizing, sorting, distinguishing and interpreting the subtleties of meaning which emerge (Radnor 2001).

Bearing in mind an overarching question: "What is going on about outsourcing activities in school?", the investigators purposively selected twelve teachers who were either coordinators or responsible for organizing ECAs in ten primary schools for in-depth interviews. Among these ten schools, four principals who were involved in overseeing purchasing ECA services from external agencies were also invited to be interviewed respectively in this study. After analyzing the transcript of the first interview, the author chose another teacher professional for interviews. Subsequently their views were, in terms of their coordinating experiences, different from the previous one. An aide-memoire was used (Burgess 1985) as a guide for interviews. Probes were used to encourage the interviewees to describe their perceptions and experiences in details and to seek clarification constantly of their words. During the interview, the consent of the respondents to allow the investigator to interview them was extremely desirable. They were also informed of their right to discontinue the conversation if they felt uncomfortable and uneasy. To ensure validity of the interview data, the investigator would send the transcript to the respondents for comments. Radnor (2001) emphasizes that an investigator should be open and honest. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The interviews were tape-recorded and the transcribed data were analyzed using both open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Each interview lasted for approximately an hour. Content analysis was adopted for coding and categorizing data regarding current practice of outsourcing activities collected from in-depth interviews. The investigators identified themes in the responses and grouped them into appropriate categories that formed the basis of the outsourcing model for primary schools in Hong Kong.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following categories and themes emerged from the data obtained through in-depth interviews. They described both principals' and teachers' responses with regard to the outsourcing of ECAs in school. The names of both principals and teachers were pseudonymous.

Effectiveness of Outsourcing ECAs Releasing Workload and Cost Saving

Majority of the teacher and principal respondents welcomed the idea of outsourcing ECAs. By making reference to the guidelines regarding outsourcing activities provided by the EDB inside which a set of very clear and specific description about how schools should conduct their "Trading Operations" (Education Bureau 2007), most of the

respondents said they had started outsourcing activities to external agents since 2001. The teacher respondents found that outsourcing activities could help reduce their daily workload so that they could concentrate on classroom teaching. Moreover, some said that outsourcing could also help release their administrative pressure. In Hong Kong, teacher's teaching load was very heavy. On average each teacher has to teach 30 periods per week. In addition to teaching students and meeting parents, each teacher will be assigned to take charge of at least one ECA after class. If activities are outsourced, they feel satisfied and welcome such policy. Three respondents had the following remarks:

I, of course, am very satisfied with the idea of outsourcing. Not only can it help release my workload but also I can have more time to prepare my lessons and teaching materials. Most importantly, I can save my time conduct more teacher-parent conferences. (Teacher informant 8)

I was used to working until 8 pm in school because I was assigned by the principal to train a team of volley ball players every afternoon. You can imagine how heavy my teaching and duty load was at that time. Two years ago, the EDB provided every school with a one-off subsidized grant for schools to spend on outsourcing ECAs. The principal immediately invited a professional to help lead this team. Since then, I have felt released. (Teacher informant 5)

Most importantly, two of the principals expressed that by outsourcing some of the activities to professional tutors from external agencies, not only could their teachers concentrate more on their classroom teaching but also the cost of the activities could be reduced to the level parents felt satisfied.

It is indeed cost saving! My teachers and parents welcomed this initiative. When more bids are received from the contractors, we can choose the lowest offer of good quality. (Principal Informant 4)

VI. ENHANCING TEACHERS' EXPERTISE

The principal respondent also found outsourcing activities beneficial to school effectiveness and school improvement. One of the principals opined that her teaching staff felt very satisfied with the arrangement as they could save more of their time on teaching. Another one emphasized that the administrative load was greatly reduced. Once the agent arrived, all those technical and administrative arrangements would be handed to him. Besides, two principals reiterated that the coach employed by the outsourcing agency was more expert at the games or activities than what their teachers could know. The service provider could demonstrate professional skills that teachers were not good at or familiarized with. They expressed that outsourcing activities could help deliver a higher quality of services to students. The teacher-in-charge could also learn how to organize the activity in a professional way. It could also help enhance and supplement the expertise of the teachers. One of the principals exclaimed in the following way:

