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Challenging common sense: Cases of school reform for learning community under an international cooperation project in Bac Giang Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the challenges in the process of building a learning community in Vietnamese primary schools. Five lessons emerge from the cases. First, changing teachers' beliefs is time-consuming. Second, because of the reluctance of teachers to change, large-scale delivery of the educational project should be critically revisited with regard to its effectiveness. Third, learning community requires the building of trust among actors, including external resource persons. Fourth, external resource persons should continue learning sincerely to gain teachers' trust. Fifth, the concept of sustainability should be revisited as something that is never-ending and that cannot reach perfection.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Literature review

The learning community has been a well discussed and studied concept in developed countries. Barth (1990) describes a learning community as 'a place where all the participants—teachers, principals, parents, and students—engage in learning and teaching (p. 43). Sergiovanni (1999) elaborates the concept of the learning community by connecting it with valued social ends and caring as professional ideals of teachers (pp. 143–144). Then, Senge et al. (2000) systematise the concept of the learning community within the school as the learning classroom and learning school and that of external entities, surrounding schools (pp. 12–16). Further, Smylie (1994) states that the learning community should enable teachers to work interdependently to promote student learning. For this, it is significant for members to share values and hold a reflective dialogue to improve practice (Louis et al., 1996).

For the purpose of improving practices, teachers must allow their colleagues to observe their own lessons, and in turn, must observe others' lessons (Barth, 1990; Joyce and Showers, 2002; Kilbourn et al., 2005; Leithwood, 1992; Noffke, 1995; Stiggins and Duke, 1988). In Japan, there is a tradition of

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activity for professional development based on the observation of and reflection on lessons, known as lesson study. Lesson study is based on the observation of and reflection on actual lessons taught by teachers, including collegial teachers or external resource persons—such as university faculty members—and on facts observed in the concrete practice of the teaching of the lessons. Nowadays, lesson study is attracting considerable attention from other countries such as the US (Fernandez and Yoshida, 2004; Lewis et al., 2004; Stigler and Hiebert, 1999), UK (Ruthven, 2005), and Australia (White and Southwell, 2003). Lesson study tends to be defined as encompassing 'a large family of instructional improvement strategies, a part of which involves the observation of live classroom lessons by a group of teachers who collect data on teaching and learning and collaboratively analyse it' (Lewis et al., 2006, p. 3).

While the above-mentioned research into lesson study tends to focus on subject education, mainly mathematics, there is an emerging approach with regard to lesson study, called lesson study for the learning community (Murase, 2007; Ose and Sato, 2000; Sato, 1996b, 2007; Sato and Sato, 2003). The goal of this approach is to create a community of discourse on lesson practices within schools to facilitate teachers' mutual learning. Sato and colleagues (Murase, 2007; Ose and Sato, 2000; Sato, 1996b, 2007; Sato and Sato, 2003) lay emphasis on lesson study as the central activity of a school, wherein all the teachers should be involved in observation and reflection, namely, practice lesson study about 100 times annually. The aim of this requirement is to enable various interpretations and analyses about lessons based on the evidences and facts of student learning. Thus, lesson study for the learning community inevitably extends to the level of school reform (Murase, 2007).

However, these studies are based on cases in developed countries and do not necessarily consider conditions in developing ones. Turning to studies on learning community in developing countries, Khemmani (2006) listed strategies to reform a school into a learning community in Thai contexts. In spite of the in-depth and extensive discussion, Khemmani (2006) limits the study to the theoretical level, without examining concrete cases. Thornton (2006) analyses the problems faced by teachers in collaborating with each other within a school in Bangladesh, but the analysis does not cover the teaching and learning processes. Saito et al. (2006b) focus on the

process of school changes based on lesson study in Indonesia; however, they cover only the early stage.

With regard to teacher professional development, there exist a number of case studies on topics such as the introduction of action research in Zimbabwe (Weiler, 2001), practicing reflection in Namibia (O'Sullivan, 2002), changing the teaching approach to constructivist ones in South Africa (Harvey, 1999), and the gap between off-school training and the daily situation in Sri Lanka (Johnson, 2006) and Indonesia (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2003; henceforth, JICA). However, these analyses have been undertaken from the perspectives of the 'improvement of teaching', rather than reforming schools. Moreover, although Saito et al. (2006a, 2007) discuss cases of lesson study in Indonesia, their inquiry does not cover the school reform process itself.

