Review Article

Lesson Study in Japan

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The book, “Lesson Study in Japan”, published by the National Association for the Study of Educational Methods (NASEM), is timely given the tremendous interest in Lesson Study and its global spread in many countries around the world (Lee, 2011). Many educational systems are exploring lesson study as a tool for teacher learning in efforts to develop teacher capacity in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for the 21st century and helping teachers to “develop the eyes to see children” (Lewis et al, 2003). This book provides insights into how lesson study started in Japan and ways in which it has evolved to its various forms in contemporary times for different purposes. As Catherine Lewis indicated in her introduction to the text, “this rich history has been largely unavailable in the English Language to researchers and educators in other countries” (p. v). The National Association for the Study of Educational Methods (NASEM) deserves commendation for making available “systematic information of lesson study—origin, history, theory and research methodology” to the world (Nakano, p.iii).

The historical accounts of Lesson Study provided in this book are fascinating and provided the context for the continuities that we see in current practices of lesson study. NASEM’s first director, Kiyoji Sunazawa had argued that “lesson study should study instruction itself to the last, but if we do not make efforts to locate instruction as the core of teaching practice, it will fall into lesson study writhing about on its belly” (p.10) and the goal of “teaching practice is to make it possible for children to prepare for the change of reality and for teachers to contribute to the change of reality through it” (Usui, Chapter 1). Catherine Lewis reminded us that the term, “jugyou” refers to “live instruction, not to a lesson captured on paper” (p.vi), clarifying a misconception in the minds of many that lesson study is just about refining lessons.

Sunazawa also argued that it is impossible for one teacher alone to be engaged in lesson study and that it requires the collaboration and participation of all teachers in a school in partnership with researchers of education (p.11). So from the beginning, lesson study is about collaboration and brings practitioners and researchers together to examine teaching practice. “Scholars of education must shake hands with practical educators” and be engaged in collaborative research

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(p.12). It should be such research according to Toyoda (Chapter 2) "consists of analysis of classroom work that teachers implement on a daily basis at their schools" (p.14). The "hallmark of this research could be said to lie in the transformation of the teacher himself/herself and the promotion of self-renewal rather than in direct improvement of lessons or in the development of new methods of instruction or course materials" (p.vii).

The origins of lesson study according to various researchers can be traced back to the early 20th century or earlier. Toyoda suggested that it started in the 1920s during the Taisho liberal education period where a movement took place to effect a “Copernican shift from teacher centric education of the 19th century to the child centric education of the 20th” (p.16) An example of this shift is the “seikatsu tsuzurikata” movement – “a writing movement designed to help children develop a strong sense of self by having them write descriptive detailed compositions about their daily life and the world around them” (p.16). This shift from teacher-centred pedagogy to student-centred pedagogy is yet to be realized in many educational systems today and is the focus of educational reforms around the world including Singapore (Hogan et al, 2011).

The early years of lesson study saw annual research conferences being held on a national scale with public lesson studies to enable the "sharing of fruits of lesson study by all teachers" (p.26). Early lesson study practitioners such as Miyazaki emphasized group-oriented pedagogy (p.19). Ishibashi emphasized the methodology of subject content and teacher leadership (p.23) and Saito insisted that "teachers must put every effort into gaining an understanding of each individual child" and focused on the transformation of children in the classroom not just from the perspective of life in the classroom but also the daily lives of the children outside of school (p.27). A similar interest in bringing lesson study closer to daily life is shared by Yoshio Toui (p.28). Children's diaries and essays are often the artifacts produced by this effort.

Lesson study after the 1960s has to be understood in the context of the need to reform school lessons by applying the content and methods of modern science. Lesson study during that period focused on the “Hypothesis-Verification-Through Experimentation Learning System” and the lesson process of exception-debate-experiment (p.32). The 1970s saw the decline of academic achievement and students' motivation to learn and diverse lesson studies were developed to incorporate learners' perspective (p.33). Video technology popularized in the 1980s saw a new style of lesson study emerging where teacher and student verbal and non-verbal behaviours as well as the atmosphere of the classroom is analysed through the use of videotapes (Fujiwara, Chapter 3). The many features of lesson study since the 1920s continue to its present form, e.g. the use of videos feature strongly in post research lesson discussions and is sometimes done concomitantly with the lesson analysis of classroom transcripts (Matoba, p.438).

