

Implicit Contradiction between the Ideals and Reality of Lesson Study in the Chinese Context

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Abstract: Lesson Study is an effective way to promote professional development of teachers and improve the quality of teaching. This study investigated the process of Lesson Study in the Chinese context by using qualitative research methods. It is found that there is an implicit contradiction between the ideals and reality of Lesson Study, which transformed Lesson Study into a tool of exam-oriented education. The top-down institutional design and the “face” cultural tradition may be the reasons for generating the implicit contradictions. Some suggestions were put forward at the end.

Keywords: Lesson Study, implicit contradiction, teacher professional development

1. Introduction

Lesson Study is a kind of circular inquiry activity conducted by a team of teachers that is centered around a “research course” (Lewis and Hurd, 2011). It originated in Japan and was initially made known by the research of Stigler and Hiebert on the Japanese pedagogical practices and professional development approaches (Stigler and Hiebert, 1999). In recent years, Lesson Study has attracted more and more attention in many countries such as USA, Singapore, and UK (Lewis, Perry and Hurd, 2006; Lawrence and Chong, 2010; Cajkler, Wood, Norton and Pedder, 2013). The previous studies indicated that Lesson Study can improve both teachers’ teaching and students’ learning (Lewis, Perry, Friedkin and Roth, 2012).

There are some researchers who have noticed the significance of context and discussed the challenges of conducting Lesson Study and support provided in their country (Fernandez, 2002; Lim, Lee, Saito and Haron, 2011). However, the existing literatures on Lesson Study are mainly based on Western contexts, while research in Chinese settings is scanty. In fact, Lesson Study in Chinese context has its own characteristics. Exploring the distinctive features of Lesson Study in Chinese context is important for understanding the variety of Lesson Study. Therefore, this study investigated the process of Lesson Study in Chinese context by using qualitative research methods, and put forward the implicit contradiction between the ideals and reality of Lesson Study, which can be a theory framework to understand the practice of Lesson Study in China.

2. Literature Review

In previous studies, researchers mainly focused on 4 sub-fields of Lesson Study, including theory issues, practice modes, research methods and specific applications. In order to grasp the overall status of researches on Lesson Study, this study adopted the CONCOR algorithm to generate the system of the whole field, as shown in Figure 1.

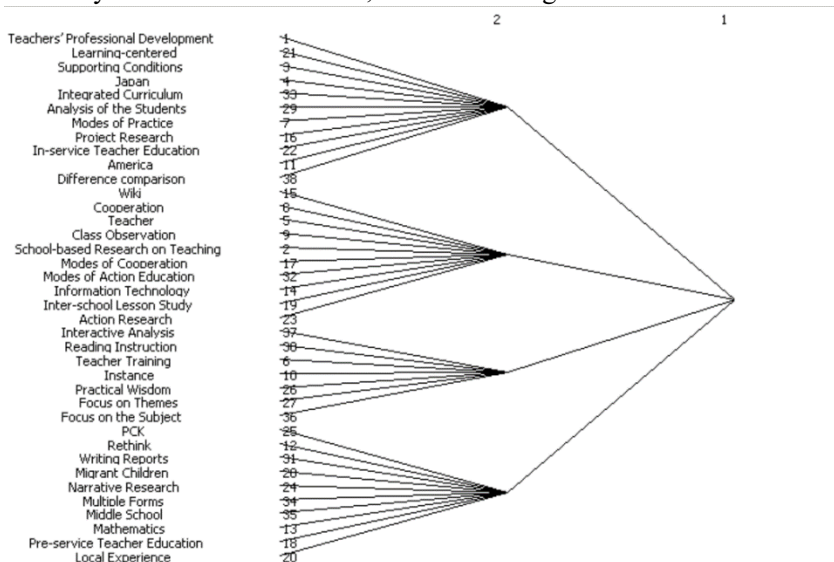


Figure 1. The whole research field of Lesson Study.

First of all, in the aspect of theory issues, some scholars summarized the features of Lesson Study such as shared long-time goal, collaboration, self-critical reflection, student-center, etc. (Lewis, 2002; Fernandez and Yoshida, 2004; An, 2013). Parks (2008), Puchner (2006), and Yuan (2018) also discussed the importance of Lesson Study. Secondly, in the aspect of practice modes, Watanabe (2002) and Chokshi (2004) introduced the model of Japanese Lesson Study. Many researchers explored the Learning Study, which is a kind form of Lesson Study in Hong Kong (Lu, 2005; Li, 2007; Pang and Ling, 2012). Thirdly, in the aspect of research methods, Lim (2011) investigated the support conditions of Lesson Study in Singapore by questionnaire. Vrikki (2017) used the method of video-based analysis to explore the differential effects of particular forms of interactions involved in the process of Lesson Study. Finally, in the aspect of specific applications, the researches concentrated on different disciplines (Parks, 2008; Yang, 2019), different types of school (Cerbin and Kopp, 2006; Dotger, 2011; Li, 2017), and different teacher groups (Sims and Walsh, 2009; Zhang, 2010).

