



# Problematizing lesson study and its impacts: Studying a highly contextualised approach to professional learning

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The study uses pupil attainment data and case studies to explore how lesson study was reconstructed in a national programme.
- Lesson study had a positive effect on pupil outcomes when integrated into an overarching school improvement strategy.
- Lesson study is increasingly part of wider improvement initiatives that result in modifications to the process.
- Contextual analysis of lesson study recognises the interactive nature of its 'effects' in and across levels of a system.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 April 2015

Received in revised form

20 July 2016

Accepted 2 August 2016

### Keywords:

Lesson study

Professional learning

Impact

## ABSTRACT

Researching the efficacy of lesson study has been complicated by the manner in which it has been reinterpreted in different settings and contexts. Drawing on research into a national school improvement programme in England, this paper looks at how various reconfigurations of lesson study were affected by the different collaborative arrangements among schools and practitioners in the programme. Utilising a mixed methods approach, the paper provides and problematizes new empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of lesson study. It concludes with a consideration of how those researching lesson study initiatives would benefit from adopting a more critical contextual analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

Lesson Study originated in Japan and became a global phenomenon after being brought to worldwide attention by the Third International Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 1998). Its popularity has grown steadily since. Xu and Pedder (2015) state that the World Association of Lesson Studies, established in Hong Kong in 2005, has members from over 60 countries and a recent estimate was that it has been used in over 2500 primary and secondary schools in England (Dudley, 2014). Since the 1990s, lesson study<sup>1</sup> has been applied internationally to a range of

curriculum areas and reinterpreted in numerous professional development programmes (Dudley, 2013; Lewis, Perry, & Hurd, 2004; Lieberman, 2009).

Researching the potential impact of lesson study has been made problematic by its versatility (Xu & Pedder, 2009) and the variability of its reinterpretations, making it difficult to identify its common characteristics (Murata, 2011; Perry & Lewis, 2009). In the UK the widespread adoption, and reinterpretation, of lesson study has occurred against a backdrop of broader school improvement phases that have focused on integrating professional learning and school development (Harris & Chrispeels, 2008; Hopkins, 2016). The different phases have formed a key part of the “practice architecture” (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), or preconditions, that have affected how lesson study has been enacted in classrooms and schools.

In this paper we consider the effect of a range of contextual influences on the lesson study model used within a national school improvement initiative. The initiative was the Leading Teachers (LT) Programme which set out to improve pupil attainment in

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article “lesson study” in lower case is used to refer to the wide range of professional learning processes that have labeled themselves as Lesson Studies, although these reinterpretations might differ significantly with regard to their focus, process and/or underpinning theories.

primary schools in England by training almost 1000 lead teachers in lesson study. Programme data indicated that 1175 primary schools in 92 local authorities (LAs, which are equivalent to school districts), representing 61 per cent of all LAs in England, were involved in the programme between 2008 and 2010. The research is based on case studies of three LAs where lesson study was credited with playing a key role in improving pupil attainment. The cases describe how existing approaches to school improvement and collaborative conditions within LAs prefigured how lesson study was interpreted and enacted and in doing so shaped the nature of the impacts on teachers and pupils.

## 2. Problematising the impact of lesson study: the role of context(s)

From a post-positivist perspective, problematising the outcomes from engagement in lesson study involves developing a more complex conceptualisation of the role played by the context in which it takes place. This raises a number of methodological and epistemological issues primarily because adopting such a perspective undermines simplistic notions of linear causality, based on regularity and predictability, and treats the links between a practice and its effects as belonging to a complex set of relationships with the contexts in which they are achieved (Ling, 2012). The methodological implications of adopting a post-positivist perspective have been extensively debated in evaluation research (Jolley, 2014; Mowles, 2014). The aim of this section is not to repeat these general arguments but to present a reflective critique of how the relationship between practice and context has often been under-theorised in research on lesson study. In doing so, we distinguish between three levels of context that affect how a particular model of lesson study was implemented and received: the national/local system (macro), the organisation (meso), and lesson study process itself (micro).