The work of lesson studies in Japan is not limited to universities and schools. The book provided a string of examples of the strong influence of professional and research associations such as NASEM (pp 40-43); Children's Language Research Society (pp 48-49), Literary-Art Education Research Association (pp 50-51); Association of Research on Scientific Reading (pp 51-52); Association of Science Education (pp 61-65); Association of Mathematical Instruction (pp 65-69); History Educationalist Conference of Japan (pp 69-70); Association for Scientific Research in Education (pp 70-72); Society for Achieving the Original Spirit of Lesson Study (pp 77-79); Japanese Society for Life Guidance Society (pp. 80-82); Society for Research on How any Child can Grow (pp 83-85); Japanese Association for Life Education (pp 96-97); Japanese Association for Composition (pp 98-100); Japanese Society for Life Guidance (pp 101-103); National Physical Education Society (pp 108-109); Music Education Society (pp 121-122);
Society of Creative Art Education and others (pp 125-128). The role that these numerous professional and research associations play has resulted in a range of interesting lesson study cases in various subject areas from Art, Music, Physical Education, History, Social Studies, Japanese Language, Science and Math as well as demonstrated the various purposes for which lesson studies are used. This is not seen elsewhere where lesson study cases are often limited to science and mathematics. Also in many countries, professional teacher associations are not as strong in examining teaching practice with their members, often relegating that role to teacher educators in universities.

The numerous Japanese professional and research associations have also brought about a critical look at courses of studies as they are intended and how they are enacted in classrooms through lessons. For example, the lesson studies of the Association of Science Education “went beyond mere discussions of teachers’ techniques and skills” and advocated “a consistent research approach that focused on the issue of what is taught and its order so that students learn the methods and findings of natural science though lessons” (p.62). Science teachers through their lesson studies made use of actual lesson records to analyze situations when children did not understand the lesson, the mechanisms of their errors and cognitive processes. So students’ responses to a lesson formed the basis for revision and development of materials as well as discussions about what to teach using those materials. The book has provided examples of how lesson study has helped Japanese educators “face the daunting task of improving the national curriculum and spreading improvements to instruction” (p.ix) and bringing about revisions in teaching materials and textbooks, e.g. school-based curriculum development and lesson study as a core activity of school-based action research (Kihara, chapter 15), lesson studies conducted at pilot schools (Kuno, chapter 16) and curriculum making and the interpretation of teaching materials provided by textbooks (Shibata, chapter 11).

The book has also contributed ideas on “how to see children” through various data collection and analysis methods. Tonoue placed children as the core of lesson studies and their capacity as learners (Chapter 4–3) and shared how lesson study records were prepared in such detail that individual children could be distinguished (p.78). Mention was made of progress notes whenever a “teacher made a surprising discovery about children” and seating charts to record “profiles of the children and teacher’s requests, as well as to record opinions and impressions prior to the lesson, together with thoughts and behaviours that emerged from the lesson” (p.79). Ichikawa (Chapter 12–2) highlighted the use of name tag magnets in tracking the development of students’ positions during discussions (pp 281–288), learning records and student portfolios (p.290). Akita shared the use of case conferences with teacher narratives of issues and presentation of children’s records and anecdotes in early childhood settings and how in observing children, we need to “see invisible things using visible things as cues” (p.426) and the importance of partnerships between kindergarten teachers and elementary teachers.

The rich tapestry of insights provided by the various contributors to the book is spoilt somewhat by untidy knots arising from perhaps the translation of the original texts in Japanese to English and the lack of good editorial support. It has made the book less readable and one cannot but have a sense that there is lot more behind the English text. The nuances of the thinking of these contributors are sometimes lost in one’s effort to understand and interpret the text. The book on the whole has made a significant contribution in providing insights into the Why, What, How, What For and For Whom of Japanese Lesson Study in bringing about transformation and renewal not just in teachers but also in schools (Sato, 5–2). This important work cannot be done
without the collaboration between researchers and teachers (Matoba, Chapter 20) in treating “classroom practice as a lode from which to mine new knowledge” (p.433).

References