

Through the Lens of the School: School-based Curriculum Innovation (SCI)

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

1. An expanded notion of the success of SCI should include the culture of learning and teacher learning.
2. An open and safe platform for sharing challenges could facilitate the sustainability of SCI.
3. Approaches in SCI could include seeding innovation, professional development, and internal and external interactions with school stakeholders.

BACKGROUND

School-Based Curriculum Innovation (SCI), also known as School-Based Curriculum Development (SBCD), is a transformational initiative to devolve autonomy in curriculum development to schools. There is a lack of studies in Singapore that takes the entire school as a unit of analysis and uses both theoretical discussion and empirical data to understand SCI.

FOCUS OF STUDY

Current professional development programs have been highly criticized. Three research questions framed this study:

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

KEY FINDINGS

Firstly, two elements of the SCI processes are:

1. *Approaches adopted in the enactment*

The participating schools displayed some commonalities in their approaches to SCI. Five approaches were observed: internal interactions, external links, professional development, a pragmatic approach and a seeding approach.

2. *Challenges in the enactment*

Enactment challenges include teachers' perceived lack of capacity and feeling of powerlessness, and concerns related to sustainability, which were negotiated between four dimensions. The four dimensions were time negotiation, role negotiation, IT-pedagogy negotiation and traditional—21st century learning negotiation.

Secondly, two prominent conditions/contexts were identified:

1. *Culture as condition*

The characteristics of the culture that shaped the enactment of SCI are open, autonomous, collaborative and safe. Most of the participating schools had a culture which afforded an open atmosphere, encouraging the expression of diverse opinions and experimentations. The teachers from all the participating schools reported that they enjoyed being autonomous in their SCI processes.

2. **Leadership as condition**

School leaders played significant roles in enacting SCI. Their leadership supports were demonstrated in providing four aspects: structural support, clear direction, encouragement for risk taking, and mentorship.

Thirdly, four aspects of outcomes were:

1. **Culture of learning as outcome**

The culture of learning was developed in the process of SCI implementation. The culture of the case study schools varied in terms of collaborative (involving constant interactions and pedagogical sharing), autonomous (teachers have the autonomy and empowerment to design, plan, and implement curricular innovations), open (to diverse opinions and to experimentation) and safe (a safe environment to express diverse and dissenting opinions). With these cultural features, some schools developed a culture of learning where learning is pervasive and visible in teachers' daily practices.

2. **Changes in learning as outcome**

The data analysis indicated that SCI brought about outcomes of learning beyond academic ones. Teachers observed that their students were showing nascent 21st century competencies and holistic development in students' engagement with SCI activities. Beyond student learning outcomes, teachers also acquired new knowledge and skills through SCI. Some teachers reported that they learnt alternative forms of teaching and learning.

3. **Changes in leadership as outcome**

Leadership evolved from a top-down into a more distributed leadership structure.

Teacher leadership emerged and became an outcome of SCI enactment.

4. **Emerging challenges as outcomes**

SCI challenges are co-evolving with the approaches as part and parcel of the enactment processes.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

For Policy

Two crucial implications are: (1) An expanded notion for success of SCI should include the culture of learning and teacher learning and (2) an open and safe platform for sharing challenges would facilitate the sustainability of SCI.

For Practice

Five promising approaches in SCI were identified. They were (a) relying on internal interactions with different stake holders of the school; (b) leveraging on external links; (c) focusing on teacher professional development; (d) applying a pragmatic approach, and (e) a seeding approach. These approaches are the commonalities in the participating schools.

POPULATION

Three primary and six secondary schools were involved in this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Qualitative, grounded theory approaches were adopted in this study. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with different school stakeholders and lesson observations.

About the authors

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