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Rethinking the HOW, WHERE and WHAT of Conversation in Curriculum

Work

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Abstract: *This paper focused on the school-based curriculum work of a case school seeking to equip their students with 21st century competencies. The school used an integrated curriculum approach for educational change. The teacher-teams planned a series of lessons, guided by cross-department key personnel. Six focus-group-discussions involving the teacher-participants, key personnel and school leaders were conducted to collect data on the innovations' genesis, processes, decision-making and the curriculum outcomes. The analysis of the focus-group-discussion data reveals a recurring theme depicting a perpetual school-placed structure that encouraged passion for conversation into practice, involving staff at all levels in crafting actionable plans that would sustain continuous teaching and learning improvement. We have labeled it as Constant Curriculum Conversation. Three key features seemed to explain this continuous professional exchange that permeated the school and anchored a desire to deliver a 21st century education to their students. They are Safe Environment (how), Integrated Curriculum (what) and Long Runway (where). The findings point to the importance placed by the school on its use of the professional learning community as a long term self-renewal strategy for continuous improvement in school-based curriculum development.*

Keywords: SCIs, SBCD, curricular innovation, curricular development

1. Background

Case study School X was established in the 1950s and earned her autonomous status before the turn of the century. School X distinguishes itself in its student-centric approach in pedagogy and continual experimentation with innovative undertakings in preparing its students for the challenges of the future. This is evidenced by the appointment as a Mentor School in the Microsoft Innovative Schools Programme. The School X received support in its phased-in implementation of the school's mobile-learning programme, which helped to build up the one-to-one Tablet PC-enabled learning environment. It was on this carefully laid structure that School X developed the noteworthy school-based curriculum innovations (SCI), which sought to equip its students with 21st century competencies. The term SCI is also known as School-based Curriculum Development (SBCD) in academic and international area, and in this paper we use the two terms interchangeably. Central to the SCIs in School X is the school's Integrated Curriculum, which enabled students see connections across subjects, as well as linkages between academic learning and real life issues.

2. Literature Review

As a philosophy approach, SBCD articulates a blend of philosophical or theoretical ideas and ideals regarding education (Marsh 1992; Skilbeck, 1984). Skilbeck suggests that SBCD necessarily requires the co-construction of curriculum by teachers and students; supported by local conditions such as teacher and student autonomy in curriculum development, and schools' responsiveness to the environment. Another scholar highlights the importance of collaboration among school staff as a significant aspect of SBCD (Bezzina, 1991). As a systemic approach, SBCD refers to works which attempt to discuss curriculum change in the broader context of educational change/reform and organisation theory. Thus Fullan's works (1993, 1999, 2001, 2007) are underpinned by the ideology of viewing schools as complex systems requiring restructuring and enculturating (i.e., developing organisation leadership) to bring about fundamental educational change/reform.

In countries such as UK and Australia, there are collections of empirical studies on SCIs as far back as in the 1970s. (Bolstad, 2004). These case studies examine aspects like teacher roles and experiences of teachers involved in SBCD (Bezzina, 1991; Cocklin *et al.*, 1995); student roles (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999), community involvement (May, 1992), and processes (Marsh *et al.*, 1990; Cocklin *et al.*, 1995). However, these works do not focus on whole school curriculum development in which the school staff consciously try to develop policies which would affect their practice. At the same time, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea share a common development in SBCD which focused on an integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum. Their empirical work on SBCD has been emergent since the 1990s, mostly initiated in response to national and economic policy of the different countries. In Singapore, there is a dearth of theoretical work on SBCD with the exception of the work of Gopinathan and Deng (2006). They propose a SBCD model for Singapore which they term as an "enactment of curriculum" in the context of education reforms in Singapore since the late 1990s. The characteristics of this model include the provision by central authorities of curricular materials in which teachers in Singapore mostly adapt and integrate, rather than create new curriculum to fit the local context (specific school and student needs). Hence, there is a need to conduct more case studies of whole school curriculum development in order to be able to compare within school and across schools towards the development of theory of SBCD and its specific aspects.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on the findings in the first phase of a two-phased research project which involved a case study of School X. While the two phases are differentiated by methodology, the research questions are common in the two phases. The first phase focuses on a retrospective study of school-based innovations in nine diverse schools over a period of 12 months. From the analysis of data from the nine schools, common patterns and divergent pathways in SBCD enactment were noted which informed the research focus in the in-situ study in Phase 2. In Phase 2, an in-situ, ethnographic study was conducted over a period of a year in two schools selected from the nine schools in the first phase. The following research questions in order of priority are:

1. How do schools with diverse conditions enact curriculum innovation? (HOW)
2. What conditions shape the enactment of curriculum innovations in the case study schools? (WHERE)
3. What are the outcomes of curriculum innovations on key personnel, teachers, and students? (WHAT)

The retrospective study in the first phase examined the conditions, processes, and outcomes of SBCD from the perspectives of the participants using data collected from Focus Group Interviews (FGDs). Six FGDs were carried out in School X. The FGD participants included school leaders, key personnel and teachers. The FGD sessions were audio and video recorded. The audio recordings were sent for transcription and three iterations of coding were carried out guided by the grounded theory approach.

4. Findings

From the analysis of the FGD data from School X, there was a recurring theme depicting a perpetual school-placed structure that encouraged passion for conversation into practice. There was strong involvement of staff at all levels in crafting actionable plans that would sustain continuous teaching and learning improvement. We labeled it as *Constant Curriculum Conversation*. This conversation occurred whenever teachers actively engaged in developing the school's Integrated Curriculum. The aims of the school's curriculum development efforts were to redesign the curriculum and to improve teaching approaches and assessment tasks to make learning more authentic and meaningful for students. School X possessed a strong culture of experimentation and sharing, with almost every member of her staff participating in action research related to the use of ICT in education. Harnessing the affordances of mobile learning and the use of Tablet PCs, teachers used ICT as an enabler to empower students to be self-directed learners, equipped with important skills required for the 21st century workforce, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration and effective communication.

As for the conditions that shape the enactment of curriculum innovations in case study School X, we identify three conditions, namely *Integrated Curriculum*, *Safe Environment* and *Long Runway*.

Integrated Curriculum (HOW was the school-based curriculum innovation enacted?)

The integrative curriculum defined the approach in how school harnessed the collective efforts of her teachers to enact the curriculum innovation. The integrative curriculum approach provided the unifying factor to link and connect the professional efforts of the school staff. The approach provided coherence in the school's curriculum re-development in preparing her students for the 21st century. Steeped in a centralised system where teaching and learning are framed by the subject discipline, the school knew that bringing two or more subjects together to build connections would run contrary to the strongholds of the individual disciplines. In School X, the school leaders believed in using an *interactive focus* for quality conversations to take place. Staff had protected time to deliberate professional matters at each stage of the curriculum work. During the *preparation* stage, the diversity in each subject content emphasis generated friendly exchange of ideas as teachers made explicit their thinking in developing a higher order abstraction of essential understanding. The designing of overarching themes to link subject topics was bore out of teachers being given the time and space to play with ideas and to improvise actionable plans. In the course of this to-and fro deliberation, the viable points of integration become clearer. A teacher recalled that...

...The people who were involved with integrated curriculum will actually sit down and brain storm things like essential questions and key questions and it (took) a lot of weeks to complete...

While many school leaders might take pride that their teachers have professional contact time to do curriculum work, School X has a critical dimension -*intensive implementation* of curriculum plans. One key personnel explained that the

motivation to design an integrated curriculum pivots on the identification of an intensive four to six-week window where the teams could put into action the culmination of their many hours of planning and discussion. This intensive implementation is a learning platform for team members to draw new insights. Two teachers were grateful that ...

... There's a concerted effort, as a school to actually like, leave those 4 weeks...

...So after we carry out the lesson, then we will come back together, sit down together to talk about what are the challenges that we faced, what are the possible improvements that we could make to this existing lesson plan.

So we improve on it so that we can carry out next year again...

Safe Environment (WHERE were the places which shaped the enactment?)

