Methodology for Supporting Educational Reform in the EBPM Era: Encouraging Intrinsic Reform through Vision-driven Approaches

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Abstract: In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of the GIGA School concept, there is a growing demand for leadership that empowers individual schools to take initiative in their reforms. This paper explores the perspective of connecting Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) with intrinsic school reform to address this challenge. The first aspect discussed is the need for a holistic approach to connect EBPM with purposeful and rational management. While evidence-based reforms and rational management approaches show effectiveness in strategic administrative initiatives, they may lead to externally driven approaches and passive recipient schools if not implemented carefully. To avoid this, the paper suggests clarifying policy objectives and breaking them down for different stakeholders, while always returning to the ultimate vision of the children and students targeted. The second aspect focuses on a methodology for endogenous school reform that is Vision-Driven. This methodology connects the driving force of EBPM and curriculum management through interactive sharing of vision and collaborative opportunities for teachers. By fostering a culture of teamwork and collective responsibility, the methodology enables sustained and meaningful school reform at the organizational level. Lastly, the paper addresses the importance of empowering governance and management in school settings. It emphasizes the need for a decentralized governance structure that allows non-governmental participants some discretion while ensuring quality. The paper advocates for respecting and empowering the field as the main actors in curriculum development to foster a dynamic network that contributes to school cohesion and transformative learning experiences. In conclusion, the integration of EBPM with intrinsic school reform through a Vision-Driven approach offers a path towards empowering schools and fostering meaningful educational changes amidst the challenges of the present times.

Keywords: Vision-driven approach; Methodology for intrinsic school reform; Empowering governance; Curriculum management; Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM)

1. Introduction

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of the GIGA School concept, there is a demand for leadership as supporters who encourage individual schools to take initiative, not relying solely on the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), nor leaving everything to the discretion of each school on-site or depending on local education boards as policy intermediaries. This paper discusses the perspective of connecting Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) with intrinsic school

reform.

2. Connecting EBPM with purposeful and rational management through a holistic approach

Evidence-Based reforms or other purposeful and rational management approaches, such as Outcome-Based reforms and Logic Models, tend to demonstrate a certain effectiveness, especially in macro-level strategic initiatives at the administrative level. However, they often rely on linear and analytical causal relationship models. Furthermore, there is a concern that once established indicators or models start operating independently, they may impose an externally driven approach, causing schools and teachers to become passive recipients.

To mitigate these negative aspects, it is crucial to recognize that the sum of the parts does not always equal the whole. It involves clarifying policy objectives, breaking them down for different stakeholders like learners, staff, parents, and the community, and defining outcome indicators such as "achieving ○○" to create action plans. By doing so, the visibility of the initiatives becomes shared, and progress monitoring becomes more feasible. However, achieving these outcome indicators or the cumulative efforts may not guarantee the realization of an "excellent school." When undertaking school reforms or modifications, it is essential to go back to the ultimate vision, a concrete and holistic image of the children and students targeted.

High schools are required to formulate school missions and school policies. For example, they break down the image of students they are aiming for, such as "nurturing future innovators," into elements of qualities and abilities such as creativity, collaboration, and initiative. Analytically setting outcome indicators for each element, and trying to evaluate the results of improvements and reforms by reducing them to a collection of abstract numerical data. This approach has significance both in rational decision-making based on evidence and in the context of external accountability. However, when school policy breaks down the targeted elements, such as qualities and abilities, like X-ray images, it may not necessarily capture the essence of the holistic student image (Vision) originally presented in the School Mission. Moreover, interpreting the numerical data obtained from the element-based outcome indicators becomes meaningful only when compared to the actual characteristics of students, leading to a thorough examination of the achievements and challenges in their initiatives.

