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Connecting Global Competencies to Local Contexts: How Egyptian Teachers Interpret 21st-Century Learning

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Abstract: This paper examines the integration of 21st-century competencies in non-Western educational settings, where teachers in non-hegemonic cultures respond to calls for Western pedagogies with limited professional development. It highlights the need for support that enables culturally responsive transformation of teaching practices while preserving local values and addressing contextual challenges. Conducted within the Critical Action Learning Exchange (CALE), an international community of critical educators (Carvalho et al., 2021), the study explores how teachers navigate these complexities.

Introduction

This study reports on a formative intervention involving Egyptian public-school teachers working to integrate 21st-century competencies aligned with the Education 2.0 policy. This national shift moves from rote learning toward student-centered, competency-based pedagogies. We examine how teachers enact these competencies in ways that honor local cultural values while navigating a professional development model informed by a Western university. To avoid cultural imperialism, defined as disproportionate ideological influence (Mains, 2009), we adopted a critical practitioner inquiry approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This positions teachers as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients. As a professional learning community (PLC), participants used an "inquiry-as-stance" to design culturally grounded lesson plans within the Critical Action Learning Exchange (CALE) project (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Theoretical framework

The study is grounded in two primary traditions. First, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) posits that human activity is rooted in evolving historical and social contexts. CHAT-informed interventions prioritize socio-cultural norms and support "expansive learning cycles" to transform collective practices (Sannino et al., 2016). It provides a lens to analyze power dynamics and overcome systemic contradictions. Second, we utilize Critical Action Learning (CAL), which draws on Freirean 'conscientização' (Freire, 1970). This approach empowers students as transformative agents through critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action (Watts et al., 2011), viewing social structures as changeable rather than inevitable.

Methods and research question

This project investigated a Cairo-based PLC over three months. Eight participants from public, private, and Egyptian Japanese Schools engaged in online workshops and classroom implementation. Developed within the broader context of the CALE project, we supported teachers with a Web-based community, customized for use by teachers using WhatsApp in the course of their daily practice as well as scheduled online Zoom meetings.

Teacher participants were engaged in a formative intervention professional development to examine their practices through the lens of practitioners' inquiry methodology, which positions practitioners as drivers of social and educational change and intends to develop the inquiry-as-stance mindset (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). Practitioners in this study were guided to problematize their current practices, interrogating the different ways knowledge and practice are constructed, examined, and used. This allowed them to critically generate knowledge that helps them to change the status quo in their own learning environments. Inquiry-as-stance is perceived as a means of changing school cultures (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999), emphasizing the collective nature of this stance as opposed to one's individual stance. This collective element was important for this study: No single teacher was able to find a solution for the issues and dilemmas that were being addressed in the CALE curriculum.

The formative intervention included two phases: a workshop phase and an implementation phase. The workshop phase included four 3-hour sessions, conducted online. A pre-survey and the engagement in various critical discussions served as the double-stimulation artifacts prescribed by the Formative Intervention methodology (Engestrom et al., 2014). The CALE framework was offered as a *mediating artifact.* Teachers critically use the concepts introduced in the 4 workshop sessions to create teaching and learning models that are

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culturally relevant and contextual to their own and their students' experiences. The goal of this w*orkshop phase* is for teachers to design their own curricular and/or extracurricular lesson plans using the frameworks and approaches presented during the workshops. The *implementation phase* was the second phase of this professional development opportunity. In this phase, participating teachers implemented their designs in their own classrooms/schools. Teachers received ongoing mentoring and peer feedback during this phase. We understand that innovative pedagogies go through different iterative phases to enhance the teaching and learning experience for teachers and students. For this purpose, participants continued to have follow-up sessions with a CALE mentor during and after the implementation of their designs.

Guided by participatory methods and "inquiry-as-stance" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), teachers used the CALE model and peer feedback to redesign curricula via WhatsApp and Zoom. Data from surveys, workshops, and interviews were examined via thematic analysis to answer the central research question: *How do Egyptian teachers, teaching the national curricula, understand and integrate 21st-century competencies in their classrooms?*

Findings

Using CHAT, we conceptualized the subject as both individual educators and the collective PLC, while the object was authentic competency integration. Tools included the CALE framework and digital platforms. We applied rules (curricular mandates and cultural norms), community (colleagues and leadership), and division of labor (professional roles) as analytical lenses to identify tensions shaping practice.

Findings indicate that cultural values, such as respect for authority and collective harmony, functioned as rules mediating the interpretation of CALE. A central tension emerged between "rules" (time constraints and coverage) and the "object" (competency integration). While some teachers treated competencies as superficial "add-ons," others resolved this by redesigning tools into locally relevant units. Those with deeper understanding designed extended units that fostered authentic student engagement, whereas others used superficial activities without meaningful skill development.

Crucially, teacher readiness depended on school context and prior training. We categorized participants into three groups:

- *Developing:* Experienced strong tensions and lacked professional development, hindering implementation.
- *Intermediate:* Showed partial alignment but lacked conceptual clarity.
- *Proficient:* Primarily in Egyptian Japanese Schools; benefited from coherent community support and sustained learning for authentic enactment.

Discussion

The limited workshop duration was a challenge, particularly for "developing" teachers who required more time to grasp 21st-century frameworks. While 3-hour sessions worked for proficient educators, they were insufficient for those with minimal exposure. Future programs should assess teacher readiness levels beforehand to provide diversified, tailored support that accommodates varying levels of awareness regarding competency-based education.

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