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REFUGE SEEKING: CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOLS IN JAPAN

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Abstract:-

The aim of this study was to develop a theoretical understanding of the process and strategies school organization members engage in when faced with issues concerning schoolwide curriculum change initiatives using a grounded theory approach. Building on this new theoretical understanding, the study aimed to explore factors and conditions that are needed to implement effective and meaningful interdisciplinary teaching and learning environments in the whole school. Most of the relevant data came from field notes of classroom observations, and several meetings that were held regularly over a two year period, with a study group that comprised of teacher education professionals, school administrators, and teachers in the primary and secondary divisions from a K-16 school in Japan. The study suggests that, 'Vaguing', (which emerged as a core category in this grounded theory study), a behaviour that organizational members including leaders exemplify when an organizational change initiative is suggested, plays a key role in contributing to the ongoing struggle in the design and implementation of successful schoolwide curriculum reform initiatives.

Keywords:-*Vaguing, radaring, filtering, acquiescing, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, s school leadership, organizational change*

INTRODUCTION

The term *Interdisciplinary* is a term often associated with strategies to integrate the arts with the sciences, and the inherent value and benefits that this type of teaching and learning can bring to enhance learning experiences in schools. Newell and Green (1992) defines interdisciplinary studies as "inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights." (p.24) Wiggins and McTighe (2005) suggests that when subject teachers engage in collaborative planning that identifies and focuses on the 'big ideas' rather than the fixed contents being taught in their respective subject disciplines, this can result in the development of a holistic curriculum that encourages authentic meaningful student inquiry and the development of conceptual understandings beyond the typical constraints of a single subject discipline. This idea of integrating two or more subject disciplines together to create opportunities for student inquiry and meaningful learning experiences is similar to the ideas presented by Dewey (1916) where he compares the learner to an explorer who maps an unknown territory. Dewey suggests that to simply give the 'map' to students (as a teacher might) is to give the summarized results of the experience, but not the actual experience by which the map was produced. The content presented to students also should not be the products of disciplinary experts (i.e. disconnected and predetermined facts), but rather be presented as immediate problems, which also have disciplinary significance. Fallace (2016) further suggests that Dewey believed, "students would only appreciate the techniques of the disciplinary expert if these methods were viewed as a natural progression from prior social inquiries." (p. 181) Education for Dewey consisted in the cumulative and unending acquisition, combination, and reordering of these exploratory social experiences. "Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at hand does he think. If he cannot devise his own solution (not, of course, in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils) and find his own way out he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct answer with one hundred percent accuracy" (Dewey 1916, p. 160). Interdisciplinary teaching and learning therefore is not a new idea. Dewey was also not the first or the only educator to suggest the interdisciplinary arrangement of content in the curriculum. The idea has been a topic of interest for well over a century, yet despite its promise in building bridges within and across the subject disciplines to support schools in developing a more holistic approach to teaching and learning experience for their students, many schools still appear to fall short in providing the necessary freedom and learning environments needed to do so. Heidi Hayes Jacobs suggests that one of the reasons it is so hard for schools to implement it is that "we've created structures that make it very difficult. We have time barriers. We have personal barriers. In secondary schools, for example, teachers become identified with their subject to such a degree that it's hard for them to look over the fence. There are cultures in departments. They've got lots of pressures on them, and although they do see the advantages of relating their subject to other subjects, it can be difficult." (Brandt, 1991, p.24)

The International Baccalaureate Organization (IB) offers interested schools a Middle Years Programme (MYP) where interdisciplinary teaching and learning is central to the design of its curriculum framework. The IB defines interdisciplinary teaching and learning as "the process by which students come to understand bodies of knowledge and modes of thinking from two or more disciplines or groups and integrate them to create a new understanding." (Boix-Manilla, 2010, p.13) The MYP curriculum framework is designed with an emphasis on supporting schools in developing an interdisciplinary curriculum, to yield interdisciplinary understandings, offering students with opportunities not only to acquire knowledge but also to explain phenomena, solve problems, create products, and/or raise new questions in ways that would have been unlikely through a single disciplinary means, and present their findings based on a task that they have completed as part of an interdisciplinary unit of study. Schools around the world that are authorized by the IB to offer the MYP, have access to resources to support teachers in understanding the theoretical foundation of interdisciplinary teaching and learning (as defined by the IB) however it is still not clear how, and to what extent, the MYP curriculum framework alone is sufficient in acting as a support for teachers in establishing the required structures for its effective realization in the respective schools.

