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PERSPECTIVES

Issues of Practising Lesson Study for Learning Community in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
It has been around 15 years since the commencement of lesson study for the learning community (LSLC) in Vietnam. It started at several pilot schools in Bac Giang province, and today it is practised all over the country. While some pilot schools emerged with high-quality practices, the speed of actual changes in the practices still remains slow. This is because, as the author has found, the following conceptions persist among the policymakers, school leaders and teachers: (a) LSLC requires changing teaching techniques; (b) LSLC is a lesson demonstration, and (c) LSLC is a one-day event. This article addresses these conceptions and argues that LSLC should be considered a fundamental, long-term, and holistic school reform approach based on democratic principles and excellence. To overcome these limitations, it is critical for the practitioners, researchers and policymakers to have networks to share their experiences, be informed about the practices and theories, and research into LSLC more deeply – to even learn from the practitioners and researchers in other countries too.

1. INTRODUCTION

Schools are human organisations and changing routine practices there can be full of uncertainty (North, 2010). The uncertainty here means the situation where teachers cannot be fully confident (Arrow, 1984; Geertz, 1978, 1979). The concept of uncertainty is largely applicable to the feelings of the school leaders, teachers, students or even local communities, inclusive of parents, because of hardship to predict the effectiveness of the choices that they make in running the schools (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009). Indeed, there is no guarantee for practices to be effective even if they follow the rules or regulations, but many school leaders and teachers tend to be compliant with those rules or regulations by implementing routines (Spillane et al., 2011). This is because they believe that such compliance with the rules would reduce uncertainty in practice (North, 2010).

Such a structure is an institution that actors in a given organisation agree on and implement (Bowles, 2004; North, 2010) – or the rules of a game to play (Aoki, 2001, 2013). Therefore, school reform is an institutional change: this is because the structure will change to let the actors, namely the school leaders, teachers and students, interact with each other differently based on a different set of beliefs from the one that they held before. External contexts, like policies set by the educational authorities, may influence such institutions (Ball, 2000; Saito et al., 2018) or the teachers and school leaders interpret those contexts based on their own beliefs and cognitions (Spillane et al., 2002). Alternatively, the school leaders and teachers decide to change their institutions based on the degree of the severeness of the situations that they have – like delinquencies of the students (Saito & Sato, 2012; Sato, 2005, 2021; Sato & Sato, 2003).

The lesson study for learning community (LSLC) is an approach to radically change the rules of the games, or an institution (Aoki, 2001, 2013; Bowles, 2004; North, 2010), to run a school from an authoritarian one to a more democratic one (Saito, Murase, et al., 2015a; Sato, 2019). LSLC has become increasingly popular for school reform across Asian countries, including Japan (Sato, 2003, 2012b, 2012c; Sato & Sato, 2003; Sato & Sato, 2011), Korea

(Shin & Son, 2019), China (Sato, 2019), Taiwan (Huang, 2019), Vietnam (Saito et al., 2018; Saito & Khong, 2017; Saito et al., 2012), Indonesia (Saito et al., 2020; Suratno et al., 2019), and Thailand (Suwanmonkha et al., 2017). In Vietnam, LSLC has been conducted since 2006. It started to be so under a bilateral technical assistance project (Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Saito et al., 2008). The author has been engaged with many studies related to, or based on, LSLC practices in the country, such as teacher professional development (Saito, 2021a; Saito et al., 2010; Saito & Khong, 2017; Saito et al., 2008; Tsukui & Saito, 2018; Tsukui et al., 2017) and school reform (Saito, 2012; Saito et al., 2018; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). A translated guidebook on how to conduct LSLC (Saito et al., 2015b) and resource books (Sato & Sato, 2015) were also published in Vietnamese.

