What works for whom in what circumstances? -
A focus on curriculum and pedagogical innovation and reform

Presenters:
1. Dr Dennis Kwek, National Institute of Education, Singapore
2. Fatema Hussain, National Institute of Education, Singapore

The presentation focuses on a theory-driven evaluation and synthesis of curriculum and pedagogical innovation and reform undertaken by Singapore’s National Institute of Education (NIE), drawing on Pawson’s (2006) realist evaluation framework in which three linked concepts form the analytic centerpiece: Context, Mechanism and Outcome. We developed a template, which allows us to ‘see’ at a glance the changes, if any, between a research project’s original proposal and actual implementation based on document analyses of nine sampled projects. We surface the underlying mechanisms of change by highlighting commonalities and differences across the projects in terms of Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes to answer ‘what works for whom in what circumstances?’ (Pawson, 2003). Our study prises open further the ‘black box’ of programmes - the space between the actual input and the expected output of a programme (Stame, 2004). In terms of NIE’s interventions and evaluation studies, we explain the vital programme ‘mechanism’ as well as the ‘context’ - the other crucial explanatory ingredient in a realist synthesis approach. We discuss the implications of our findings for future research in curriculum reform and pedagogical innovation surfacing change processes embedded in the local context that possibly, differ from aspects of school change in the West.
Abstract

Author 1: Dr Dennis Kwek
Author 2: Fatema Anis Hussain

A key question asked of many programmatic interventions that attempt change or improvement in classroom teaching and learning is: ‘What works?’ Theory-based evaluations have opened the ‘black box’ of programmes - the space between the actual input and the expected output of a programme (Stame, 2004). Given the increasing calls to determine the impact of educational research in Singapore, this study (2014-15) focuses on a theory-driven evaluation and synthesis of curriculum and pedagogical innovation and reform (CPIR) undertaken by the National Institute of Education (NIE). The study applies theory-driven evaluation to an important research niche area in NIE drawing on Pawson’s (2006) realist evaluation framework in which three linked concepts form the analytic centerpiece: Context, Mechanism and Outcome. Realist evaluation is fundamentally, about unearthing and inspecting the vital programme ‘mechanism’ with ‘context’ as the other crucial explanatory ingredient to answer ‘what works for whom in what circumstances?’ (Pawson, 2003).

Data sources comprise case-for-support documents and final reports of NIE’s four intervention and five evaluation projects in different subject-domains, accessed in accordance with ethical guidelines. Based on an in-depth literature review of theory-driven evaluation and school reform in different countries, we developed a template that afforded a comprehensive, systematic overview of each project in terms of its purpose, research design, mechanisms of change, and outcomes. The template allowed us to ‘see’ at a glance the changes, if any, between a project’s original proposal and its actual implementation. It proved instrumental in surfacing the underlying mechanisms of change: the model of change, challenges involved, and change processes. We generated commonalities and differences across the sampled projects in terms of Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes.

We found that the context of the interventions tended to be high-stakes distal environments. The studies made extensive use of experts as agents of change but lacked an explicit model of change. Developing curriculum materials was a common focus. Effective interventions and evaluation studies were those that addressed all aspects of the Instructional Core: teacher, student, content, and the relationships between them (City et al., 2009). The common denominator among the evaluation studies was a form of baseline or descriptive data collection and reporting on the conditions and perceptions of
teaching and learning. For future research, careful documentation of expected and actual causal mechanisms in reporting frameworks, are recommended.

The present findings are based on, and limited to, the document analyses of selected CPIR projects but make a valuable methodological contribution by testing the viability of a theory-driven evaluation of NIE’s existing research projects. The findings inform future CPIR research by surfacing potential areas of concerns that need to be addressed to achieve intended outcomes. Supplementing a prior quantitative summary of NIE’s research projects, this study fuels further research through a clearer research agenda in the Singapore context. The study elucidates change processes embedded in the local context, mechanisms, and outcomes, which are potentially useful to future researchers building on such studies, and which may well differ from the extant literature on school change predominantly based in Western contexts.

References


