

Curriculum Perspectives and Leadership in Innovations for the Nurturing of 21st Century Learners

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- To increase the success of the implementation of Integrated Programme (IP), schools should organise foundational courses to help teachers identify high ability students and understand their cognitive, social and emotional needs.
- Pedagogical practice change did not happen with the removal of high-stakes examination and teachers need time and space for the iterative experimentation and reflection to develop a metalanguage for learning and teaching.

BACKGROUND

This study investigated the inception of IP with a focus on nurturing 21st century learners in schools that have had sustained academic success and the challenges they encountered to identify the knowledge, processes and practices in designing school-based curriculum and modifying pedagogical practices to nurture 21st century learners.

FOCUS OF STUDY

1. Identification of the knowledge, processes and practices in designing school-based curriculum and modifying pedagogical practices to nurture 21st century learners.

2. Examination of teachers' and school leaders' roles in reframing and re-contextualising curriculum and pedagogical practices in four IP schools and a junior college.

KEY FINDINGS

The study found that generally, the school mission, vision, and strategic thrust of each school influenced its school leaders' and teachers' perspectives about the IP curriculum and their chosen approaches. These perspectives in turn affected each school's priorities and rationales for the strategies, approaches and curriculum model (if any) that were adopted. Overall, the perspective of the IP curriculum by the four schools seemed to be framed by restrained flexibility and autonomy.

The discourses in these schools mainly revolved around policy, practice, and students. The curriculum policy at the national level played a major role in the design and implementation of the IP curriculum. Even though the leaders in all the schools in the study motivated their teachers to embark on changing their practice, there was ambiguity schools experienced in trying to determine what enriched IP learning experiences should be. It was challenging for schools to operationalise the IP curriculum in a way that set it qualitatively apart from the 'O'-Level Programme (OP) as it was difficult to

convince teachers who were accustomed to the tried-and-tested pedagogical practices that had delivered academic achievement thus far.

The study also revealed three modes of curriculum leadership as exhibited by the school leaders: top-down, restrained, and moderate. The top-down mode describes leadership that is clearly driving the IP curriculum change in the school. A restrained mode of curriculum leaders lacked the empowerment to deliver the IP – they faced constraints from school leaders and had had to manoeuvre carefully amidst the undercurrents among the teachers, and had to spend much time achieving buy-in from both sides (school leaders and their teachers). Finally, the moderate mode of curriculum leadership was pressured to achieve and sustain performance at the high-stakes examination. These leaders valued the culture of togetherness and preparedness to innovate, which led them to make changes at a moderate pace.

Finally, the study found that the IP provided the students with learning experiences that focused on open-endedness, authenticity, and complexities. In addition, there were opportunities for the students to pursue their interests, albeit at an introductory level. Students also shared that there were opportunities for much engagement and collaboration with other learners, critical and creative thinking, as well as character development and student well-being.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal rich insights that contributed to the successful implementation of IP in schools. At the policy level, the study has demonstrated that there is a need for policy gatekeepers to state and communicate the expected standards for the conceptualisation and implementation of IP. In addition, some recommended standards for practice have been made to help IP schools assess and monitor the progress and quality of the IP programmes they have conceptualised and implemented. These recommendations can also offer schools and policymakers a more realistic take on the implementation and desired outcomes of IP in the context of a dual-track IP school.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants included school leaders, curriculum leaders, teachers, and students from the five participating schools. The study involved roughly 1250 students who were enrolled in the OP and IP programmes from 2013 to 2016 Year 1 cohorts.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This was a multiple-case study and broadly followed the convergent mixed methods design. The student outcomes are measured quantitatively using four instruments, namely the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (UK Version), the Wallach-Kogan Creativity Test, Learning Preference Assessment, and Attitude in Learning. The interviews conducted with school leaders, middle management, teachers and students were co-generative dialogues.

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