There are some particular ways of understanding LSLC among the policymakers, administrators, and schoolteachers in Vietnam, who are not really familiar with it. Their misunderstandings can be summed up as follows: (a) LSLC requires changing teaching techniques; (b) LSLC is a lesson demonstration, and (c) LSLC is a one-day event. Although LSLC is recognised as part of important policies regarding the new curriculum, it is still confined to professional development activities (Bộ GD-ĐT, 2020; Khong, 2021). This may be because it was introduced in combination with reactivation of an existing framework for professional development activities called professional teacher meeting based on lesson study, or "*sinh hoạt chuyên môn theo nghiên cứu bài học*" in Vietnamese, as a part of the project mentioned above.

To be noted, LSLC was originally developed as a systematic approach to school reform (Sato, 2012a, 2019, 2021). By deepening their understanding of LSLC, its practices in Vietnam can further strengthen the learning of the students, teachers and local communal people, inclusive of the parents. However, in order to do so, it is critical to understand what particular conceptions the Vietnamese stakeholders tend to have about LSLC. Therefore, this paper discusses the nature of conceptions about LSLC held by the educational authorities and teachers as mentioned above. The rest of the paper is as follows: the introduction is followed by an explanation of the LSLC, after which the first issue - that is, it requires a change in teaching technique - is discussed. Thereafter, the matter of lesson demonstrations is addressed, followed by a discussion on how to counter the conception that LSLC is a one-day 'special' event. Finally, the conclusions are drawn.

2. LESSON STUDY FOR LEARNING COMMUNITY

LSLC is a systematic approach to school reform, consisting of (a) vision, (b) philosophy, and (c) activity systems (Sato, 2012a). The vision of LSLC is to ensure learning opportunities for students, teachers, and local communities. A school is a place for students to learn. Therefore, through LSLC, learning opportunities for students have to be established and developed. To provide students with such opportunities, teachers must learn how to teach their subjects (Darling-Hammond, 2008). In other words, continuous professional development and learning must be provided in schools conducting LSLC. Furthermore, local communities, including students' parents, are eligible to gain from these learning opportunities - learning with the students and teachers as parents and citizens.

Table 1. LSLC Framework

	Students	Teachers	Local community
Vision	Learning for every student	Learning for every teacher	Learning for local community members
Philosophy	Excellence	Publicness	Democracy
Activity system	Collaborative learning	Regular lesson observation & reflection	Participation of local community members

As regards philosophy, there are three key principles: publicness, democracy, and excellence. Each classroom is regarded as a public space, and each teacher opens or presents their practices at least once a year to their colleagues for joint observation and reflection to aid mutual learning. Additionally, schools are conceptualised as democracies, as a mode of associated living where everyone is treated equally - as a 'protagonist' (Dewey, 1916). Furthermore, excellence implies that pupils should be engaged in something of value: moving from the 'zone of proximal development today' to that of 'actual developmental level tomorrow' (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning is also emphasised as critical for the learning process. A prominent feature of LSLC is a professional learning

community of teachers for mutual observations and joint reflections on observed lessons. Local citizens, including students' parents, participate in the learning process.

As regards the activity system, there are three elements: collaborative learning, regular lesson observations and reflections, and local participation. At the classroom level, students learn based on the activities of collaborative learning, with a strong reference to help-seeking (Saito & Atencio, 2013, 2014a, 2014b; Saito et al., 2021; Webb, 2013). For this, small groups of three to four members, concrete tools mediating concepts and realities, and sharing representations through consultations are emphasised (Saito & Sato, 2012; Sato & Saito, 2020; Sato & Sato, 2003). For teachers' professional development and learning, regular observations and reflections on lessons is essential, and leading schools with LSLC do this 80-100-times annually (Saito, Murase, et al., 2015a; Saito & Sato, 2012; Sato, 2005). Moreover, in these schools, community members participate in the learning process as resource persons or learners (Saito, 2021b; Sato, 2012a, 2012c; Sato & Sato, 2003).

3. CONCEPTIONS ABOUT LSLC IN VIETNAM

3.1. Conception 1. Teaching practice change as technique change

This is a frequently observed issue, especially in schools that are relatively new in conducting LSLC. Teachers seem to believe that this approach requires a change in teaching methods from one-way lectures to engaging students in more group activities. They think of LSLC pedagogical practices as teaching techniques (Bjork, 2005; Saito & Atencio, 2013; Saito et al., 2021), which reveals their incomplete understanding. Fundamentally, two perspectives must be considered when changing teaching practices: identity issues and academic rigour.