Turning to the situation in Vietnam, the focus of this study, despite an increase in the number of studies on important educational issues (Duggan, 2001; Griffin et al., 2006; Griffin and Thanh, 2006; Peyser et al., 2006), the studies do not examine cases of real classrooms or the school reform process. Then, despite Saito et al. (2008) analysing real classroom situation, their analysis tends to be limited to the level of teaching and learning processes, rather than sufficiently addressing school reform process. Thus, in the case of Vietnam, there is an urgent need to study the process of trials to reform schools.

1.2. Purpose of this paper

Based on the necessity mentioned in Section 1.1, this paper will probe the process of trials undertaken on a pilot basis to reform some schools under an international cooperation project by the Vietnamese government and JICA. According to the concept of the project, school reform would be done by revitalising the existing system of observation of and reflection on lessons by collegial teachers, called professional teacher meetings. For this, the framework of the lesson study for the learning community approach was adopted. However, this paper does not aim to discuss successful model cases. In contrast, when conducting the project, the teachers and the authors had to confront various challenges that went against their existing beliefs and common sense. The purpose of this paper is to openly discuss these challenges and their implications.

Although the discussions below are rather straightforward, there is no intent to attack the teachers concerned. On the contrary, by clarifying all the challenges and problems, the authors strongly hope that they can hold further, deeper, and more sincere dialogues with the teachers, administrators, and readers. Moreover, it should be considered that the teachers in the schools did not necessarily become candidates for school reform spontaneously; rather, the local educational authorities and project consultants chose these schools as pilot schools, despite having had consultation with the schools. In addition, it should also be underlined that the teachers had to interact with the authors, who had different perspectives and experiences as well as a different understanding regarding education.

Their experiences, including those of the authors, were actually a series of cultural exchanges of educational practices and thoughts; they were occasionally confrontational, asymmetrical, and even collaborative. It would be worthwhile to explore these series of experiences, because of their potential to provide different perspectives—radical questions in some cases—on educational issues in developing countries.

1.3. General contexts: curriculum reform in Vietnam

As admitted by the Vietnamese government, there are numerous challenges in the teaching and learning processes in Vietnam. The Ministry of Education and Training (2001) identifies that Vietnamese education tends to impose mechanical abilities on students and pays little attention to real-life practical abilities. In order to overcome these problems, the Vietnamese government introduced a new curriculum for primary education in 2002, based on the child-centred educational framework (JICA, 2004). Child-centred education is defined as more practice-oriented education with a strong emphasis on children's creativity and their initiatives, according to Article 24 of the Education Law, established in 1998.

Turning to the situation in schools, to the extent of the authors' knowledge, the schools are under the strong control and influence of the authority. The Department of Education and Training of the province and the Bureau of Education and Training of the district regularly inspect schools. They check various types of documents, including lesson plans, teachers' notebooks for professional teacher meet-

ings, and so forth. Inspectors also observe lessons and give instructions to teachers. Their views tend to be very conventional, and the teachers fear being held for not conducting lessons according to the policies listed by the authorities.

Moreover, parental interest in and concern about the results of terminal examinations are tremendous. Thus, teachers in schools also feel great concern and face pressure with regard to examinations, which cover the entire scope of the textbooks. This pressure for excelling in the terminal examinations leads to the teachers' tendency to cover the whole curriculum through one-sided lectures and impose upon students the task of memorising the contents as a mandate of schooling education.

These factors result in the teachers having authoritarian and evaluative attitudes (Saito et al., 2008). Being a teacher tends to be recognised as having the authority and responsibility to 'teach right things' to children; further, a teacher is perceived as the only person who knows the truth and the right answers in a classroom and as one who guides innocent students. This is very similar to the point made by Barth (1990, p. 90) that 'schools are seen as places where children learn and adults teach.' In this framework of understanding the position and role of teachers, what is to be taught in classroom lessons constitutes knowledge, which comes mostly from the content of textbooks. Therefore, teachers tend to maintain their authority over children and have evaluative viewpoints towards them.