However, when it comes to curriculum evaluation or school assessment, the focus often remains on examining the achievement of goals for each individual quality and ability, without necessarily returning to the fundamental vision of what children are meant to become. To avoid getting stuck in partial optimizations for individual element-based goals or initiatives, it is crucial to scrutinize whether "in the end, the school has improved" from the perspectives of the faculty group's productivity (performance), collegiality (interpersonal relationships), and challenge (organizational culture). Furthermore, it is important to examine whether "the children grew up with it", it is essential to integrate not only analytical and quantitative data, such as test results and survey outcomes on individual qualities and abilities but also intuitive and comprehensive insights from the faculty members who share the school life with the children. Additionally, qualitative narratives like specific episodes and examples of the children's learning and development, seen holistically, must be considered together. This integration involves reviewing the planned curriculum's language, framework, and educational goals based on the actual learning histories of the children. By incorporating both quantitative data and qualitative narratives, this approach allows for a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the impact of the school's efforts on the children's growth and development.

Moreover, there are efforts to concretize the elements broken down as qualities and abilities into rubrics and directly set them as educational objectives in each subject, among other areas, connecting them to viewpoint-based evaluations. However, in many cases, such initiatives tend to pursue the triple standard in subject instruction (subject-specific knowledge and skills; subject-specific thinking, judgment, and

expression abilities; generic skills), leading to complicated and formalized classroom practices. What's important is to be aware of the differences in the layers of objectives and assessments (**Table 1**). Objectives, despite sharing the same name, serve different functions depending on the layer, and curriculum evaluation (communication), lesson study (reflection), and learning assessment (assessment) should be distinguished. The Vision provides a direction for the school community, offers a common language, and creates connections and culture, shared by everyone, including the children, as something to "continue to pursue." Lesson study is not for "assessment" but a space for teachers to learn from each other and "understand" about lessons and children's learning. Viewpoint-based evaluations are designed to maximize children's potential and "guarantee the achievement" of subject objectives for all children. For macro-level school management, a value-seeking approach is essential, while for micro-level unit and lesson improvements, goal-oriented thinking is crucial (**Figure 1**).

Table 1. Layers related to goals and evaluation

Curriculum evaluation	Policy level	Courses of study, municipal logic models	Principle presentation, framework setting, condition setting and policy evaluation	Deliberation and validation based on quantitative and qualitative evidence
	School level	School educational objectives (organizations vision and mission: aims)	Interactive and exploratory sharing of philosophy and formation of school culture	Goal-free assessment as third-party evaluation
Learning assessment	Classroom level	Curriculum year and annual objectives (aims)	Growth guarantee and growth evaluation	Narrative and personalized description through portfolios etc.
		Curriculum unit and lesson objectives (aims)	Guarantee of academic achievement and assessment of learning	Goal-based assessment by tests and tasks
	Learner level	Learning objectives (aims)	Sharing of goodness, discernment formation, self-regulation and learning transcendence	Reflection and self-evaluation with shared evaluation criteria and awareness of metacognition and learning strategies
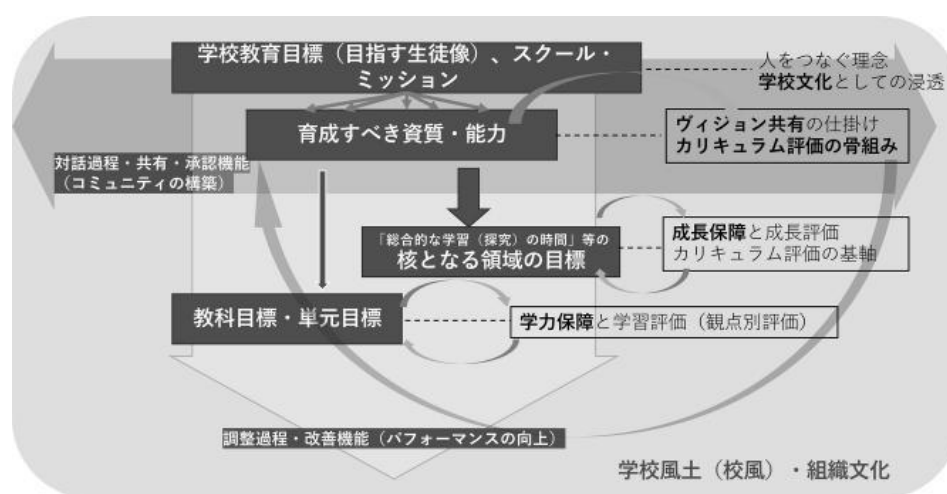
Figure 1. Hierarchy of educational objectives and functions

