

Adopting and adapting Lesson Study in different cultural and educational settings

Lesson study is a professional development method that originates from Japan. It involves small teams of teachers who plan lessons collaboratively, observe each other's enactments, and discuss their observations of teaching and learning. Three young researchers introduced their recent work on the challenges of translating Lesson study into different cultural contexts and educational structures.

Sarah Seleznyov: Challenges in translating Lesson Study: an analysis of threats to successful implementation

Sarah Seleznyov reviewed the literature on challenges to the implementation of Lesson Study in countries other than Japan. Making use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, she elaborated on differences in cultural dimension profiles across countries. In Japan, three cultural dimensions reach extreme scores, namely "masculinity", "uncertainty avoidance" and "long-term orientation". High scores on these dimensions are reflected in the design, shape and implementation of traditional Lesson Study in Japan.

Sarah Seleznyov argued that a differing pattern of dimensions in cultures outside Japan could lead to difficulties in implementing the Japanese model of Lesson Study, as some features of the original approach might not be in line with the culture of implementation.

In the Netherlands for instance, "masculinity" and "uncertainty avoidance" score at the opposite end of the scale compared to Japan, hinting towards possible challenges faced by Dutch teachers in the implementation process of the Japanese model.

Merging implementation science and the role of culture, the speaker came up with hypotheses on the outcomes of implementation in countries depending on the proximity of their cultural dimension profile to the Japanese profile. She finalised her presentation by suggesting that a country's profile, the importance of fidelity to the original Japanese Lesson Study and a consideration of necessary adaptations all need to be taken into account when implementing Lesson Study in different countries.

Dr. Tijmen Schipper: A first attempt to explore the 'big ideas' and critical features of Lesson Study from an international perspective

Dr. Tijmen Schipper broached the subject of the rapid growth of Lesson Study throughout various countries, leading to a questionable resemblance to the original Lesson Study model practiced in Japan. There are many factors that make the research of Lesson Study challenging, such as different formats and strategies of teaching systems throughout the world. The key question the speaker assessed was whether a common framework exists from which Lesson study can be culturally and contextually adapted without losing its essential characteristics.

As a first step, they defined its "big ideas", which offer a direction to educators, and "features", which are more flexible components of Lesson Study and vary in different contexts.

In an explorative study design, the researchers assessed the ratings of a culturally diverse group of individuals in the education field against the relevance of “big ideas” and “features” to Lesson Study. They found that all “big ideas” were universally shared among participants, which was in contrast to a larger variety of ratings on “features”, which were more specific to the cultural background of participants. Based on this data, Dr. Tijmen Schipper and colleagues constructed a framework of Lesson Study around the “big ideas” which can also be applied to the online context.

Fenna Wolthuis: Lesson Study as an organisational routine

Lesson Study has been adapted to teachers in the Dutch context. Fenna Wolthuis focused on the aspects which Dutch teachers consider to be the purpose of Lesson Study and how they implement and evaluate it. She based her research on prior literature, suggesting difficulties in performing all phases of the research cycle when implementing Lesson Study in countries outside Japan.

Using the data from a cross-school professional learning network, she found teachers to perceive the purpose of Lesson Study in four different ways. Teachers who considered lesson development, insight into student responses and collaboration to create a shared vision to be the purpose of Lesson Study generally evaluated the approach negatively, indicating it to be too time-consuming and not appropriate to fulfilling their purpose. This was also reflected in low implementation rates.

On the other hand, teachers who defined the purpose as gaining insight into student learning, which resembles the original purpose of the Japanese model closely, gave positive evaluations and perceived the time investment as appropriate. The positive evaluation aligned with high implementation rates of the complete Lesson Study cycle.

Fenna Wolthuis agreed with the previous speakers on a high variation between cultures in the performance of Lesson Study, but additionally emphasised the role of intracultural differences. She pointed out the importance of the perceived purpose of Lesson Study to ensure long-term sustainability.

Prof. Wouter van Joolingen closed the symposium by initiating an enlightening discussion that picked up the discussion points of previous speakers. He suggested that a change in perspective should be considered by using the worldwide diversity of Lesson Study as a source of inspiration and that we should refrain from sticking to the Japanese model as a strict reference. Nevertheless, he emphasised that the “big ideas” are universally essential in implementation. Lesson Study can only be sustained in educational practice in the longer term if it is adapted to the cultural framework and the specific attributes of a particular school environment.