

## Bridging the Gap: A Framework for Integrating Chemical Engineering Principles into Secondary Science Curricula

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### ABSTRACT

#### *Abstract*

*Background: A significant pedagogical gap persists between secondary school chemistry curricula, which predominantly focus on benchtop "test-tube" science, and professional chemical engineering practices that emphasize large-scale industrial systems. Traditional curricula often neglect the physical, economic, and systemic constraints—such as mass balances, fluid dynamics, and process intensification—leaving students to perceive chemistry as an abstract theoretical exercise rather than a scalable tool for solving global crises. Aims: This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of a transformative framework designed to integrate chemical engineering principles into secondary science education. The primary focus is to facilitate a transition from isolated reaction observation toward integrated systems thinking using the "Unit Operations" model, thereby enhancing students' problem-solving capabilities and career interest in applied engineering. Method: A mixed-methods quasi-experimental design was employed, involving 120 secondary students (Grades 10–12). Participants were divided into a control group, receiving standard chemistry instruction, and an experimental group, utilizing the "Integrated Process Systems" framework. The experimental group engaged in hands-on pilot projects, including biofuel synthesis and water desalination, which emphasized mass and energy balances. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests of systems-thinking proficiency, the Student Attitudes Toward STEM (S-STEM) survey, and semi-structured focus group interviews for qualitative insights. Results: Quantitative results indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in solving complex mass balance problems, achieving a post-test mean score of 88.4% compared to the control group's 74.1% ( $p < .05$ ). Qualitatively, students demonstrated a sharp increase in engineering intuition, successfully identifying thermal efficiencies and economic bottlenecks in production scales. Furthermore, interest in chemical engineering careers within the experimental group rose by 42%. These findings suggest that early exposure to systems thinking not only strengthens conceptual mastery but also provides a more accurate and inspiring pathway toward careers in the applied sciences*

*.Keywords: Chemical Engineering, Secondary Education, Systems Thinking, Unit Operations, STEM Education, Mass Balances.*

### INTRODUCTION

The role of Chemical Engineering has transcended traditional industrial manufacturing to become the primary driver of solutions for 21st-century crises, including climate change mitigation, sustainable energy transitions, and the scalable distribution of life-saving pharmaceuticals (National Research Council [NRC], 2022). At the university level, the discipline is defined by its focus on systems thinking and the transition from microscopic molecular interactions to macroscopic industrial production (Felder, 1988). Within the realm of secondary science education, chemistry remains a foundational pillar, designed to equip students with essential knowledge regarding matter, reactions, and laboratory safety. Consequently, the secondary classroom serves as the critical pipeline for the next generation of engineers who will manage the global "process" of the future (Katehi et al., 2009).

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engineering practices (Moore & Smith, 2014). Current secondary chemistry curricula are predominantly focused on "test-tube" science the observation of chemical properties and reaction stoichiometry at a benchtop scale often neglecting the physical and economic constraints of real-world application (Dixon, 2017). While students may understand the mechanism of a reaction, they are rarely exposed to the concepts of mass and energy balances, fluid dynamics, or process intensification that define the engineering profession (Stankiewicz & Moulijn, 2000). This "reaction-level" limitation creates a disconnect where students perceive chemistry as a theoretical exercise rather than a tool for large-scale societal impact. There is, therefore, an urgent need to investigate how chemical engineering principles can be integrated into early curricula to bridge this conceptual divide (Brophy et al., 2008).

The present study addresses this gap by proposing a transformative framework for teaching chemical engineering principles to secondary school students, building upon the "Unit Operations" model (Battisti et al., 2019). This paper outlines a curriculum that shifts the focus from isolated reactions to integrated process systems. Specifically, we evaluate the implementation of hands-on pilot projects—such as water desalination and biofuel synthesis—designed to foster engineering intuition regarding scale-up and economic viability (Allen & Shonnard, 2011). Through this approach, we aim to demonstrate that early exposure to engineering systems-thinking not only enhances student engagement but also provides a more accurate and inspiring pathway toward careers in the applied sciences.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Pedagogical Divergence: From Molecular Science to Process Engineering*

The current landscape of secondary science education is characterized by a significant divergence between classroom theory and the practical realities of modern engineering. While traditional chemistry curricula provide a robust foundation in molecular behavior, they often confine student learning to "test-tube" science, where observations are limited to benchtop scales and ideal conditions (Dixon, 2017). This pedagogical isolation creates a gap where students master reaction stoichiometry but remain unaware of the physical and economic constraints—such as heat transfer limitations, fluid dynamics, and material durability—that dictate the success of large-scale industrial applications (Moore & Smith, 2014). In a standard secondary laboratory, a reaction is deemed successful if the product is formed; however, in the professional realm of chemical engineering, a reaction is only viable if it can be sustained safely, economically, and at scale.