However, teachers are not provided with sufficient opportunities to develop their own professional capabilities. Although they can have centre-based training on the new curriculum and child-centred education, their daily teaching tends to remain unchanged (JICA, 2007). Although they follow the system of professional teacher meetings, it tends to serve as a platform for mutual judgement and criticism, not as an opportunity for mutual learning (Saito et al., 2008). Therefore, it has been very difficult for teachers in Vietnam to have opportunities for their continuous professional development based on collegiality.

1.4. The project

This study centres on one project conducted with the support of JICA from 2004 to 2007. The focus of this project was on in-service training, targeting teachers from five out of ten districts in Bac Giang

Province (Saito et al., 2008). In June 2006, a component of school-based in-service training was added, following the style of lesson study for the learning community, by reforming the professional teacher meeting system.

Vietnamese administrators and Japanese consultants jointly selected pilot schools from each district. Since the schools were closed for vacations from June to July 2006, they commenced the activities with weekly video reflection. Following this, in September 2006, the observations of and reflections on real lessons began. For this, the teachers were requested to express their opinions and views upon watching the videos or lessons; in particular, they were asked to describe (1) the situations in which the students' concentration levels with regard to learning increased, (2) those in which the levels decreased, and (3) the lessons learnt from the observed lessons (Saito et al., 2008). In terms of duration, the lessons typically continued for 50–60 min, and the subsequent reflection sessions lasted for at least 90 min.

Moreover, the authors emphasised the importance of recognising child-centred education and professional teacher meetings as matters of school reform, based on the idea of lesson study for the learning community. This is because of the necessity for teachers to re-identify their own roles in classrooms in order to change their teaching methodologies (Joyce and Showers, 2002, p. 83) at the level of each of their beliefs, insights, or cognition (Sato, 1996a). Teachers' reflection and motivation to change themselves tend to be strongly promoted by the entire school striving to do (Ito and Takeda, 1994; Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003; Sato, 2006; Sato and Sato, 2003).

2. Methods

The authors were involved in the implementation of the project as team members; moreover, they collected information pertaining to the progress of the professional development activities by directly observing the lessons and by exchanging information with each other as well as other colleagues during the project. This study will examine the situation of five schools that were set as pilot schools to promote the observation of and reflection on lessons. The research was conducted from June 2006 to August 2007, and the data were collected through participation in a series of professional teacher meetings in each school. Here, professional teacher meeting equals lesson study geared to building the learning community. The authors attended almost 200 professional teacher meetings in total and took notes of the events that occurred during the meetings, also noting their opinions on these events. The analysis presented is based on the facts observed by the authors. The transcripts of the discussion in the professional teacher meetings were translated from Vietnamese to English and typed by professional translators.

This paper employs the case study method to analyse the data (Cohen et al., 2000; Cresswell, 1998). In other words, it provides an in-depth description and interpretation of the cases and the generalised lessons that were learnt. To elaborate, this paper employs interface analysis, which was developed by Oguni (2003), as its analytical framework. This method is based on the concept of interface (Long, 2001), referring to some type of encounter between individuals with different interests, resources, or power. Concretely, five items will be analysed: (1) gap, (2) opportunity, (3) learning process, (4) shared ideas, and (5) sustainability. Gap refers to the difference in opinion among the actors in this study, including teachers, authors, and administrators. Opportunity refers to an event or incident that clarifies the gaps between actors. The learning process originally refers to the process in which actors establish rules through mutual interaction (Oguni, 2003, pp. 73–74). However, this paper does not only focus on rules; it also analyses how the actors attempted to overcome the gaps. Shared ideas imply those values or ideas that the actors shared through the learning process. By using this analytical method, the types of problems confronted by the actors and how the actors overcame or attempted to overcome them through interaction with other actors will become clear.

3. Case

In this section, the authors will provide a description of the five pilot schools, namely, schools A, B, C, D, and E. The situation in each school will be explained as below.

3.1. School A

School A is located in a district close to the provincial capital, the district being relatively developed in economic and educational terms. This school as well as the other pilot schools is recognised as a leading and central school in the district.

