The cultural complexity of international collaboration: Conditions for sustainable curriculum development in Ghana☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

International cooperation initiatives often focus on the development of curricula to increase the quality of education in developing countries. Through the adoption of a culturally sensitive approach, effective conditions for curriculum development can be created. Nevertheless, aid organizations and international project teams frequently lack cultural understanding to create conditions related to ownership and adequate project management. Consequently, misunderstandings and conflicts between project members and with stakeholders occur, which can lead to curriculum implementation failures and unsuccessful educational reform initiatives. This paper outlines a case study which aimed to identify how conditions supporting the development of a professional development program for polytechnic Heads of Department in Ghana, were sensitive to culture. A conceptual framework for culturally sensitive curriculum development was used to facilitate the identification of culture in conditions related to Creation of ownership and Project management. Project members from Ghana and The Netherlands participated in the data collection by means of documents, interviews, and a researcher's logbook. Results showed that the creation of stakeholders' involvement, partnership between project team members, and the management of project resources, budget and time were impacted by Hofstede's cultural dimensions of High-Low Power Distance and Collectivism–Individualism and by Hall's cultural dimensions High-Low Context and Polytime-Monotime. By developing different types of culturally sensitive strategies, the project team anticipated on culture to strengthen the conditions for curriculum development, but culture remained challenging to cope with.

1. Introduction

To improve the quality of education in developing countries, capacity building programs and large-scale educational reform projects regularly include curriculum development endeavors which are managed and financed by organizations of international cooperation (Diallo & Thuillier, 2004). Familiarity with and knowledge of the local context (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Diallo & Thuillier, 2004; Kealey, Protheroe, MacDonald, & Vulpe, 2005) and culture (O'Grady & Lane, 1996; Selmer, 2007) are required from the international project teams to create the necessary conditions for sustainable curriculum development. By taking local views, values, and preferences of stakeholders into account and by stimulating partnerships with local associate organizations, ownership can be created facilitating a good fit between the curriculum and the educational systems and its stakeholders. By managing the project according to local and international norms,

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expectations, and guidelines, available project resources can be effectively applied and arrangements can be made to ensure the sustainability of the curriculum over time.

Notwithstanding, as evidenced by previous studies, international cooperation projects often suffer from misunderstandings and conflicts within the project teams due to, among other reasons, differences in interests, expectations, and perspectives (Aaltonen & Sivonen, 2009; Kealey et al., 2005; Smith, 2005). Cultural dissimilarities between the project members and stakeholders with regard to communication and relationship building (Dinges & Baldwin, 1996; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Zhu, Nel, & Bhat, 2006; Zimmermann, Holman, & Sparrow, 2003), and dealing with conflicts (Hammer, 2005; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Kausal & Kwantes, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 1994) challenge the creation of ownership and adequate project management. The lack of sensitivity of aid organizations and project teams to culture results in adjustment problems and poor work performance of project team members (Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001; Parker & McEvoy, 1993) leading to weak conditions for curriculum development impeding educational reform initiatives.

By creating a better understanding of how conditions for sustainable curriculum development are sensitive to cultural characteristics (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2006; Rogan & Grayson, 2003), rejection of curricula at a later stage can be prevented (Berkvens, 2009). In a previous study (Gervedink Nijhuis, Voogt, & Pieters, submitted for publication-b), we developed a conceptual framework for culturally sensitive curriculum development which facilitates the analysis of conditions for curriculum development on culture. The study presented in this paper specifically aimed to identify and analyze culture in conditions related to Creation of ownership and Project management, in a project to support the development of a professional development program for polytechnic Heads of Department in Ghana.

1.1. Context of the study: supporting the development of a professional development program for polytechnic managers

Based on a review of the educational system in Ghana (Government of Ghana, 1991), Ghanaian polytechnics became tertiary level educational institutes in 1993, aiming to offer higher technical vocational studies in Business and Management, Engineering, and Applied Sciences studies. As a result of the upgrade from secondary level to tertiary level education, the polytechnics had to increase the quality of teaching and learning, and needed to strengthen the link with industry (Effah, 2005; JICA, 2001; Nsiah-Gyabaah, 2005; President's Committee, 2002). However, the polytechnic managers, who were in the position to initiate and stimulate the necessary educational reform, did not have the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed. Especially the polytechnic Heads of Departments (HoDs) lacked the knowledge and skills to effectively lead their departments which resulted in the absence of departmental goals, problems of recruitment and retention of staff, no review of course curricula for the past ten years, and resistance to change (Nsiah-Gyabaah, 2005). To facilitate the polytechnics in their mission to provide high quality teaching and learning, the government of The Netherlands supported a four-year project in which a team of curriculum specialists, educational change facilitators, and ICT support staff from Ghana and The Netherlands collaborated to enhance the leadership and management capacity in the Ghanaian polytechnics. The project incorporated a sub-project aiming at the development of a professional development program for polytechnic Heads of Department (PDHoD). By means of five workshops, a Learning Conference, and a Sustainability Conference, PDHoD targeted to increase HoDs capacity to manage the core academic processes in their departments. To facilitate the development and sustainable implementation of PDHoD, the project team was challenged to create the necessary conditions for this curriculum development endeavor. Previous studies within and outside the same international project (Effah, 2005; Kouwenhoven, Oduro, & Nsiah-Gyabaah, 2009) also showed that the creation of conditions for professional development, especially ownership and project management, has been heavily endorsed by the ministry and by educational politicians.

In this study, conditions supporting the development of the PDHoD curriculum will be identified and analyzed on cultural sensitivity. We specifically focus on the analysis of conditions that are related to the Creation of ownership and Project management, as will be exemplified in a conceptual framework for culturally sensitive curriculum development, that will be further introduced in this paper.

1.2. Culturally sensitive curriculum development

To facilitate the identification of culture in conditions for sustainable curriculum development, a conceptual framework for culturally sensitive curriculum development was used. This framework originated from expert review studies and literature analyses in which systematic surveys of the concepts Curriculum Development, Culture, and International Cooperation were carried out (Gervedink Nijhuis, et al., submitted for publication-b). The framework consists of three components: Curriculum Development Process, Cultural Frame of Reference, and Practice. Since the hypothesized influence of culture on conditions supporting the development of the PDHoD curriculum are examined in this study, the components *Curriculum Development Process* and *Cultural Frame of Reference* are relevant.

The *Curriculum Development Process* component has a central position in the conceptual framework and its activities are supposed to be influenced by culture. In particular, conditions for curriculum development, i.e. conditions related to Creation of ownership and Project management are hypothesized to be sensitive to cultural and contextual influences. Creation of ownership is sub-divided into Involvement of stakeholders and Creation of joint partnerships. As curriculum