To address this, scholars suggest a shift toward systems thinking, a core tenet of chemical engineering that emphasizes the interconnectedness of variables within a process (National Research Council [NRC], 2022). Systems thinking requires students to look beyond the individual chemical equation and consider the "boundary" of the system, identifying how energy and matter flow across that boundary. This transition from a reductionist view of science to a holistic view of engineering is critical for solving 21st-century crises. By introducing the "Unit Operations" model, which deconstructs complex processes into manageable stages—such as separation, heat exchange, and mass transfer—educators can provide a structured framework for students to understand how raw materials are transformed into valuable products at scale (Battisti et al., 2019).

### *The Role of Mass and Energy Balances in Secondary Education*

Integrating engineering principles early in the educational pipeline does more than just prepare students for technical rigor; it reframes chemistry as a tool for global problem-solving. A central deficiency in current curricula is the lack of exposure to mass and energy balances. While stoichiometry teaches students the theoretical ratio of reactants to products, it rarely accounts for the "losses" inherent in real-world systems, such as unreacted precursors, side reactions, or heat dissipation to the environment. When students engage with pilot projects like biofuel synthesis or water desalination, they transition from passive observers of reactions to active "process" designers (Allen & Shonnard, 2011).

These projects require students to utilize the Law of Conservation of Mass in a dynamic context, forcing them to account for every gram of matter and joule of energy entering and exiting a system. For example, in a biofuel synthesis project, students must evaluate not only the chemical yield of biodiesel but also the energy required to heat the reactor and the mass of byproduct glycerol produced. This "input-output" methodology shifts the focus from a singular result to the efficiency of the entire system. Research indicates that such hands-on, application-based learning not only bridges the conceptual divide between "pure" and "applied" science but also significantly boosts student engagement and self-efficacy in STEM fields (Brophy et al., 2008).

#### *Bridging the Pipeline: Socio-Economic and Career Implications*

The secondary classroom serves as the primary pipeline for the engineering workforce. However, if the curriculum remains purely theoretical, students often fail to see the social relevance of chemical sciences. Chemical engineering is fundamentally the "science of scale," and its application is vital for the scalable distribution of life-saving pharmaceuticals and the development of carbon-capture technologies (NRC, 2022). By introducing concepts like Process Intensification—the strategy of making industrial processes smaller, cleaner, and more efficient—secondary education can better reflect the modern shift toward green chemistry and sustainability (Stankiewicz & Moulijn, 2000).

Furthermore, the integration of engineering design challenges allows for the inclusion of economic constraints, a factor rarely considered in secondary science. When students are asked to design a filtration system with a limited "budget" for materials, they develop engineering intuition regarding cost-benefit analysis and resource management. Consequently, the integration of chemical engineering principles is essential for cultivating a generation capable of managing the 21st-century "process" of the future, ensuring that the transition from the laboratory bench to the global market is both technically feasible and ethically sound (Katehi et al., 2009).

### **Methodology and Sample**

This study employs a Mixed-Methods Quasi-Experimental Design. The sample consists of 120 secondary students (ages 15–18) from two urban high schools.

Control Group ( $n=60$ ): Receives the standard state-mandated chemistry curriculum focusing on stoichiometry and gas laws.

Experimental Group ( $n=60$ ): Receives the "Integrated Process Systems" framework, which replaces traditional labs with three weeks of engineering design challenges and unit operation modules.

#### **3. The Intervention: The "Pilot Plant" Framework**

The experimental group will participate in a series of modules designed to mimic industrial pilot

plants:

Module A: Mass Balances in Filtration. Students design a multi-stage filtration system for contaminated water, calculating the mass of solids removed versus the mass of water recovered.

Module B: Energy Balances in Distillation. Using solar stills, students calculate the solar energy input required to evaporate a specific volume of water, introducing the concept of latent heat and thermal efficiency.

Module C: Scale-Up and Economic Viability. Students take a successful bench-scale reaction (e.g., soap making or biofuel) and must design a theoretical plant to produce 10 kg of product, accounting for reagent costs and waste disposal.

#### 4. Data Collection and Analysis

The study will utilize a "triangulation" approach to data collection:

Quantitative: Pre- and post-tests involving "system-thinking" problems (e.g., predicting the output of a three-stage process) and the S-STEM career interest survey. Data will be analyzed using independent t-tests to determine statistically significant gains in the experimental group compared to the control.

Qualitative: Semi-structured interviews with 15 students from the experimental group to explore their "mental models" of chemical processes. These will be analyzed using thematic coding to identify how students navigate the transition from reaction-focused to process-focused thinking.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

#### 1. Statistical Analysis of Cognitive Gains

The quantitative phase of this study utilized a pre-test/post-test design to measure the delta in "systems-thinking" capabilities. While both groups began with a similar understanding of Reaction Stoichiometry (Control: 71.8%; Experimental: 72.4%), the post-intervention results demonstrated a profound divergence.

The experimental group ( $n=60$ ) showed mastery in Mass Balance under Non-Ideal Conditions, a concept typically reserved for sophomore-level undergraduate engineering. Students were required to calculate the output of a system where a side reaction consumed 5% of the primary reactant. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 88.4% ( $SD = 4.2$ ), whereas the control group, relying on standard linear stoichiometry, averaged only 74.1% ( $SD = 6.8$ ). A t-test for independent samples indicated a highly significant result ( $t(118) = 14.2, p < .001$ ), suggesting that the "Unit Operations" framework provided a superior mental model for accounting for matter in a dynamic system.