The "evaluation" related to the visualization of learning and activities deeply involves both the function of adjusting towards goal achievement (performance improvement) and the function of sharing and recognizing experiences and values, which contribute to relationship-building (community formation). In learning assessment, it is essential to be aware of goal achievement leading to results, while in curriculum evaluation, the communicative aspects (subjectivity and persuasiveness in accountability) towards trust and community formation must be considered. The alignment (consistency) of objectives, methods, and evaluation cannot be guaranteed through the breakdown of objectives alone, and a linear stage theory that sets the vision once and then focuses on concretizing sub-goals and devising ways of achievement, tends to fall into partial optimization. The vision is continually reaffirmed, shared, and re-understood in practice. It is crucial to start with the vision (desired image of children/goal image) and return to the vision (deepening the understanding of the desired image of children) as a continuous process.

3. Methodology for endogenous school reform

Being Vision-Driven can serve as a methodology that connects the driving force of EBPM and curriculum management, such as the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle, with the establishment of a "learning organization" and leads to intrinsic and sustainable school reform (improvement at the school-wide level rather than individual teachers' isolated improvements). In other words, by fostering interactive sharing of the vision and creating opportunities for teachers and staff to collaborate and engage in dialogue, the school can establish a system and culture of collective responsibility for all students' learning and collaborative efforts towards improving teaching. The combination of shared vision and opportunities for teacher collaboration and dialogue can foster a culture of teamwork and create a system where teachers work together to improve classroom practices and enhance the overall learning environment. This Vision-Driven methodology has the potential to contribute to sustained and meaningful school reform at the organizational level.

First, the reforms based on qualities and abilities should be used as an opportunity for teachers and staff to work together to discuss the actual conditions and challenges of the children and schools. They can explore questions such as "What are the challenges of the children in front of us?", "What kind of children do we want to bring up in our schools?", "What kind of learning and teaching do the children in front of us need?", and "What concepts do we want to prioritize in our lesson planning?". This leads to the sharing of school educational goals as the goal image of reform (the vision of the kind of children they aspire to nurture and continuously pursue as a whole school). When starting from methods such as active learning and the use of ICT, there may be significant resistance among teachers and staff. However, by beginning with an understanding of the actual conditions of the children, a common direction can be more easily shared. Through a collaborative goal-setting process that is supported by diagnostic self-assessment of the school, where the bottom-up approach is emphasized, the school can establish a foundation for shared direction and goals. While respecting each teacher's teaching philosophy and instructional style, this approach also encourages creativity and new ideas for practices.

With a focus on what is necessary for the children in front of them, teachers align their perspectives and mindsets in their initiatives. They not only understand the benefits of new approaches intellectually but also gain a true understanding of their significance through actual implementation and experiencing the changes and growth in the children. School reform is driven by the image of the children they aim to nurture. Therefore, to connect the interactive sharing of the vision and the creation of opportunities for teacher collaboration and dialogue, classroom research is utilized as the core of a learning organization. For example, discussions during post-lesson conferences go beyond the PDCA cycle (evaluative thinking that rushes to results and methods) or episodic understanding of events (interpretive thinking that delves into the diversity of learning and the uniqueness of processes). They also incorporate a perspective of

continuously exploring and confirming the essence of the desired image of the children through practice (value-seeking thinking). Moreover, they emphasize deepening the understanding and beliefs (perspectives) about the nature of children's learning processes and teaching practices through research (critical reflection on the double-loop) as essential aspects of the process.