A safe nurturing environment was where teachers were able to be bold in thinking strategically and innovatively. The teachers had constant curricular conversations as they felt reassured in School X, where provisions of time and space were put aside to support a platform conducive for professional conversation and growth. For the school to go boldly to explore unknown curriculum terrain, building the professional courage to journey forth began with conditions that support capacity building and self-renewal capability. School X used the structure of multi-team membership to champion curriculum work across different discipline or subject groupings. Staff had multiple memberships, being involved in several teams such as project teams, task force, level units and subject groups. As they oscillated between groups and teams, they encouraged the cross-fertilisation of new ideas, challenged each other in their thinking and re-examined their own assumptions.

The school leaders practiced an *inclusive leadership*. They used manageable and clear goals to propel staff to greater heights. Individually, key personnel might not have the full picture of how students could be better prepared for the future. However, the key personnel collectively possessed thought leadership to guide the curriculum planning and implementation processes undertaken by their own department teachers.

Key personnel as curriculum leaders shared deep expertise in the subject discipline with their teachers. Where appropriate, heads of department engaged the teachers and discussed possibilities in terms of whether certain technological tools would help to bring about improved student outcomes. They listened to the teachers' concerns on implementation. To ensure that teacher discussion on curriculum issues was productive and rigorous, the school invited resource persons from the education ministry into their curricular conversations to level up the teachers' knowledge and expand their perspectives. The *guided autonomy* experienced by the teachers challenged their world views and uncovered missed opportunities.

While the school leaders believed in allowing less than perfect plans to proceed so that the learning from the implementation would provide them with more learning points, they would sometimes challenge good ideas proposed by the teachers to stretch their thinking. School leaders, key personnel and teachers played dual roles in suggesting and critiquing ideas. No one person was the sole producer of ideas. It was a place WHERE decision making was a team endeavor. Teachers felt empowered because of his membership to the team. One teacher described the professional space that the school provided was where she could explore and contribute from her strengths ...

...we voice out our opinion, we tell them what are the difficulties and offer suggestion ...

Long Runway (WHAT were the outcomes of the curriculum innovation?)

One outcome of the school's involvement in SCI was a culture of learning; not just for its own staff but also for others beyond the school. The staff at School X felt the social responsibility to share their learning with other schools. The WHAT of all the curriculum efforts of the project teams was the shared vision of a long runway. For the practitioners at School X, rethinking its school curriculum was not for just today; i.e. it is a long runway where there is no ending in their curriculum innovation efforts. The school saw itself as a sustained innovator and provider of learning solutions to themselves and to others. For the staff in School X...

“So next year I would hope to see that the teachers take ownership of some of the lessons. Because they already carried it out right, so they will give feedback you know, how can we further improve.”

“So we improve on it so that we can carry out next year again...”

Another reported outcome was teachers believed their curriculum innovations were developing 21st century competencies in their students. At the same time, gains in teacher learning were noted in such areas as technological skills, alternative assessments and appropriate ICT integrated and student-centred pedagogy.

5. Conclusion

School leaders and key personnel played important roles in setting the stage for teachers to how they could deliberate passionately about their craft. The selection of a curriculum model was strategic on the part of school leadership. The use of an integrative curriculum approach provided the HOW method to link and unify teachers' curricular conversation. The constant curriculum conversations of the staff overflowed from the formal meeting circles of teachers into their work stations and staff lounge areas. It was not unusual to hear informal exchange among teachers from two different subject disciplines as they connect across common themes for engaging the learning of their students in their classrooms. It was clear from our focus group discussions with the staff that there was strong camaraderie among colleagues. A safe nurturing environment with enduring values that transcended changing leadership and staff movement define the WHERE of the school's stronghold. Staff felt safe to innovate and challenge their status quo. The shared vision of a long runway unified the collective wisdom of the staff to desire constant improvement in quality teaching and learning. The WHAT outcomes of curriculum innovations were built on this vision of a long runway, which reflected the reality of curriculum implementation as an on-going activity - one which demands constant adjustment and responsiveness to the needs of learners, teachers and stakeholders within the school and beyond.

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