The aim of this study was to develop using a grounded theory approach, a theoretical understanding of the thought processes organization members of an authorized IB world school in Japan undergo, when faced with the challenge of implementing a schoolwide interdisciplinary curriculum, and investigate the socially constructed meanings that form their realities and the behaviours they exhibit as a result of those meanings.

RESEARCH SETTING

The research setting for this study was a large private K-16 school in a quiet neighborhood setting in the south western suburbs of Tokyo with an approximate student population of 1400. The school is an IB authorized world school, and offers the MYP and DP (Diploma Programme) to a small section of the school, with the promise of gradually spreading the philosophical and pedagogical elements of the IB to the whole school. In the mainstream section of the school, currently there are no individualized or special education plans for students that require special needs, instead every student in the class is generally expected to participate in the same learning engagements to meet the expectations set by the teacher. All of the student desks are generally lined up neatly in rows, all facing the front of the room which poses some challenges in creating opportunities for students to engage in collaborative activities. For the most part, the teacher stands and delivers at the front of the classroom, and the students generally listen and record what is being delivered. The school however offers a mandatory class called 'jiyu-kenkyu' (JK) which translates to 'freedom to explore' that happens once a week in each year level. During this time students are encouraged to engage in their own independent inquiries on a topic that most interests them. There is a general understanding amongst teachers at this school that these classes promote opportunities for students to engage in deep reflection of their learning process, and at the same time assist in the construction of new understandings as they engage in inquiry using the knowledge and skills gained from what they

learned in their other subject disciplines. Thus it is believed that these classes naturally provide meaningful opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. The reality however, is that currently these classes are not used for the purpose that it was originally designed for, and instead are used as extension time for extra-curricular club activities, or operates simply as a free study period for students to catch up on school work in their other subject classes. This has been an ongoing issue for the school's leadership and administration team for a long time however despite the many initiatives the school has tried to introduce to run to revitalize these JK classes so that it serves its original purpose, much of the work and efforts appears to have resulted in little change.

Participants that contributed to this study comprised of teachers, school administrators and university professors from the private K-16 school that were members of a study group that met regularly to find solutions to this issue relating to interdisciplinary teaching and learning, as well as how the pedagogical principles and philosophy of the IB can be aligned to fit and work in a Japanese school context. The topic of discussion in recent years has been focused on how to integrate aspects of the MYP curriculum framework into the school's mainstream curriculum. The study group explored ways in which the school's JK classes could be remodeled to fit and align with the MYP curriculum. This group was selected for the study as it provided a range of backgrounds and experiences, from primary to secondary classroom teachers, to school administrators and university professors. The group comprised of men and women, ages varying from 30 to 60 years old, with teaching experiences in Japanese schools ranging from 5 to 30 years. Data collected for this study was based on field notes that were taken of the meetings with this study group during the past two years where the topic of discussion specifically focused on how to effectively facilitate the JK classes in each year level as an IB authorized world school, and consequently how to promote more meaningful interdisciplinary teaching and learning experiences schoolwide.
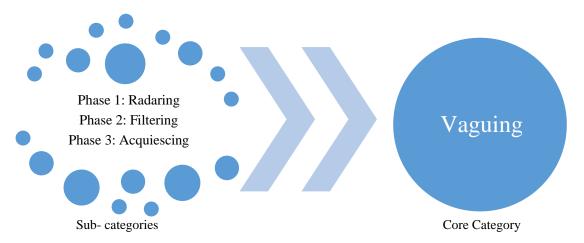
RESEARCH METHOD