As shown above, the Chinese scholars pay more attention to the aspects of theory issues, practice modes and specific applications. However, the aspect of research methods has been ignored. Compared with foreign studies, there are few empirical studies in China. Therefore, this study used qualitative research methods to gain insights into the process of Lesson Study in a Chinese primary school and the characteristics of Lesson Study in Chinese context.

3. Methodology

This study mainly adopted a qualitative approach, including observation and interview, to explore the process of Lesson Study in Chinese context. Specifically, non-participatory observation method was conducted to investigate the overall situation of Lesson Study and semi-structured interview method was carried out to probe into the underlying factors for the process of Lesson Study.

G primary school was selected as the sample. It is located in G county, which has the economic and social development at the middle level in China. G primary school has many typical characteristics of county-level primary schools, such as the size of school, the quality of teachers, and the number of students. 14 teachers and 6 leaders in G primary school were interviewed and the information is presented in Table 1. Twenty lessons in G primary school were observed and the information is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Information of the participants.

No.	Position	Gender	Subject	Code
1	Leader	Male	Math	G-XM01
2	Leader	Female	Chinese	G-XF02
3	Leader	Female	Chinese	G-XF03
4	Leader	Female	Math	G-ZF01
5	Leader	Male	Math	G-ZM02
6	Leader	Female	English	G-ZF03
7	Teacher	Female	English	T-FW01
8	Teacher	Female	English	T-FW02
9	Teacher	Female	Math	T-FS03

10	Teacher	Female	Chinese	T-FY04
11	Teacher	Female	Science	T-FZ05
12	Teacher	Female	Math	T-FS06
13	Teacher	Male	Math	T-MS07
14	Teacher	Male	Math	T-MS08
15	Teacher	Male	English	T-MW09
16	Teacher	Female	Chinese	T-FY10
17	Teacher	Female	Chinese	T-FY11
18	Teacher	Female	Chinese	T-FY12
19	Teacher	Female	Chinese	T-FY13
20	Teacher	Female	Science	T-FZ14

Table 2. Information of the lessons.

No.	Topic	Subject	Code
1	Factor, prime number, composite number	Math	KS01-TF01
2	Decomposed prime factor	Math	KS01-TF02
3	Numbers within 100 million	Math	KS01-TF03
4	Numbers over 100 million	Math	KS01-TF04
5	Landing performance on time	Chinese	KY01-TF01
6	Interview from son	Chinese	KY01-TF02
7	A paradise of birds	Chinese	KY01-TF03
8	My comrades-in-arms Qiu Shaoyun	Chinese	KY01-TF04
9	Grateful heart	Chinese	KY01-TF05
10	Frontier poems	Chinese	KY01-TF06
11	Walk in the Yellow Sand Hill at night	Chinese	KY01-TF07
12	Ode to wintersweet	Chinese	KY01-TF08
13	Foot of creeper	Chinese	KY02-TF01
14	Bi Luo Chun tea	Chinese	KY02-TF02
15	Diving	Chinese	KY02-TF03
16	Watching the tide	Chinese	KY02-TF04
17	What do they do?	English	KW01-TF01
18	What do they like to do?	English	KW01-TF02
19	In the city	English	KW01-TF03
20	I'm lost	English	KW01-TF04

Each interview lasted for 30 minutes. During the interviews, the teachers were asked to share their experiences of Lesson Study and the changes in their teaching, while the leaders were requested to describe the practices of managing Lesson Study. The characteristics and changes of teaching in the process of Lesson Study were the areas of focus during the observation. All the interviews and observations were recorded by audio or video and transcribed verbatim. To ensure the credibility and accuracy of data, the task was verified by the two authors.