Identity change is necessary because a teacher's identity largely influences classroom discourses. Southeast Asian teachers tend to assume the identity of a speaker (Bjork, 2005; Saito & Atencio, 2013; Saito & Tsukui, 2008) and think that their job is to guide the students to find answers for given tasks—an attitude based on the hierarchical teacher–student power relationship (Saito & Atencio, 2013; Saito et al., 2021; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). In the case of LSLC, teachers design and conduct activities for students and then implement what their teachers instruct them to do.

To conduct collaborative learning based on help-seeking (Saito & Atencio, 2014a, 2014b; Saito et al., 2021; Sato, 2012a, 2012c; Webb, 2013), it is critical for teachers to be good listeners; it also facilitates students' learning because teachers can then have a good understanding of their situation, expectations, challenges, and interests and take actions accordingly. However, there is a question of how to define the term *facilitation*.

Facilitation refers to the art of identifying those at risk of dropping out of the learning programme and reconnecting them with peers for better learning (Sato et al., 2020). Under LSLC, in order to accurately identify potential strugglers and devise suitable interventions, teachers frequently observe and reflect on the lessons. Additionally, the underpinning belief here is that students learn better with their peers than when receiving direct support from teachers. Moreover, it is important for teachers to not discourage or disparage those facing challenges, lest they frustrate them (Strati et al., 2017) or, inadvertently, instil in them an inferiority complex (Flores et al., 2015; Jorgensen, 2016). In other words, professional teachers focus on developing students' positive identities through learning (Andersson et al., 2015; Flores et al., 2015; Jorgensen, 2016; Keddie, 2011; Rumenapp, 2016).

Teachers' academic rigour is another critical factor. It refers to the authenticity of their teaching, for example, learning mathematics as mathematicians do (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Saito et al., 2021), and depends on the quality of exposure to the discipline (Casinader, 2015, 2016; Rommel & Damico, 2013). This perspective engenders an important question: how much authentic experience do student-teachers in universities, and professional teachers in schools, possess of the subjects they teach?

3.2. Conception 2. Lesson observation and reflection as lesson demonstration

When attending lesson observation and reflection sessions in various schools, the author found many teachers believed that these occasions were meant to demonstrate their innovative teaching techniques. In other words, they considered them as opportunities to show their techniques to other teachers (Inagaki & Sato, 1996) or thought they were mutual technique evaluation sessions (Saito, 2021a; Saito et al., 2008). This perspective is variously problematic: it leads to issues related to showing others something special, creating a hierarchy within the teachers, and a need for deeper reflections.

Showing 'something special to the other teachers' is a common practice in Vietnam. The author used to attend lesson observation and reflection sessions, which were organised on an ad-hoc basis during the initial stage of his association with Vietnamese schools. He realised that in these sessions, teachers did not present their daily practices (Saito et al., 2008) - as will be discussed in the next section, the real intent of these sessions was, and is, to provide suggestions for improvements in daily practices. This was mainly because their practices were authoritarian and punitive (Saito et al., 2008; Tsukui & Saito, 2018).

Starting in early 2010, the author changed his approach. He began spending one full day in a school; in the morning, he visited every classroom to personally observe the way classes were being conducted, and in the afternoon, he observed and reflected upon one lesson with other teachers. In one school in 2013, he had a heated debate with the principal about the daily practices, and he highlighted the serious lack of learning in classrooms—something that was difficult for the principal to accept. However, the principal eventually observed the same issue and decided to visit every classroom every day to video-record on her mobile phone some critical moments related to students' learning and discuss them with the respective teachers. The teachers were gradually sensitised about issues in their daily practices, and these efforts resulted in a great transformation of daily practices based on collaborative learning (Saito & Khong, 2017) - and the reform continued (Saito, 2021a).