It is just wonderful. I need not invite my teachers to take the training courses prior to leading the team of school orchestra. The one coming to take up the activity looks more professional. Students are satisfied with his performance and have found what he said inspiring. Two of our music teachers are willing to participate in looking after the orchestra because they said they could learn some skills from the coach. Now our school orchestra has participated in many contests in Hong Kong. (Principal informant 2)

Teacher respondents were generally satisfied with the idea of outsourcing. At least half of the respondents found that the service provider would likely send someone who could provide students with the best professional knowledge and skills during the course of study. A teacher had the following highlight:

When the coach conducts the workshop for our students, I have found that they provide students with very professional skills and knowledge. Relatively speaking, the activity is of high quality and better than what normal teachers perform. They are usually professionally trained. (Teacher informant 11)

Catering For Students' Learning Needs

For some ECAs requiring some specific skills such as ball games, calligraphy, choir, etc., the school teachers cannot easily take up the task of coaching or leading the activities due to lack of expertise. To cater for the learning needs of the students with regard to varieties of ECAs, it is better to invite expert outsiders to provide these activities. There would be many diversified activities for parents and students to choose. Some teachers remarked that it was more effective to do so. Through conducting a survey, they would outsource the outsourced activity demanded most by the students. A teacher said:

The activities outsourced are liked most by the students. Usually, we ask their parents to fill in a questionnaire with regard to the options of activities. Then we contract out those activities most welcomed by parents and students. (Teacher informant 7)

A principal opined that the fee of the activities to be collected was one of her considerations when deciding as to whether they were offered to students. For those students of working class background, she would consider granting subsidies to them:

To cater for the needs of the students, we have to consider not only the quality of the service but also its price. The fees for the activities must be afforded by the parents. The activities offered should be at a price the parents are willing and able to pay. Those students of working class background, they usually cannot afford paying the fee. However, I still encourage them to join by applying for school subsidy. Our school council is so kind to

donate an amount of money for students who have difficulties in participating in ECAs. (Principal informant 4)

Issues and concerns about management of outsourcing activities

Though many of the respondents welcomed the initiative of outsourcing, they also expressed their concerns about outsourcing activities regarding the cost and quality of the services, teachers' workload and the needs of parents and students.

Increase in Administrative Duties

Though many respondents agreed that outsourcing could really reduce their workload, there were still a few questioned whether outsourcing ECAs really released their load. They found that it took time to liaise and negotiate with service providers. A teacher expressed in such a way in the interview:

We expect outsourcing could replace our teaching load so that we have more time to prepare our lessons and teaching materials. However, sometimes we need to take up those administrative duties linked to outsourcing. For example, I need to liaise with them all the time. It causes me much inconvenience. (Teacher informant 12)

Another ECA teacher coordinator echoed:

I need to collect fees from students and allocate rooms for the activities. When the coach did not turn up, I have to call the service providers. There is much for me to do. (Teacher informant 4)

In fact, there were at least five teachers raising examples to demonstrate that they sometimes had to leave the school late in the evening due to looking after varieties of ECA held in their schools though there were outsourced. Teacher informant 8 remarked:

Outsource does not mean let go, it needs to be monitored and assisted. Teachers still need to plan and collect fees. (Teacher informant 8)

Some teachers mistakenly thought that outsource could release their workload. In fact, part of the work and activities still needed to be conducted by teaching professionals. Some teacher respondents thought that it was a waste of time when spending too much on negotiations and contact with outsourced companies. For example, a principal respondent exclaimed in such a way:

My teachers and I need to spend a lot of time on making initial contact with contractors, observing their performance and quality. (Principal Informant 3)

Maintaining Quality of the Activities

Maintaining the quality of the outsourced agencies was also one of the concerns expressed by teaching professionals. Some complained of tutors sometimes being late for

sessions. Two teachers pointed out that the quality of activities varied because of the change of tutors. It seems that carefully monitoring and management of outsourced ECAs is a must so as to ensure they are of the quality expected. Regarding management of ECAs, one of the principals had the following remark:

My colleagues and I need to monitor the quality of the agencies so as to ensure the quality. In fact, quality of ECAs varies tremendously. I constantly evaluate each activity and then make recommendations for improvement periodically (Principal informant 2).

