

Curriculum development routines supporting goal pursuit in Estonian schools

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Summary

In recent decades, Estonian schools have received more decision-making powers to manage learning and teaching, and teachers have more responsibility over the principles of student assessment and disciplinary policy in school curriculum areas (Kukemelk & Kitsing, 2020). Schools compile their own curricula based on Estonia's National Curriculum. Each school has a different curriculum, which serves as the basis for all learning-related activities (Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus, 2010). Previous research has indicated that education policy pushes school principals toward innovative initiatives for school improvement (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021), and teachers are characterised by low curriculum ownership (Viirpalu et al., 2022). Curriculum development is essential in a school that strives to enhance teaching and learning and requires organisational routines to facilitate leadership for learning and ensure teacher collaboration.

School improvement goals defined in school improvement plans set the direction of improvement that a school is taking and lead to more coherent organisational practices that result in more focused, specific, and consistent teaching practices in classrooms (Meyer et al., 2020). Curriculum leadership is crucial to enhancing teaching and learning. According to Wai-Yan Wan & Leung (2022), curriculum leadership has been decentralised, and the focus on the school principal has shifted to a multitude of forms of teacher collaboration and collective teacher decision-making processes. Therefore, the interactions among school leaders and teachers need a frame and structure that can be characterised by organisational routines as repetitive, recognisable patterns of interdependent actions involving multiple actors (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). Previous studies (e.g. Liljenberg et al., 2017, Binkhorst et al., 2015) about school improvement routines revealed the lack of well-designed routines for principals to implement a well-established idea of pedagogical leadership and to collaborate with teacher teams.

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In this study, we explore how curriculum leadership routines are shaping the pursuit of school improvement goals. The following research questions will be addressed:

- In terms of curriculum development, what are the school's improvement goals?
- What is the school improvement teams' understanding of how curriculum contributes to school improvement?
- What curriculum leadership routines are implemented in the schools?

The article is based on multiple case studies in seven schools, where the data were collected using semi-structured interviews with school principals, focus group interviews with improvement teams and documents like school improvement plans and curricula. Data analysis was conducted with multi-stage content analysis combining within-case and cross-case techniques, where significant inter-rater reliability (80%) was reached.

The results of the current study reveal that school improvement goals are focusing on a vast scale on curriculum implementation, like changes in teaching methods, teacher activities, assessment of students, the content of subjects and arrangements of support services. The goals for curriculum writing or monitoring are underrepresented. In all of the cases, the goals of curriculum implementation, including instruction and teaching activities, are dominating. It corresponds to the earlier findings by Grützmacher et al. (2023), but the studied cases differ from Meyer, Patuawa (2022) and Viirpalu et al. (2014) as the goals are not aiming for higher academic results, improving the relations of students nor differentiation in subject areas. Erss et al. (2014) has noted a strong impact of state exams, but is not reflected in school improvement plans. It needs further inquiry whether and how the improvement plans influence the decisions made by school principals.

The school improvement teams perceive the function of the curriculum as contradictory. In some cases, the school leaders advocate the importance of curriculum development. On the other side there are school leaders, who express confusion when trying to reflect the function of curriculum in school improvement. In their opinion the curriculum development needs to assure that the curriculum document is in accordance with the study organisation in everyday actions. Similarly, the teachers perceive the curriculum as a bureaucratic tool copying the National Framework Curriculum (Erss et al., 2014; Mikser et al., 2016, 2023). We assume that the reasons refer to the educational policy in Estonia, where the school principals are not conceptualised as

leaders for learning or instructional leaders (Põhikooli- ja gümnaasiumiseadus, 2010; Fontes & Ministry of Education and Research, 2023).

In all the schools, there are curriculum leadership routines following mostly a hierarchical task-oriented model. It is remarkable that, in the cases, there were few or no procedures for curriculum evaluations and also no goals were set for creating any routines for curriculum evaluation. At the same time the schools should implement regular internal evaluation to analyse the teaching and learning in the school (Estonian Parliament, 2010). The internal evaluation has the potential to give input into the development of the curriculum, but it needs further research to explore how the schools are implementing it. The seven cases in the current article indicate a few practises for relations-oriented curriculum leadership. Other research has also revealed the lack of collaboration (Eisenschmidt et al., 2021).

As a limitation of this study, we examined the routines of curriculum leadership from an ostensive perspective as perceived by the school improvement team. Pentland & Feldman (2005) emphasise that the real action may not be in accordance with abstract idea about the routine. Therefore, it is imperative that longitudinal research continues in order to investigate the interrelationship between goal-setting and curriculum development as expressed through the performative aspect of the routine.

Keywords: curriculum, leadership, organisational routines, goals