Grounded theory is a rigorous research methodology with a focus on the emergence of theory from data. The purpose of the methodology is to generate theories directly from data to explain social behavior. While data is systematically collected and analysed however, "the cardinal rule in grounded theory is to not undermine the discovery of latent patterns in data by preconceiving what to look for or what type of data to use." (Holton, J., Walsh, I. 2017, p.73) The researcher therefore is required to simply follow the data where it leads through the process of theoretical sampling using the constant comparative method. It is a general research methodology that uses any and all types of data, both quantitative and qualitative, and "is more about the context of discovery than the context of justification." (Gibson, B., Hartman, J., 2014, p.43) The collected data consisted mainly of field notes taken of classes that were observed, interviews that were conducted with individual teachers, and meetings with members of the study group, over a two year period. All interviews were open-ended and care was taken to ensure that participants of the study felt comfortable in freely talking about their views and perspectives. Consequently, no audio or video was ever recorded during interviews or classroom observations. Instead key words were captured during the conversations and during observations, and later elaborated into a more extensive field note, that would later be coded to extract relevant indicators or concepts that would be used for analysis to allow the grounded theory to emerge. Readers interested in the details of this research methodology may refer to Glaser (1978).

Careful facilitation of this research methodology provided many opportunities to capture real incidents (experiences, stories, gossip, confessions, etc.) that suggested a concept or a pattern of behaviour to help in explaining what is going on in the situation that is being studied. Codes were constantly compared to verify what concepts, if any, were buried within the descriptive content and to confirm that they were grounded in the data. Theoretical memos were kept and compiled as data were being coded, to help in uncovering what was happening in the situation at hand; to capture patterns that were repeatedly occurring in the data; and to progress the study through the different stages of the research to the eventual discovery of an emergent grounded theory. Data collected at later stages in the study (ie. literature related to the research topic) were used to add, elaborate, and saturate codes, properties and conceptual categories to further explore the validity and relevance of the emergent theory.

THE THEORY OF REFUGE SEEKING

The theory of refuge seeking accounts for how organizational members continually resolve their main concern which is the fear of having to do something that may compromise their own way of teaching, by resorting to a behaviour known as *vaguing*, (which in this study is defined as responding vaguely to a direct question or comment). This study dealt with discovering the conceptual structure of *vaguing* within the substantive area of curriculum reform. *Vaguing* is a basic social process that enables individuals to protect their deeply rooted ideals about teaching in a manner consistent with their personal and professional needs, goals and values. Whilst exploring the overarching behavioural process of *vaguing* and identifying the pivotal components in its conceptual structure, three factors were discovered that combine to create a situation in which *vaguing* behaviours result. First the receiver of the communication of a change initiative understands it to be suggested (*radaring*). Second, the receiver of the change message begins to understand that the suggested change may be accompanied by expectation of accountability for implementation (*filtering*). Third, the communication of suggested change continues to persist and receiver resorts to a passive mode of communication (*acquiescing*). This study suggests that a combination of these conditions, results in a high likelihood of *vaguing* behaviours to emerge.

Phase 1: Radaring
Phase 2: Filtering
Phase 3: Acquiescing

Vaguing

Sub- categories

Core Category

Radaring

The first phase of the *vaguing* process is the initial mental processing of the communicated change initiative. This initial meaning-making phase represents the beginning of uncertainty, indecision, and perhaps even fears. Therefore emotions play an immediate and significant role in the *vaguing* process, and can impact on one's initial stance and perspectives regarding the communicated change initiative. During meetings with the study group when discussing strategies on how to promote change in the the JK classes, members of the group appeared to be constantly glancing at each other, and gathering information from observing others relate to the same issue, as well as gaining insight by interacting with other meaning-makers around them. Members of the study group were often found asking each other to what extent they already are or have been effectively implementing the change that is being suggested in their own classrooms. Many sat quietly and nodded in agreement while each member shared their own approaches to teaching with the group. While engaged in receiving communications, the study group members appeared to be continuously recording the information gathered to be later played back in their heads during the *filtering* phase.