Another issue relates to the creation of a hierarchy within the teachers on account of observations and reflections of daily practices. The first type of observed hierarchy refers to the one between 'the model teacher' and 'the followers'. In this case, the teachers chosen to reveal their practices for observation are likely to be considered competent - these are the high rankers in regional teachers ranking contests. Naturally, the observers will praise their practices. However, a few questions remain: (a) whether it is a public practice for mutual learning?, and (b) how much of the knowledge gained from the observations will be implemented in their daily practice from the next day? Another type of hierarchy, which is more probable, is the one between 'the observed' and 'the evaluators'. Those who demonstrate their practices receive severely and penalising comments (Saito, 2021a; Saito et al., 2008; Tsukui & Saito, 2018; Tsukui et al., 2017). This tendency was reported by Nguyen and Pham (2020) in their study on academics at the tertiary level.

This problem of hierarchy seriously hinders teachers' professional development and learning. In particular, it stymies their regular self-reflection and hinders their identification of personal strengths and weaknesses (Inagaki & Sato, 1996). This is caused by the harsh evaluation by peers, which results in traumatic memories or decreased sensitisation about their practices. As each student is unique, so is a teacher; they have their own unique potentialities and strengths, regardless of whether they are aware of them or not. One of the goals of LSLC is to help teachers become aware of and develop, their own potential through professional conversations over joint observations and reflections, as well as daily practices. This is the practice of associated living or democracy for teachers (Dewey, 1916).

Moreover, there is the issue of the need for deep reflections, despite emerging trends of new types of dialogues in joint reflections where teachers share their views and experiences about students by showing recorded classroom videos (Saito, 2021a; Tsukui & Saito, 2021). Although it is an advancement compared to 2006, when LSLC was introduced, and teachers can now record moments of student well-being and learning (Saito, 2021a), they tend to finish with their personal emotions or notes rather than their analysis or interpretation (Tsukui & Saito, 2021). This should be further analysed, but it would be partly because of the nature of the syntaxes of their discourses. The teachers would tend to refer to the students or situations with emotions in their reflections, such as 'I like' or so (Tsukui & Saito, 2021). This would be partly because of their attempts to avoid penalisation against the teacher who conducts a lesson for observation. Also, it shows a need to support them to multiply the types of syntaxes in the joint-reflective discourses. This aspect must be further considered.

3.3. Conception 3. LSLC as 'a special event'

The author found that teachers and policymakers consider LSLC as a special event, not as a long-term school reform process. Doing almost nothing on a daily basis, they fabricate (Ball, 2000; Ogisu & Saito, 2019; Saito et al., 2018) their practices for self-promotion on the day of this special event, with external stakeholders, such as local bureaucrats, in attendance. Thus, there is no need for a change; the teachers would not have to, or even want to, question their daily practices.

Even in schools where LSLC works well, there have been persistent problems and challenges (Saito et al., 2012; Saito & Sato, 2012; Saito, Watanabe, et al., 2015; Sato & Sato, 2003). A successful reformation, thus, depends on

how deeply the teachers are sensitised to mundane issues related to students' learning and well-being, and how persistently they work to resolve them before they turn into a crisis. Three points will be made in this section; school leaders must: (1) have long-term engagement in pedagogical reform; (2) find more time for professional work; and (3) consider how to work with local communities on a daily basis.

First, changing teaching practices requires the long-term engagement of everyone in the school. The LSLC vision states universal equality, to guarantee high-quality learning opportunities for each student in the school, and to avoid disparity within the school, and every teacher has to be engaged. Thus, a school policy is required to reform the existing pedagogical practices into more collaborative ones, and the formulation of such a policy is the school management's responsibility, not of individual teachers (Saito, Murase, et al., 2015a; Sato, 2005, 2012a; Sato & Sato, 2003).

In the schools conducting LSLC, collaborative learning is emphasised, which includes formation of small groups of three to four students and enabling them to learn through consultations (Saito & Sato, 2012; Sato & Saito, 2020; Sato & Sato, 2003). The school management must enable the teachers to practice this approach in every lesson for every subject every day. An example from a Vietnam school is discussed above, where the school principal visits every classroom daily to observe how students learn and to discuss with the teachers about students' learning and well-being (Saito, 2021a; Saito & Khong, 2017).