In this critique we have drawn on the findings of what is so far the only systematic review of lesson study (Cheung & Wong, 2014), which considered what constitutes lesson study, the nature of its intended effects, and the relationship between actual effects and the practices of lesson study by examining the evidence base relating to Lesson Study and its effectiveness, as reported in journal articles published between 2000 and 2010.

### 2.1. System context (macro)

The macro level of contextual analysis focuses on differences between and within educational systems. The issue of variations between different education systems' interpretation of the practice known as *jugyou kenkyuu* in Japan and renamed Lesson Study elsewhere (Watanabe, 2002; Yoshida, 1999) has been the focus of considerable debate (Perry & Lewis, 2009; Yoshida & Jackson, 2011). The issue is exacerbated by a paucity of case studies that set the process within its original Japanese context (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2014). This led Cheng and Ling (2013) to argue that widespread uptake of lesson study in North America:

*is based more on the perception of an ideal rather than on a fidelity approach. This is true of all countries adapting the lesson study approach. This also explains why the interpretations and practices of lesson study vary so widely across countries* (p. 2).

The debate over what constitutes a lesson study has resulted in various attempts to define the key characteristics that determine whether a particular professional learning process is a "lesson study" (Chokshi & Fernandez, 2004; Perry & Lewis, 2009; Takahashi, Watanabe, & Yoshida, 2006). The resulting definitions

tend to be lists of core practice elements with few references to contextual features. Cheung and Wong's (2014) systematic review only identified 20 articles that they considered to be examples of lesson study or the related process of Learning Study. The criteria for rejecting studies were based on the practices described in the original research, with little consideration of the role lesson study played in the local education systems.

"Between system" analyses provide a better understanding of contextual differences in the purposes and intended outcomes that led to the adoption of lesson study. "Within-system" analyses are important when examining how lesson study has been positioned and reinterpreted over time, reflecting changes in national and local policy agendas, and how this affects the intentions behind its adoption, and the impacts sought. The need for more within-system contextual analyses of lesson study can be illustrated with reference to the macro policy context of the English education system, specifically the relationship between professional development and school improvement. Lesson study in England was initially popularised during the first phase of school improvement research (Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2003). One of the first publications to draw attention to lesson study after TIMSS (1998) was Stigler and Hiebert's (1999) *The Teaching Gap* which focused on articulating, validating and disseminating what were considered effective teaching practices. The policy discourse at this point was concerned with identifying gaps in teaching quality, rather than variations in pupil performance, and lesson study was seen as a promising approach to professional development. As school improvement policy subsequently moved towards assessing the impact of school-based interventions on pupil test scores (Cordingley, Bell, Rundell, & Evans, 2003), lesson study became increasingly judged on this criterion. In later phases of school improvement in England, the focus has moved towards system-level change and leadership, set within a discourse of the "self-improving system" (DfE, 2010; Hargreaves 2010). System-level change was premised upon developing capacity at different levels. Schools were encouraged to generate sufficient capacity to meet their own improvement needs before supporting others, leading to a range of collaborative initiatives (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). Along with approaches such as walk-throughs (Bickford, 2010) and instructional rounds (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), lesson study became increasingly positioned as a means of engendering the forms of joint practice development, reciprocal knowledge transfer and distributed leadership regarded as key elements of capacity building within a self-improving system (Mourshed, Chijioko, & Barber, 2010; Hargreaves, 2010), and assessments of its effectiveness began to shift to accommodate these elements.

A system-level contextual analysis allows for consideration of whether the adoption of lesson study in a locality, posited on the achievement of broad system-level impacts, has an effect on the way it is reconstructed at other levels. Cheung and Wong's (2014) review included only nine articles in its final analysis, mainly due to lack of evidence of impact. The notion of impact used was unfortunately restricted to meso and micro level analyses even though some of the articles reviewed contained studies that aspired to effect wider change. For example, Stewart and Brendefur's (2005) research involved 50 teams of teachers in 13 US school districts and was set explicitly within a discourse of system-level change based on the perceived failure of previous large-scale reform:

*The systems we were working with were fragmented and overloaded, and the timelines were too long. Some teachers and administrators felt that there was too much going on. Others wanted to opt out because they could see little direct connection between the reform efforts and their day-to-day working lives* (p. 682).

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