Filtering

The second phase of the *vaguing* process is *filtering*, which is a means for considering how to deal with a suggested change initiative. While initial responses in the *radaring* phase can be considered to be reflexive, *filtering* was a deliberate process used by study group members to determine how they will protect their deeply held beliefs about teaching. As one member of the study group related with the rest of the group, regarding the opportunities JK classes' offer to students,

"These classes are designed to give students freedom to do what they want to do during this allocated time. This free-form approach to learning generates an environment for interdisciplinary learning to happen naturally. Many students in the past have used this time to connect what they are doing with their inquiry projects, with the knowledge and skills gained in the other subjects and some have even continued on with this inquiry and made a career out of it! These JK classes are wonderful learning experiences for students and what sets us apart from other schools in Japan. I do agree however that it does require a fair bit of skill and facilitating these classes properly but that comes with practice."

The above statement and similar ones that came from other members of the study group suggest that they believe the problem lies not with the JK curriculum per se, but rather with teachers that are not quite versed in the trade to deliver the JK class effectively, but with practice this can be overcome. Thus the process of *filtering* appeared as a form of justification or re-affirmation (in an individual sense and in a communal sense), to steer the focus away from what is being suggested as the problem. Although they appeared to show concern for the issues that were being raised, as well as a strong interest in how the IB framework could enhance the interdisciplinary nature of the JK classes, however in the end the group appeared to be moving towards a general consensus that there is no need for any modification or change to be made with the current curriculum as it stands.

Acquiescing

The third and final phase of the *vaguing* process is *acquiescing*. Prior to entering this phase classroom observations were conducted of a number of JK classes including some that were facilitated by members of the study group. *Acquiescing* is the act of accepting without any protest. This behaviour was soon observed after the findings of recent classroom observations of JK classes were shared with the study group. There was a considerable gap observed between what was discussed in the study group meetings prior to the classroom visits, and what was actually observed in the JK classes. Classes that were observed appeared quite structured, where students generally sat quietly at their desk working off a workbook that was prepared specifically for this JK class. The teachers all generally stood at the front of the class, and dictated what was in the workbook, so the classes were predominantly teacher-led. 'Student freedom to do what they want to do', was not immediately apparent from the observations that were made of these JK classes. The contents of the workbook contained step-by-step instructions for students to follow on how to write an academic essay and contained very little instruction or room for students to engage in authentic student-led inquiry. Students were seen either quietly sitting at their individual desks typing away on their laptops or with their heads down and eyes closed.

The study group members were asked to provide input on how this gap between what was discussed in previous meetings and what was observed in the JK classes came about. The group members were encouraged to provide suggestions on how the gap could be closed using the curriculum framework provided by the IB as a guide to promote more meaningful interdisciplinary teaching and learning environments in the whole-school. The JK workbook that students were using first came up as a topic of discussion. One group member claimed that the workbook was produced recently by another team of teachers that was responsible for managing the curriculum of the JK classes, (which included two members of this study group) and was apparently being trialled this year for the first time. This was not mentioned during any of the prior study group meetings, however for the rest of the meeting, the discussion centered around the JK workbook and reflections on what they feel are going well, and areas where improvements should be made. Efforts made to try and steer the topic of discussion back to the main topic of concern that day were in vain. When individual teachers from the study group were later asked (and not in the presence of someone in a leadership or administrative role) to describe how they felt about the new initiative that was being trialled, the general response that came out was that it was a top-down initiative and while many of the study group members didn't fully support or agree with the decision, they went along with it anyway, knowing that it would probably not last.

DISCUSSION

During the two year period when this study group met to discuss ways in which the IB curriculum framework could be best utilized to foster interdisciplinary teaching and learning in the whole school, all members contributed willingly to the discussions and engaged fully in all of the collaborative group activities that were assigned. A number of new curriculum resources were developed as a result of these engagements. There was never once a sign or indication of resistance exhibited by any of the group members and for the most part it felt as though the meetings were successfully moving forward. It was not until near the end of the two year period when the new curriculum resources were completed and finally ready to be trialed in the school, when it became evident that some other hidden agenda could possibly be at play. One of the study group members asked, "Will what we are developing be officially enforced in the school?" to which another group member who was a school administrator answered, "It is difficult to say at this stage, but most likely not in the immediate future".

