

Professional Learning Communities: Structure, Potentials and Limitations

Alice W.K. Chow, *The Education University of Hong Kong*

This paper reports on a multi-site study which examined the structuring of professional learning communities (PLCs) for professional renewals and school improvements in secondary schools in Hong Kong. Underpinning the formation of PLCs is the notion of teacher agency and a social constructivist philosophy which assume teacher knowledge to be 1) shaped by context(s) in which it is acquired and used (Eraut, 2000) and 2) socially constructed in conversations and social practices (Orland-Barak, 2006). For school improvements to succeed, it is believed that strengthening teacher capacity to review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents is essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice. The process takes place within a particular context, and is most effective if it is based in schools where teachers collectively find generative means to resolving teaching and learning gaps for the betterment of student learning. While many research studies show that professional communities characterised by reflective dialogues enhance teacher development, there is relatively less research on the management practices of middle managers and how that might impact collaborative enquiries.

To investigate the factors shaping the organization and team process within such communities, a study examining the structure, process and sustainability of school-based renewal initiatives was undertaken in three secondary schools in which project teachers engaged in lesson studies on literacy instruction. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observations. A total of twenty one teachers from three schools were interviewed about the nature and process of their involvement in the renewal projects. Teacher informants were also interviewed about the perceived benefits, impacts and limitations of the projects in enhancing teacher capacities for change and renewals, and the sustainability of the initiatives. Lesson observations were conducted in eighteen classes to examine participating teachers' instructional practices, and to gauge the extent to which reciprocal peer lesson observation and subsequent team discussions facilitated teacher reflective engagement that led to enhanced pedagogical practices.

The findings of the study highlight the organisational spectrum of professional learning communities in which leadership goals, concerns and orientations play a dominant role in shaping the structure of knowledge representations, power relationship as well as the boundaries for participation and leadership involvement within the PLCs. Issues pertaining to the dichotomies between 1) managerial accountability and professional empowerment, 2) techno-instrumentalism and autonomous explorations, and 3) constraining uniformity and random experimentation will be explored. For generative professional renewals to be sustainable, facilitative conditions that feature heterarchical knowledge relationship, infrastructure for team learning and leadership transformation, mutual engagement, joint enterprises and shared repertoire of practices will also be discussed.

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Lesson Study in Praxis: Three Japanese Teachers of English and Forces of Friction in Implementation of the New English Policy

Fumi Takegami, *Ritsumeikan Keisho Junior & Senior High School*

Terry E Laskowski, *Kumamoto University*

The purpose of the study is based on helping Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) in their teacher development (TD) to basically conduct classes in English meeting the new course of study mandate in Japanese secondary schools. Like many mandated curriculum policies formed at the upper institutional levels, gaps between anticipated policy implementation and actual realization in practice have widely emerged. The study addresses reasons for why problems have occurred. Then, solutions to narrowing the gap, which are tackled in this study, are found in the concept of praxis-- an iterative process involving knowledge, action and reflection. In praxis, teachers are given opportunities to apply professional knowledge (theory) in their instruction (practice), and to think about their actions (reflection). The concept of praxis originating with the ancient Greeks is relevant to the study because it draws on a dialectical relationship of bringing theory and practice together allowing both to inform each other in an ongoing cyclical process aimed at making positive transformations in teaching. Based on these understandings of the praxis concept, lesson study goes beyond the 'one try' lesson, as is often the case when conducted with secondary teachers in Japan, to an iterative process involving the JTEs in several lesson study cycles. Conducted in this manner, lesson study is seen as a most appropriate, coherent and contemporary TD model that incorporates the basic principles of praxis. The study takes a qualitative approach in its design and is context dependent. Data were collected from three participating JTEs, at a private secondary school setting. The participants were joined by one of the researchers at their school site as they go through five praxis based lesson study cycles emphasizing theory (to inform professional knowledge), reflection, and practice. Data collection first considers the teaching context of the participants by focusing on data to understand the JTEs' teacher realities, and then evolves to documenting ways to make changes in their instruction through lesson study. Data collection and analysis were conducted using principles associated with grounded theory (GT) bringing procedural rigor to the qualitative approach. Data collection techniques of interviews, observations, field notes and stimulated recall were carried out. Analytical techniques associated with GT were performed by applying a three-stage coding procedure to formulate conceptual categories using open coding to label all of the data, axial coding to form key categories, and finally selective coding to construct a thematic core theme to encapsulate the data substantiated in the previous coding stages. Outcomes of the study that emerged from coding the data in GT analysis depict complexities of teaching and are conceptualized by three categories: harmony provisionally maintained (HPM), a static state; existing positive disharmonies (EPD), a possible change state that can lead to development, and reconceptualizations of practice (ROP), opportunities to see change successfully implemented in action. The categories are further encapsulated by the core theme of many possibilities of friction conceived as a metaphor showing forces (negative and positive) of change. A proposed model is shown for future, on-going development emphasizing constructivist methodologies and complementary teaching methods. The broader focus of this study is 1) to promote the advancement and dissemination of an

important role that lesson study can play in pedagogical research to better inform professional foreign language teacher development, and 2) to contribute to the expanding international literature on conducting school-based lesson study that is found lacking in studies taking place in Japanese schools even though it originated in Japan.

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How to Build School In-service Training System Based on Lesson Study?

Zukhra Idrisheva, *Center of Excellence*

Zhanna Baigarinova, *Center of Excellence*

From the experience of working with teachers and heads of school in in-service teacher training courses, we observed that Lesson Study took place under external control and the teachers had no internal motivation to improve their practice.

Our conclusions after the observations were corroborated by the data obtained during the surveys and interviews of teachers from different regions of Kazakhstan.

Then, as the experimental area, two schools of different types of the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Astana) were chosen: public and private, and one rural school in Akmola region. This choice was aimed at comparing the processes taking place in schools, which radically differ from each other by the contingent of teachers and students, the form of ownership and location.

We found out that teachers considered that the main barriers were the lack of time for conducting Lesson Study and workload during the day, while the heads of schools noted the reluctance of teachers to work in collaboration and reflect on their practice.

The purpose of this research is to determine the ways of building an effective system that would help to reduce the load and optimize the processes aimed at further training in the school.

The school in-service training system assumes the combination of various processes that allow to develop professionalism within the school and by its own teachers. These are the processes of coaching and mentoring, Action Research and Lesson Study, implementation of networking mechanisms.

In this way, teachers can conduct Lesson Study, wherein coaching, mentoring and Action Research take place.

Groups of Lesson study, which share experience, resources, interact to jointly solve problems, also constitute the structure of school networking.

This means that the heads of schools need to organize the process of Lesson Study in order to have an effective system of in-service training that includes all known modern approaches and best pedagogical practices.

The next focus of this research will be the question "How to use the coaching approach in Lesson Study?", because it is coaching that helps to develop the teacher's inner motivation without offending his/her self-esteem and without using external control from the administration.

Key words: Lesson Study, school in-service training system, networking, mentoring, coaching, Action Research, leadership, deep pedagogy, systemness.