The data were analyzed by an inductive approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The authors

read the transcripts of interviews and observations repeatedly and coded in 3 levels recursively. To ensure the validity, the coding process was conducted by the two authors separately, and the consistency of the analysis results was checked by the two authors together.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The General Situation of Lesson Study in G Primary School

4.1.1 The Concept of Lesson Study in G Primary School

As mentioned at the beginning, Lesson Study plays an important role in improving teachers' teaching and students' learning. The concept of Lesson Study was supported by teachers and leaders in G primary school. For example, school leaders encouraged teachers to participate in Lesson Study:

"It is important to polish teachers' teaching...Young teachers can improve their teaching by taking part in Lesson Study." (G-XF02)

Almost all the teachers agree with the concept of Lesson Study and believe that Lesson Study can greatly improve their capacity of teaching:

"Lesson Study is a kind of circular inquiry activity. The concept regarding Lesson Study as a powerful continuous improvement agent is fascinating." (T-FY04)

"Lesson Study provides a platform for teachers to communicate with each other." (T-MS08)

"Lesson Study is beneficial to young teachers' professional development, especially in teaching methodology." (T-FW01)

Based on the acceptance of the concept of Lesson Study, teachers and leaders in G primary school were enthusiastic about Lesson Study in practice.

4.1.2 The Practice of Lesson Study in G Primary School

There is a complete system of Lesson Study in G primary school which stipulates the time and form of Lesson Study. This activity is held every two weeks and is organized by subjects. According to the teachers, Lesson Study had been embedded in their school life:

"Every two weeks, we gather together to attend a class given by one of the teachers in our subject, and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the lesson." (T-FS03)

The preceding quote revealed that Lesson Study has become a routine for the teachers in G primary school and this can be confirmed by the authors' observation:

The director of teaching came to the meeting room in advance to make preparations for the last part of Lesson Study. Afterwards, all the teachers participated in the activity in the meeting room. They all brought notebooks and pens. Some teachers brought cups. After the class bell rang, the director of teaching arranged the tasks of this activity and asked teachers to express their opinions by turn.

The teacher KY01-TF01 introduced the topic of her teaching, and evaluated the teaching effect from two aspects—goals and process, and finally addressed the shortage of time allocation. Then, the teacher KY01-TF02, who taught the same topic as the teacher KY01-TF01, also reviewed her teaching from goals and process, and finally addressed the lack of organizing group cooperative learning. After that, the director of teaching requested other teachers to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the two teachers' teaching. The teacher KY-TF08 thought the introduction of the teacher KY-TF02's lesson was interesting. The

teacher KY01-TF05 spoke highly of the teacher KY01TF01's method which required students to collect information before teaching. In the teacher KY01-TD03's view, the method which divided new words into groups for teaching is worth learning... At the end of this activity, the director of teaching made a summary and emphasized the importance of preview activities.

(KY01-P)

As indicated above, Lesson Study is given a lot of attention in G primary school and has formed a fixed mode. Teachers are accustomed to participating in Lesson Study and communicating with other teachers.

In addition, leaders in G primary school would supervise the implementation of Lesson Study:

"Sometimes the vice-principal inspects the effects of Lesson Study. Excellent teachers will be praised in our work group." (T-FY12)

Furthermore, the achievement of Lesson Study in G primary school was acknowledged by the teachers:

"The practice of Lesson Study in our school is the best in this country. Lots of teachers from other schools often comes to learn our experiences." (T-FW02)

In a word, whether in concept or practice, Lesson Study has been well developed in G primary school.

4.2 The Characteristics of Teaching in G Primary School

However, the teaching has not qualitatively changed. The student-centered characteristics of Lesson Study were not reflected in the teaching in G primary school. The goals, contents, and evaluations of teaching still present some traditional knowledge-centered characteristics.

The goals of teaching that teachers set were all around the knowledge in textbook:

1. Write three new words.
2. Read the text correctly, fluently and affectionately.
3. Understand the features of plum blossom and comprehend the traits of the poet.

(KY01-TF08)

Under the guidance of knowledge-centered goals, the contents of teaching were usually focused on the textbook knowledge. As an actual teaching piece showed:

T: What is the meaning of "Jing Feng" in the text?

S: "Jing Feng" means that the grass was suddenly moved by the wind.

T: What is the meaning of "Jing Feng" in the text?

S: The grass was suddenly moved by the wind (all the students answered together)

T: What is the meaning of "Lin An" in the text?

S: "Lin An" means that the light is dim in the forest.

T: Yes. "Lin An" means that the light is dim in the forest. General Li mistook the stone for a tiger because the light was very—

S: Dim (all the students answered together). (KY01-TF06)

* Use T and S to denote teacher and student.