Another teacher respondent demonstrated similar view with regard to monitoring. In addition, she highlighted that parents had high expectation on what the outcome of the activities would be.

We need to cope with various types of demand from parents. Therefore, individual tutors' personality, skills and teaching performance etc. are needed to be monitored for the purpose of quality assurance. (Teacher informant 11)

To ensure quality of ECAs, many respondents said they needed to be familiarized with the service providers. Their credibility of was of vital importance when deciding to whom they contract out their activities.

Link between ECAs and School Curriculum

One of the principals highlighted the importance of linking ECAs to formal curriculum of her school. She reiterated that ECAs were not just activities. They had to be educational and were related to the school curriculum. She expected that the instructors possessed professional certificates and the activities offered matched the requirement of subject curricula. She said:

I hope the service providers should be of education background. If they just provide our students with activities which are not related to what we have taught in the classroom, I do not think it benefits all the stakeholders. (Principal informant 3)

The responsible teacher needs to use a lot of time to discuss the content of activities. For example, the contractor cannot immerse into their activities some content of religious related element. We also take into the consideration of the value hidden in the activities. (Principal informant 4)

It is of primary importance to embed educational goals and values in the outsourced activities. However, two of the respondents highlighted that some tutors neglected the moral and societal values of implementing an activity but rather paid attention to the degree of fun and happiness in the

They come and just teach without taking into account what we have already reminded them of the educational learning goal required. (Teacher informant 7)

Student discipline

Another issues raised by teacher respondents is handling student discipline in the process of implementing ECAs. They admitted that tutors were not trained educationists. They did not have any knowledge of client psychology or skills of counseling. The teacher coordinator needed to sometimes arrange meetings with tutors to understand what they encountered in the sessions and help them solve the problems.

There are problems in controlling student discipline in the sessions. Some of the tutors do not know the correct way to handle. They call us to go to the room to resolve the issue. (Teacher Informant 5)

Professional instructors may not necessary receive trainings on educational psychology and they need teachers to assist them to deal with students' psychological emotions and discipline problems. (Teacher informant 10)

In one of the schools, as too many classes of ECAs were organized from Monday to Sunday, teachers needed to follow on the issue of student performance, discipline, fee payment and tutor quality. The teacher sometimes asked the outsourced agency to send staff to help monitor the progress of the activities. Some students often did not complete the assigned tasks but those tutors would not care. There were quite a number of student discipline issues to follow.

VII. DISCUSSION

Outsourcing ECAs to external agencies is the trend of practice nowadays in Hong Kong. With reference to the findings, there exist advantages of outsourcing activities for the benefits of development of students, teachers as well as the school. There are, however, issues and concerns regarding the practice of outsourcing at the same time. As Agron (1999) noted, a school's satisfaction with outsourcing depends on each school's experience in the specific area or areas that they are considering for outsourcing. A negative experience can prompt administrators to question their decision to outsource and perhaps ultimately eliminate outsourcing. Positive experiences with outsourcing however, most likely will result in more non-educational services being contracted out. This permits administrators to focus more fully on their real purpose, to educate children. The responses showed above suggest that the schools that participated in this study mostly have had positive experiences with outsourcing. The majority of the respondents agreed with the idea of outsourcing and were satisfied with the service provider and with the quantity of outsourced extracurricular activities. Their reasons for agreeing with outsourcing including "easing teacher workload, providing professional skills that teachers cannot provide and providing higher quality" whereas their reasons for disagreeing with outsourcing were "maintenance of

quality, queries about workload and student discipline” indicating opinions of a far more specific nature than what is discussed in the literature. The reasons for outsourcing and the potential for satisfaction with outsourcing in schools that adopt the practice are often discussed in broad and strategic terms only.

