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Can Learning Studies help sustain system wide educational innovation?

Indicators from the VITAL project.
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The VITAL Project: Learning Studies as an object of policy

- Who selects the schools? Evidence from the Evaluation of the EMB funded programme of LS in primary and secondary schools suggests that in the main the schools are self-selecting. Principals appear to initiate contact with their district inspector rather than vice versa. There is little evidence of the EMB coercing schools to participate.

Principals initiate in response to teacher Feedback

- Principals often initiated communication with the EMB inspectors when assured of a measure of staff support e.g. after some teachers had expressed an interest in the school becoming involved in LS. Decisions by Principals to become involved in Learning Study were not simply autocratic.
- Principals also had their own reasons for involving the school.

Reasons for engaging the school in LS

- The need for curriculum change/improvement in a particular KLA e.g. a number of principals perceived a greater need for change in the area of Maths as opposed to Languages.
- Teachers in such areas were expected to comply, and did so. However, in the main they did so willingly. Although many teachers involved in LS were not volunteers they did not feel coerced by their principals.

Capacity for innovation in the H.K. educational system

- The VITAL evaluation suggests that the capacity for securing non-coerced system wide educational change may be greater in HK than in some western countries. Why? Schools as organisations and work-places tend to be shaped by a culture of holism as opposed to individualism.
- The involvement of the school provides the regional education officer (REO) with an opportunity to influence changes in the school that improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- The involvement of subject experts from the tertiary institutions in learning studies process can facilitate the development of the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in a form which enable teachers to tackle difficult points in their lessons.

Learning studies as a methodology of change

- Teachers generally experience Learning Studies as a rigorous SBCD method - a well-defined package of procedures - that has significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning.
- Teachers learn to systematically review the effectiveness of their teaching by evaluating students' performance and perceptions in the lesson.
- The method involves collaborative lesson planning meetings, pre and post-lesson testing, peer observations of lessons, post-lesson interviews with a group of students, post-lesson conferences, and video-recording of lessons.

LS: a methodology for 'injecting' change capabilities.

- Teachers do not in the main view the 'Learning Study' as a permanent feature of SBCE. It is often viewed as a temporary system that is of value as an initial and top-up 'injection of capabilities' for effecting curriculum and pedagogical change into the school as a work-place.
- The capabilities developed through LS are frequently associated with the use of variation theory as a pedagogical tool and sustaining a focus on the objects of learning.
- The school culture can be improved and changed into an learning organisation in which team spirit is enhanced amongst the teachers.

Capabilities exercised in the use of variation theory.

- V1. Understanding variations in the ways students understand the intended object of learning (V1); V2. Understanding variations in the way teachers understand and handle the particular object of learning; V3. Using V1 and V2 to plan learning experiences which make use of patterns of variation that are judged appropriate for enhancing a critical discernment of the object of learning.
- There is a great deal of variation in teachers, principals and SDOs familiarity with variation theory and how it can actually be applied.

Using variation theory as a pedagogical tool.

- Teachers experience lesson planning as a form of co-ordinated action
- Teachers observe and discuss each others' practice
- Teachers elicit students perspectives on lessons.

Such experiences might be organised on a smaller scale in ways that create less conflict between priorities, than is the case with the current procedural package known as LS.

LS and the consumption of scarce time and resources

- Teachers tend to experience LS as an 'inflexible' procedural package, fixing priorities in a form that excludes giving attention to other important work-place activities (for purposes of survival) and placing them on the 'back-burner'. e.g. advisory work with pupils, and meetings to co-ordinate action across a number of different fronts. LS tends to be regarded as a very worthwhile one-off experience that cannot be sustained on a continuous basis.
- The process of learning study is very consuming of resources in terms of teacher's time, tertiary institution personnel's time and the REO's time
- The learning studies cannot be sustained in many schools because the degree of involvement that is necessary is too great.

LS enhances the work-place culture's innovation capacity

- Teachers generally feel that they acquired capabilities in the context of a full-scale LS which they could then transfer into their work place practice in more flexible forms. These capabilities are viewed as enhancing their capacity to effect sustainable curriculum and pedagogical change in their classrooms and schools.
- Learning studies develop teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and thereby enable them to become effective agents of curriculum and pedagogical change in their classrooms and schools.

The organisational culture in HK schools and LS.

- The organisational culture of schools in HK is less marked by the values of privacy, territoriality and hierarchy which shape the school as a work place in the west. This may facilitate rather than frustrate the transfer of capabilities developed in the context of Learning Studies and cited in 8 above.
- The impact of the project cannot be sustained if there is no frank discussion amongst the teachers, strong teacher's commitment and strong leadership from the principal and senior staff.

Learning Studies in the context of curriculum change

- The key question that needs to be asked of Learning Studies as a procedural package is not whether it can be institutionalised in schools, but whether it has the power as a temporary system to effect sustainable improvements in the capabilities of teachers to effect worthwhile curriculum and pedagogical change.
- Learning Studies covers a very small part of the syllabus to be taught and it is doubtful if it could be extended to give much wider curriculum coverage and scope for learning.

The Evaluation of Vital

- The final phase of the evaluation will be gathering evidence of the extent to which teachers engagement in LS has resulted in sustainable improvements in their capabilities to effect significant curriculum and pedagogical change.
- On the basis of such evidence the evaluation will propose a framework of quality indicators for assessing the sustainable impact of Learning Study on curriculum and pedagogical practice in schools.

A final challenge for Learning Studies in Hong Kong

Are there more flexible, and less time-consuming and work intensive ways of effecting sustainable improvements in teachers' capabilities as curriculum change agents in schools? Some have claimed that there are and the evidence for it needs to be examined.