In this piece of teaching, almost all the questions asked by this teacher were based on the textbook knowledge. The interests and experiences of students were ignored. The key ideals of Lesson Study include focusing on students, having a student-focused approach and deepening the teachers' understanding of student. But the practice in G primary school is in

contradiction with the ideals of Lesson Study. Except the goals and contents of teaching being knowledge-centered, the teaching consists of knowledge-centered characteristics in evaluations:

T: Who wants to express some opinions?

S: From the word “solemn”, I found that the son was serious about the homework.

T: Oh! You have found that the son was serious about the homework. Very good!

S: From the word “froze”, I found that the son was amazed about the wish of his father.

T: Oh! You have found that the son was amazed about the wish of his father. Very good!

(KY01-TF02)

** Use T and S to denote teacher and student.*

The preceding quotes indicated that the teacher just repeated the answers of students, sometimes this means an emphasis on knowledge-acquisition, rather than evaluating according to the answers of students. In reality, the knowledge-centered evaluations were quite prevalent in G primary school.

To sum up, although the teachers and leaders of G primary school have recognized the concept of Lesson Study and embedded it in the regular practice of management and teaching, the teachers' teaching still featured some traditional knowledge-centered characteristics which were contrary to student-centered approach of Lesson Study. In other words, there is an implicit contradiction between the ideals and reality of Lesson Study in China. Because of the implicit contradiction, Lesson Study has been transformed into a tool of exam-oriented education. Moreover, the teachers and leaders did not realize the existence of the implicit contradiction. They often regard the reform actions as the results of reform, which further deepens the contradiction between ideals and reality of Lesson Study.

4.3 The Chinese Institutional and Cultural Context

The emergence of the implicit mechanism could be explained by two aspects, institution and culture, which are related to the unique Chinese context.

Lesson Study originated in Japan and it was initiated voluntarily by Japanese primary and secondary school teachers in the 1960s. It was only ten years later that the Japanese government began to realize the significance of Lesson Study and provided financial and policy support (Fernandez and Yoshida, 2004). Compared with the bottom-up institutional design in Japan, the implementation of Lesson Study in China is a top-down process in which Chinese government played an important role. It is a policy requirement for most teachers to participate in Lesson Study. Owing to the top-down institutional design, the initiative and enthusiasm of teachers are not fully manifested. Consequently, when asked about the feelings towards Lesson Study, a teacher said:

“It’s not voluntary in many cases... There is no curiosity after a long time.” (T-FY04)

On the other hand, the Chinese traditional “face” culture affects the implementation of Lesson Study. In order to keep a harmonious relationship and save “face” for others, teachers tend to focus on the others' merits, rather than the drawbacks. As the authors observed:

The teacher KY01-TF05 believed that the teacher KY01-TF03 had a deep understanding of the textbook and could connect with the students' real life. The teacher KY01-TF07 thought that the teacher KY01-TF04 grasped the main line of the text and the process of teaching was fluent. Both teacher KY01-TF01 and teacher KY01-TF08 believed that the teacher KY01-TF04

facilitated students to understand the text by asking students to tell their own experiences.

(KY01-P)

Due to the “face” problem, almost all the teachers rarely expressed their true views.

“I don't want to offend my colleagues.” (T-FW01)

“You have to take care of other people's feelings, right?” (T-FW02)

Therefore, the Chinese traditional “face” culture resulted in the superficiality of the teachers' communication. It is difficult for teachers to hold deep dialogues and improve the quality of teaching.

5. Conclusion

Lesson Study has been recognized as an important tool for instructional improvement around the world. With the development of the 8th basic education curriculum reform and “School-Based Teaching System Construction” project, Lesson Study has become a routine activity in Chinese primary school. This study adopted qualitative research methods, such as observation and interview, to investigate the process of Lesson Study in G primary School. It is found that there is an implicit contradiction between ideals and reality of Lesson Study, which transformed Lesson Study into a tool of exam-oriented education. The Chinese unique institutional and cultural context—the top-down institutional design and the “face” cultural tradition may be responsible for generating the implicit contradiction between ideals and reality of Lesson Study in China.

In order to improve the quality of Lesson Study, the institutional and cultural barriers should be addressed. Firstly, the policy makers need to respect the views of teachers and grant more autonomy to schools. For example, the policy makers could let some teachers participate in the process of policy making. The government could also provide financial and technical supports for schools during the process of Lesson Study. Secondly, the school leaders need to devote effort to building a cooperative culture for teachers. For example, the school leaders could reward the teachers who raise reasonable different opinions to enhance authentic dialogues between teachers. It is also necessary to hold some activities to enhance the affection between teachers. In a word, only with the concerted efforts of the government, schools and teachers, can the quality of Lesson Study be effectively improved.

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