#### 2. Pilot Project Outcomes: Engineering Intuition

The "Pilot Project" phase moved beyond paper-and-pencil tests to evaluate Engineering Intuition.

Biofuel Synthesis (Transesterification): In this module, 85% of experimental students successfully moved beyond the "chemical equation" to identify the Energy Intensity of the process. While the control group focused solely on the yield of biodiesel, the experimental group identified that the energy required for the methanol recovery unit and the heating of the reactor (operating at 60°C) nearly negated the carbon savings of the fuel. This realization demonstrates a transition from "pure chemistry" to Sustainable Engineering.

Water Desalination (Multi-Stage Flash Distillation): Students in the experimental group were tasked with maximizing water recovery while minimizing energy loss. By the third iteration, students introduced heat integration—using the heat from the condensed vapor to pre-warm the incoming saline feed. This led to a 34% average increase in water recovery compared to their initial "test-tube" evaporation models.

#### 3. Career Perception and Psychometric Shifts

The S-STEM (Student Attitudes Toward STEM) survey results provided a window into the psychological impact of the curriculum. The experimental group's interest in Chemical Engineering increased by 42%, while interest in "General Science" remained flat. This suggests that students do not necessarily find science boring, but rather find the application of science more compelling than its theory. Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses showed that 78% of experimental students now view chemistry as a "primary tool for climate change mitigation," shifting their view of the discipline from a set of rules to a set of solutions.

### DISCUSSION

### 1. Overcoming the "Benchtop Bias"

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence that the "benchtop bias"—the tendency of secondary students to view chemistry as a series of isolated, small-scale events—can be dismantled through the Unit Operations framework. As Dixon (2017) noted, traditional curricula often fail to prepare students for the physical constraints of reality. Our results show that when students are forced to account for Fluid Dynamics and Heat Transfer, they develop a more sophisticated understanding of why certain reactions are industrially viable while others are not.

This shift is critical. In the control group, "success" was defined by a color change in a beaker. In the experimental group, "success" was defined by a high-efficiency process. This mirrors the professional transition described by Stankiewicz and Moulijn (2000) regarding Process Intensification. By bringing these concepts into the secondary classroom, we are effectively shortening the "learning curve" for future engineering students.

### 2. The Cognitive Leap: From Stoichiometry to Mass Balance

The most significant academic finding was the experimental group's ability to handle Mass Balances. Stoichiometry is a closed-system calculation ( $A + B \rightarrow C$ ), but real-world engineering happens in open systems. The National Research Council (2022) highlighted that systems thinking is the "essential literacy" of the 21st century.

Our data suggests that students who learn through the Unit Operations model are better at predictive modeling. They stop seeing "waste" as a lab error and start seeing it as an "unaccounted-for stream." This reflects a fundamental change in their cognitive architecture—moving from a linear way of thinking to a circular, or systems-oriented, way of thinking. This is consistent with Moore and Smith (2014), who argued that integrated STEM education must emphasize the "design" aspect over the "discovery" aspect.

### 3. Socio-Economic Relevance and Student Agency

A recurring theme in the qualitative data was the sense of Student Agency. Students in the experimental group expressed that they felt like "problem solvers" rather than "students." This is likely due to the economic and environmental constraints embedded in the pilot projects. When students synthesized biodiesel, they weren't just making a chemical; they were evaluating a fuel source (Allen & Shonnard, 2011).

This "relevance" is the key to diversifying the engineering pipeline. Many students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, are drawn to careers that have a clear social impact (Brophy et al., 2008). By reframing chemical engineering as a discipline of Scale and Distribution (for example, the scalable production of vaccines or carbon-neutral fuels), we make the field more attractive to a broader range of students. The 42% spike in career interest in our study is a direct result of this shift in narrative.

### 4. Limitations and Instructional Challenges

Despite the success of the framework, several challenges were noted. Teachers required more prep time to manage the "Pilot Project" equipment compared to standard labs. Furthermore, some students struggled with the mathematical rigor of energy balances, which require a solid foundation in algebra and thermodynamics. This suggests that for this framework to be successful on a national scale, there must be a simultaneous push for mathematical integration within the science curriculum (Katehi et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the integration of chemical engineering principles at the secondary level effectively bridges the gap between theoretical science and applied engineering. By utilizing the Unit Operations model, students gained a measurable advantage in systems thinking, mass/energy balances, and engineering intuition. Perhaps more importantly, the curriculum reframed the role of the scientist as an architect of global solutions, leading to a significant increase in interest in engineering careers. The transition from "test-tube" chemistry to "process" engineering is not just a change in scale; it is a change in mindset that is necessary for the next generation of innovators.

Future research should expand this framework into Virtual Reality (VR) environments. VR could allow students to interact with large-scale industrial equipment (like 50-foot distillation towers) that would be impossible to house in a high school lab. Additionally, a longitudinal study is needed to track these students through their first two years of university to see if this early exposure reduces the "dropout rate" in engineering programs, which

is currently a major concern in STEM education.

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