To adhere to Vision-driven approach means to interpret human activities with normativity and value conflicts within the context of school management that undergoes technological rationalization and systematization. It involves reinterpreting formal management technical theories (goal achievement) as a practice community theory (value-seeking). Improving school operations and organizational reforms do not guarantee the formation of teachers' professional capabilities or ensure the quality of children's learning and academic performance. Conversely, focusing solely on classroom improvements without considering stability and sustainability may not lead to the assurance of children's learning outcomes and quality. Moreover, the introduction of new curricula or methods often results in temporary efforts that fail to significantly change the everyday landscape of classrooms. By connecting the macro (external framework) and micro (core aspects) of school endeavors, represented by school organizational management and classroom research, with the axis of exploring the desired image of children, the transformation from the PDCA cycle to value-seeking can be achieved in both systems and relationships. It is essential to establish the core part that drives such school reform while positioning and promoting curriculum-level initiatives that align with and contribute to it.

In a situation where the boundaries of education fluctuate in relation to society, and the relationships among the actors involved become more diverse, it is essential to be aware of the responsive ternary relationship (collective attention) rather than a binary relationship where actors confront each other. This responsive ternary relationship involves jointly observing the facts of children's learning and lives, which are the purpose and subject of educational activities. Through interactive imaging and sharing of goals based on the reality of children, and pursuing these goals collaboratively, various actors involved in schools, including teachers and researchers from universities, can build a collective attention relationship to jointly observe the children's learning. By establishing this collective attention relationship, the responsibilities and roles of each actor can be organized organically, avoiding falling into mechanistic division of labor. This leads to the creation of a dynamic network that fosters shared vision and collaborative response responsibilities, allowing for mutual permeation and avoiding rigid role divisions.

By anchoring school management with the image of the child, not only do teachers develop a stronger sense of solidarity among themselves, but it also facilitates better collaboration among participants both inside and outside the school, including supporters and stakeholders. As a result, school management and curriculum development go beyond mere improvements in tasks and organizations; they become transformative for children's learning, reaching the goal of becoming a school that competes based on the child's image ("a school that can succeed with the child's vision").

4. Empowering governance and management in school settings

Both Evidence-Based Policy Making (EBPM) and Curriculum Management are facing the challenge of building a decentralized governance structure that allows non-governmental participants some discretion while ensuring quality. This is one of the backgrounds where school governance reforms have been focused on. It involves navigating the tension between the direction towards neoliberalism and marketization and the efforts to seek alternative approaches. For example, in curriculum management, three aspects: cross-sectional perspective across subjects, establishing the PDCA cycle, and securing human and material resources, including external resources from the community. These raise the question of whether it should lean towards comprehensive quantification of learning outcomes and efficient implementation of the PDCA cycle driven by administrative objectives (towards logical accountability and disregard of teacher expertise),

or whether it should trust qualitative judgments made by experts, collaborative vision-building, and autonomous school operation (towards responsive accountability and respect for teacher expertise).

If the latter direction is the direction to be taken, then, with regard to the first aspect of curriculum management, curriculum development should not be based on the mapping of content, activities and skills (chart making), but on the interactive sharing of visions (school educational goals) that image specific children, and teachers' curriculum conceptualization skills (cross-curricular and cross-curricular). In relation to the second aspect, it is important to view the cycle of goals and evaluation not as a mechanical process (the achievement of quotas "goals" and the self-objectification of the achievement itself), but as a creative practice (the relentless pursuit of value). As for the third aspect, it is necessary to respect, empower and delegate authority to the field as the main actors in curriculum development, so that the field will not be deprived of the power to develop the curriculum as a result of the government's efforts to make up for inadequate conditions and necessary support by the field through self-help efforts. Structural institutional reforms are not functional. Structural institutional reforms can only work if they are linked not only to functional efficiency but also to the rebuilding of community and school cohesion.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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