Second, schools must help teachers find more time to engage in professional matters. Although school reform is thought to add more work, it should actually reduce unnecessary tasks to create extra time for more professional activities - self-studying, designing classes, or even exchanges of experiences with other colleagues (Saito, Murase, et al., 2015a; Saito & Sato, 2012; Sato, 2005, 2012b, 2012c). Mostly, reforms increase teachers' workload (Bayles & Knowles, 2019; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2018; Hairon & Dimmock, 2012; Li, 2017; Morris et al., 2019), which may increase the risk of teacher burnout (Bayles & Knowles, 2019; Hargreaves, 1994; Sato, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary for schools, as well as policymakers at both national and local levels, to consider tasks and processes that can be curtailed or abolished (Saito, Murase, et al., 2015a; Saito et al., 2008).

Third, collaboration with local communities should be considered. In Vietnam, this aspect is still to be developed, even in pilot schools in Bac Giang province. In 2012, the author and his colleagues conducted a series of interviews with parents whose children attended the pilot schools, and they showed strong interest in closer collaboration with the schools. However, as far as the author knows, there have been few cases of collaborations between local communities and schools, especially for students' learning. In LSLC schools, local community members join the learning process as students or resource persons (Saito, 2021b; Sato, 2005, 2012b). Their participation as resource persons makes the lessons more authentic, exposing students to an expert's perspective. This aspect must be developed further, and the author, therefore, needs to discuss this possibility with the school management.

4. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the following conceptions held by the authorities and teachers about LSLC: (a) LSLC requires changing teaching techniques; (b) LSLC is a lesson demonstration, and (c) LSLC is a one-day event. The gist of the problem is that many Vietnamese teachers, schools, and policymakers tend to still consider LSLC as a superficial, one-day event to demonstrate changes in teaching techniques. However, it should be considered a fundamental, long-term, and holistic approach to school reform. Simply put, stakeholders in education in Vietnam need to evolve their understanding of the vision, philosophy, and activity system of LSLC.

As discussed in the introduction, changing routine practices may cause a larger sense of uncertainty (Arrow, 1984; Geertz, 1978, 1979; North, 2010) to the teachers, especially those who are familiar with the previous sets of routines. The conceptions by the teachers in Vietnam above would be considered as their attempts to find the ways to feel comfortable with the practices of a new concept of LSLC. At least, considering LSLC as above would help them predict the effectiveness of their choices if not having full confidence (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009) – probably these would be their computation about the approximation of the publicly acceptable practices from the perspectives of the authorities and schools, reducing their uncertainties (North, 2010).

Further, from the perspectives of institutional change (Aoki, 2001, 2013; Bowles, 2004; North, 2010), the discussions above can be considered as follows. First, LSLC was introduced as an external influence (Saito et al., 2018), and the school leaders and teachers interpreted and made sense based on their sense of previous practices (Spillane et al., 2002). The author initiated the introduction of LSLC, so he tends to find a strong dissonance,

especially between the practices of those who are new to LSLC and the original framework. In a sense, such conceptions are considered as local adaptations of LSLC, but there is a risk of few implementation of the gist of the principles - at least, the cognitions of the teachers (Spillane et al., 2002) demonstrated above can be questioned, especially in terms of the degree of how much benefitting to the student learning. This is because those who understand the points of the principles, indeed, could make a difference in the practices - to let the students have better learning experiences (Saito, 2021a; Saito et al., 2018; Saito & Khong, 2017).

Therefore, it is necessary to research and advocate LSLC in further depth. In Japan, Korea and Taiwan, there are informal networks of researchers and practitioners - sometimes including policymakers too - that expand the theoretical understanding and practices of LSLC. In Vietnam, such organisational intervention is weak. Although a few practitioners did collaborate with the author in Bac Giang province, it is difficult to foster the next generation of collaborators. Whether at the local or central level, at least one network should be established to inform practitioners and researchers.

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