It appears from the finding in the category of “quality” that tutors’ promptness in arriving for sessions and quality of tutors present the main problems. In the category of “student discipline”, the comments suggest that service providers need more extensive training in handling student discipline to better control their classes and the students. In the category of “monitoring”, the major problem is related to time requirements. A need for more resources and the time-consuming nature of the work were the main problems identified. Respondents indicated that the major difficulties were finding respected organizations that provided services suitable to schools. Finally, respondents identified parental demands and expectations as one of the major problems. The comments are indicative of some of the disadvantages associated with outsourcing that Schweitzer (2004) identified. These disadvantages include: (a) loyalty on part of contractor employees is to the service provider and not to the school; (b) greater purchasing power of larger schools, which impacts administration and cost; (c) lack of benefits offered to contracted employees, which are not only social and ethical issues for the schools, but may also affect contracted employees’ performance in terms of punctuality, quality of teaching, and commitment to teaching; (d) contracted employees receive lower pay and fewer employee benefits, which too is a factor related to punctuality, quality of teaching, and commitment to teaching; (e) loss of control over the service contracted, which was indicated in respondents’ comments relative to monitoring; (f) individual vendors being outbid by big firms, which impacts administration and cost; and (g) the long-term nature of contracts that make it difficult to cancel them without legal ramifications. Comments of the participants also reflect the findings of the American School and University’s Sixth Survey of Privatization/Contract Services which revealed that schools do not use outsourced services because of administrative costs, among other concerns (Agron 1999).

It is worth noting that educational ideologies and values held by primary school teachers in Hong Kong are not always shared by employees of services providers. As disclosed in the findings, views of schools have tilted towards business values and they have failed to address ethical importance of personal moral development in terms of the traditional Confucian values about education; student discipline is considered by teachers as an important personal value. It is obvious that these business oriented service providers may not necessarily hold the same beliefs as the teachers.

Those concerns expressed by the respondents such as familiarity with provider and providers’ credibility are actually supported in the literature. These concerns can be addressed with planning, communication and follow-up actions. Outsourcing efforts must be carefully planned, have explicit goals, and be systematically implemented. As Crane (2004) points out, plans should include strategic and tactical considerations at all levels but the management must not use outsourcing to eliminate inadequately managed, poorly

understood or costly functions. It is necessary for outsourcing activities to be completely open and candid with employees about short term and long term plans and goals (Caplan 2004). This can be accomplished with a major communication and training effort which explains what is happening and why. Such efforts should be undertaken as soon as possible, as rumours may circulate before a formal announcement is made which can increase anxiety and prompt good employees to begin the process of looking for another job (Belcourt & McBey 2004). Because the mission of schools is to educate children, the goal of schools is to make the business aspects of the school run smoothly so that teachers and administrators can focus on their mission (Kramer 1996). Managing the relationship with the service provider is also a crucial determinant. Schools need to work in a partnership mode with the service provider. Both the school and the service provider must have the understanding that their relationship is long-term and multi years that can work only if both parties trust and respect each other. Even if the most detailed contract cannot include all contingencies that may arise, the contract must allow for dealing with problems and unexpected events effectively (Hoover 2007).

In fact, during the interviews, the respondents suggested some measures for improvements. For example, in the category of “monitoring for quality”, half of the respondents suggested that the school, government, and parents be involved in monitoring and that monitoring standards be included in contractual agreements. They also indicated that there needed to be more two-way communication between teachers and service providers, with teachers’ major responsibility being their professional work and activities. In the “cost” category, respondents suggested that the government bear part of the cost associated with outsourcing of activities.

Issues associated with contractual agreements have been discussed in the literature. As stated repeatedly throughout this study, the primary mission of schools is to educate children, unlike businesses whose mission is to make a profit. Schools need to be concerned with academic achievement, self-esteem, social interaction, and emotional and moral development. To address these concerns schools need committed administrators, teachers, and staff who not only work within the school to accomplish its mission but also interact with parents and the broader community. Like businesses, schools are employers bound by legal regulations and responsibilities. Therefore, contractual agreements with service providers are necessary for schools (Crane 2004).