Careful comparison of conceptual categories and properties that emerged from the analysis of field notes using the grounded theory methodology resulted in the emergence of *vaguing* as a core category. The conceptual structure of *vaguing* explains how organizational members attempt to resolve the main concern, being the fear of having to do something that may compromise their own way of teaching. *Vaguing* provides an explanation of why school reform initiatives are and continues to be an ongoing issue in this K-16 school in Japan. Regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy, *vaguing* appeared to be a common practice exhibited to some degree by all members of the school community. Teachers that supervised the JK classes, did not appear to look very excited with the changes that were made to the curriculum, however when asked individually about how they felt about the new changes, although none made any open negative comments or showed any signs of resistance when responding, it was hard to tell whether they were supportive of the new changes as well. The same *vaguing* behaviour was also observed surprisingly with school leaders.

Looking back at the collected data, school leaders in the study group appeared very supportive of the suggested change initiatives however they may have been *vaguing* from the gecko. A Japanese teacher once explained in passing, that this is a common practice shared by many school leaders, and they do it generally to 'preserve the *wa*' (the *wa* meaning the Japanese way of doing things). The *vaguing* behaviours exemplified by the school leader can be described as a strategy to ensure that the *wa* of the organization is never disrupted, and to protect and allow organizational members of the school to carry on as they have been without the threat of losing face. Therefore while they may have appeared to be in full support of any suggested change initiatives on the surface level, it is possible that when push comes to shove they are ready to drive their heels down as gatekeepers of the *wa* to ensure that only those change initiatives that they feel will maintain and preserve the *wa* are implemented.

The behaviour can be considered as a self-defence or coping mechanism to protect oneself from having to change their ways, but there may be more to it than that. Further analysis of the emergence of this behaviour in other parts of the school, or in other schools in Japan may shed more light on, and reveal other factors that may be at play to explain this particular phenomenon. It was interesting to note that classroom observations of JK classes and individual interviews with the supervising teachers confirmed that direct confrontation or resistive actions are not seen as productive and are rarely openly demonstrated or observed within a school organization in Japan. This may explain why when teachers decide that their opinions will not be heard or are not likely to be taken into consideration, instead of *resisting* they resort to *vaguing*, as it is less confrontational and safer to seek refuge in a vague space to protect their deeply rooted values and ideals as a teaching professional.

CONCLUSION

This then poses questions about the nature of leadership that is required to establish the necessary conditions for interdisciplinary teaching and learning to thrive in a Japanese cultural context. In the current literature on organizational change, notable experts such as Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), talk about the importance of developing 'professional capital' claiming that it is the responsibility of the school leaders to take proactive action and push the teachers forward.

Wenger (2002) another notable expert in the field of organizational change, insists on the importance of leaders of an organization to place their main focus and attention on how best to establish environments where teachers can naturally form communities of practice for sustainable change to happen. In fact, much of the literature on theories of leadership come from American and Western European countries, reflecting to a large extent the cultures of these countries. With the world migrating towards an increasingly global society (Alexander and Wilson, 1997), will these American and Western European leadership theories apply in other culturally different countries such as Japan?

Until further investigations are made concerning what the driving factors of leadership are in schools in Japan, the question will remain unanswered, however what can be concluded from this study is that *vaguing* behaviours are real, and if they are present as a common behaviour exemplified by members of a school organization including school leaders, change initiatives such as the one attempted at this school to create more meaningful opportunities to foster interdisciplinary teaching and learning, will continue to be a challenge for the aspiring change agents. While it may look at first as though a change initiative might be moving forward, the momentum will probably not last because one may find upon close inspection that nobody was actually aboard the ship to begin with.

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