

Challenging common sense: Cases of school reform for learning community under an international cooperation project in Bac Giang Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the challenges in the process of building a learning community in Vietnamese primary schools. Five lessons emerge from the cases. First, changing teachers' beliefs is time-consuming. Second, because of the reluctance of teachers to change, large-scale delivery of the educational project should be critically revisited with regard to its effectiveness. Third, learning community requires the building of trust among actors, including external resource persons. Fourth, external resource persons should continue learning sincerely to gain teachers' trust. Fifth, the concept of sustainability should be revisited as something that is never-ending and that cannot reach perfection.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Literature review

The learning community has been a well discussed and studied concept in developed countries. Barth (1990) describes a learning community as 'a place where all the participants—teachers, principals, parents, and students—engage in learning and teaching (p. 43). Sergiovanni (1999) elaborates the concept of the learning community by connecting it

with valued social ends and caring as professional ideals of teachers (pp. 143–144). Then, Senge et al. (2000) systematise the concept of the learning community within the school as the learning classroom and learning school and that of external entities, surrounding schools (pp. 12–16). Further, Smylie (1994) states that the learning community should enable teachers to work interdependently to promote student learning. For this, it is significant for members to share values and hold a reflective dialogue to improve practice (Louis et al., 1996).

For the purpose of improving practices, teachers must allow their colleagues to observe their own lessons, and in turn, must observe others' lessons (Barth, 1990; Joyce and Showers, 2002; Kilbourn et al., 2005; Leithwood, 1992; Noffke, 1995; Stiggins and Duke, 1988). In Japan, there is a tradition of

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activity for professional development based on the observation of and reflection on lessons, known as lesson study. Lesson study is based on the observation of and reflection on actual lessons taught by teachers, including collegial teachers or external resource persons—such as university faculty members—and on facts observed in the concrete practice of the teaching of the lessons. Nowadays, lesson study is attracting considerable attention from other countries such as the US (Fernandez and Yoshida, 2004; Lewis et al., 2004; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999), UK (Ruthven, 2005), and Australia (White and Southwell, 2003). Lesson study tends to be defined as encompassing ‘a large family of instructional improvement strategies, a part of which involves the observation of live classroom lessons by a group of teachers who collect data on teaching and learning and collaboratively analyse it’ (Lewis et al., 2006, p. 3).

While the above-mentioned research into lesson study tends to focus on subject education, mainly mathematics, there is an emerging approach with regard to lesson study, called lesson study for the learning community (Murase, 2007; Ose and Sato, 2000; Sato, 1996b, 2007; Sato and Sato, 2003). The goal of this approach is to create a community of discourse on lesson practices within schools to facilitate teachers’ mutual learning. Sato and colleagues (Murase, 2007; Ose and Sato, 2000; Sato, 1996b, 2007; Sato and Sato, 2003) lay emphasis on lesson study as the central activity of a school, wherein all the teachers should be involved in observation and reflection, namely, practice lesson study about 100 times annually. The aim of this requirement is to enable various interpretations and analyses about lessons based on the evidences and facts of student learning. Thus, lesson study for the learning community inevitably extends to the level of school reform (Murase, 2007).

However, these studies are based on cases in developed countries and do not necessarily consider conditions in developing ones. Turning to studies on learning community in developing countries, Khemmani (2006) listed strategies to reform a school into a learning community in Thai contexts. In spite of the in-depth and extensive discussion, Khemmani (2006) limits the study to the theoretical level, without examining concrete cases. Thornton (2006) analyses the problems faced by teachers in collaborating with each other within a school in Bangladesh, but the analysis does not cover the teaching and learning processes. Saito et al. (2006b) focus on the

process of school changes based on lesson study in Indonesia; however, they cover only the early stage.

With regard to teacher professional development, there exist a number of case studies on topics such as the introduction of action research in Zimbabwe (Weiler, 2001), practicing reflection in Namibia (O’Sullivan, 2002), changing the teaching approach to constructivist ones in South Africa (Harvey, 1999), and the gap between off-school training and the daily situation in Sri Lanka (Johnson, 2006) and Indonesia (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2003; henceforth, JICA). However, these analyses have been undertaken from the perspectives of the ‘improvement of teaching’, rather than reforming schools. Moreover, although Saito et al. (2006a, 2007) discuss cases of lesson study in Indonesia, their inquiry does not cover the school reform process itself.

Turning to the situation in Vietnam, the focus of this study, despite an increase in the number of studies on important educational issues (Duggan, 2001; Griffin et al., 2006; Griffin and Thanh, 2006; Peyser et al., 2006), the studies do not examine cases of real classrooms or the school reform process. Then, despite Saito et al. (2008) analysing real classroom situation, their analysis tends to be limited to the level of teaching and learning processes, rather than sufficiently addressing school reform process. Thus, in the case of Vietnam, there is an urgent need to study the process of trials to reform schools.

1.2. Purpose of this paper

Based on the necessity mentioned in Section 1.1, this paper will probe the process of trials undertaken on a pilot basis to reform some schools under an international cooperation project by the Vietnamese government and JICA. According to the concept of the project, school reform would be done by revitalising the existing system of observation of and reflection on lessons by collegial teachers, called professional teacher meetings. For this, the framework of the lesson study for the learning community approach was adopted. However, this paper does not aim to discuss successful model cases. In contrast, when conducting the project, the teachers and the authors had to confront various challenges that went against their existing beliefs and common sense. The purpose of this paper is to openly discuss these challenges and their implications.

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