Often organizations sign the contract before finalizing all details. The result is that they do not get the benefits they seek (Huber 2003). Schools must exercise due diligence in their contractual agreements which should extend to the contract negotiation stage. Because every aspect of the outsourcing arrangement is governed by the contract, both sides must agree on all the terms and conditions of the agreement. This requires that schools consider every possible contingency that could arise during the life of the agreement, including how disputes will be resolved after the contract has been signed. At the same time, because situations arise that cannot always be anticipated, it is important that the contract maintains some level of flexibility so that conditions are not specified so tightly that the service provider cannot use discretion to respond to a

business need or innovate to improve service (Tarsh 2004). Therefore, internal and external legal experts should be consulted when drafting the contract to ensure the organization's interests are being met, acceptable performance standards are determined (Belcourt & McBey 2004) and an appropriate fee structure and exit strategy are covered (Crane 2004). However, legal advice and provisions may induce additional cost which has a diminishing effect on the whole purpose of outsourcing. In the Hong Kong situation, this is mostly not viable because of the high legal charges and low quantity of outsourcing.

The contract should also outline acceptable service and quality standards and the penalties that applicable if the service provider does not meet the guidelines (Belcourt & McBey 2004). There should be clear goals for all relevant criteria including performance indicators such as accessibility, timeliness of service, accuracy, and client satisfaction (Yalof & Morgan 2003).

Outsourcing should not only lead to cost savings but also lead to other benefits such as improved service, focus on core responsibilities and competencies, access to leading-edge technology and specialized expertise. There is abundant literature that establishes that organizations can achieve significant benefits from using outside service providers for non-core services. This is also true of schools. Schools must weigh carefully the specific reasons, costs and benefits associated with the decision to utilize outside service providers.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A major limitation of this study was the number of samples included in this qualitative study. However, we do not aim at generalization of the findings of this study but attempt to illuminate the phenomenon of outsourcing ECAs in ten primary schools in Hong Kong. Bearing in mind with the question regarding "What is going on about outsourcing activities in school?", the investigators initiated in-depth interviews with those teaching professionals concerned and ultimately revealed some pros and cons of the outsourcing practice. To support the empirical findings of the present qualitative study, it is recommended that follow-up quantitative studies be conducted, with larger sample sizes and more diverse sample groups included in the population. Broadening the population would yield greater insights and perhaps an even closer convergence with the findings of the present research. In future research, some aspects of the present study should be done differently. In some schools in Hong Kong, the decision to outsource is controlled by the school board and not the heads. This resulted in some questions that may have been overly open to interpretation.

It is also recommended that this investigation be replicated based on other related theories and approaches and a broader perspective be taken. For example, one could explore outsourcing from the perspective of leadership and vision of a school head. The distributive transformation approach is about creating an organizational vision and empowering people throughout the organization to take initiatives in order to make that vision a reality (Hern & Burke 2007). Porter's (1979) Five Forces Model is concerned with the bargaining power of customers and suppliers, the threat of substitute products or services, and the jockeying of competitors for positioning as the basic forces for competition in an industry. Studies could be

conducted on how schools select service providers and negotiate price or the impact of these practices on schools and learning, using Porter's framework. Furthermore, service providers themselves can also be another focal point of study as to how they react to schools' requests and their philosophy of business based on similar considerations from the schools' point of view. Another area of possible investigation is the obvious extension of the study area to include secondary schools.

The outsourcing process has taken deep roots and the only debate seems to be built around the question as to how far this major paradigm shift should go, not on whether it should be practiced. The former Secretary of State for Education and Skills in UK said in *The Guardian*:

"There is no doubt that breaking down the lack of transparency and the inward-looking culture that used to be the hallmark of the public sector has brought great benefit.....We offer our children a better deal because we've shifted away from the state paternalism of the old system."(Morris, 2008)

It is clear from the results of this study that the participating schools used outsourcing for reducing workload of teachers and to achieve cost savings, enhancement of student learning and to provide higher quality. The majority of the respondents indicated satisfaction with the idea of outsourcing and with service providers at their respective schools. In Hong Kong, public schools are being given additional funding (such as the increase in the Capacity Enhancement Grant) to be spent in a number of areas, including student activities. However, cost should not be the only concern. School boards and school managers should also be concerned with freeing teachers up to concentrate on their primary function of teaching and learning of students.

Outsourcing ECAs, other peripheral support services, and even core teaching services may be a way for schools to balance the need for cutting costs with the need for student academic achievement and for providing activities to students that will enhance their achievement and learning. Ongoing research with empirical data and analysis needs to be conducted to determine contributions that for-profit service providers can make to the educational mission of schools.

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