However, the relationship among the teachers in this school did not appear to be supportive to each other; rather, it seemed to be in a deep state of Balkanisation (Hargreaves, 1994). For instance, in the meetings, the teachers tended to chat with each other, ignoring other colleagues' comments. Moreover, when the authors requested the distracted teachers to give their comments, they would remain silent and unapproachable, saying, 'I have the same ideas as the others' or 'I do not know.'

There was strong dissatisfaction and doubt among the teachers with regard to the professional teacher meetings. Their frustration led to an outburst of complaint after a professional teacher meeting in September 2006. The teachers insisted on the meaninglessness of the current approach and of the necessity for them to observe the demonstration lesson of 'authentic child-centred education' by the Japanese consultant team.

Therefore, the consultants decided to request a junior expert from the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers to conduct a demonstration lesson. This junior expert has been a teacher in Japanese primary schools for 12 years and was dispatched to Bac Giang Province as a junior expert in 2005 and conducted a lesson, showing full respect and care for the children. This was in stark contrast to the existing approach and methods of the teachers, which involved banging the desks with rulers, addressing the children in harsh language, etc. The teachers noticed a considerable difference between the lesson conducted by the junior expert and those that they conducted themselves. Since then, there was a noticeable difference in the teachers' attitudes. They were calmer and seemed to take a greater interest in the professional teacher meetings.

However, despite this development of motivation, there still remained problems in the discourses of the professional teacher meetings. Although utterances regarding children's learning were observed, the teachers had a tendency to heavily criticise the observed teachers and the children, without analysing the reasons behind the observed problems. The authors had a serious concern that they might foster more negative views on the children rather than develop supportive and caring attitudes towards them. For instance, in one professional teacher meeting at the end of December 2006, a leading teacher made the following comments:

In the groups, some students played dominant roles, and kept talking, rather than listening. One child could not name the rectangles correctly, so at that time, the teacher should have corrected the child immediately. There were also some mistakes in the teacher's explanation…

Thus, the situation in school A became more stagnant. In January 2007, the major topics of professional teacher meetings returned to being teaching methods, without the basis of children's learning evidences. The second author reported the following to the first author as well as other consultants regarding a discourse in a professional teacher meeting on a Vietnamese language lesson in mid-May 2007:

They had heated arguments and debates regarding whether children could understand the difference between "using wings" and "by wings"… Yet, no one raised their opinions from the children's perspectives or based on the evidences of the children's learning. I interrupted them twice, but they turned down my comments, saying, "The difference between these two expressions is important to us," and continued arguing about teaching techniques with each other.

Having noticed few changes, in June 2007, the first author had a long discussion with the principal and vice-principals of the school as well as with two members of the district education office. In the meeting, the first author elaborated to the principal some concerns regarding school A: harsh criticism by leading teachers, too much focus on teaching techniques, and the lack of collegiality. In response to this, the principal insisted that these problems would cease to exist after February, despite the first author having pointed them out. Then, the author suddenly noticed that besides the principal and author, everyone was distracted. Thus, the author pointed out that this would be the typical situation in school A and stated, 'Even though I am talking to the principal, everyone should be attentive, because the topics being discussed are very important. Yet, the rest of you did not listen but perceived our discussion as something unrelated to yourselves. In other words, there is no real collegiality in your school.'

This was a very harsh but frank comment made by the first author for the first time to school A. Nonetheless, the principal grasped the seriousness of the comments and, for the first time, acknowledged them, saying, 'I completely understand what

you are saying. You are probably right.' This was the moment for both the managers and authors to share their view on the reality in this school. Although this occurred near the termination of the project, after reaching a consensus, the principal showed a strong motivation to conduct more professional teacher meetings.

3.2. School B

School B is located in a district in which the major occupation is farming. This district has the third largest land area in the province and a large population. Most of its area is mountainous and it has poor accessibility to schools. Here, the teachers originally laid emphasis on mutual help among children during lessons. Thus, at the beginning stage of conducting the professional teacher meetings, the authors observed that group activities were frequently organised for students to consult with each other.

However, there was a reluctance to follow the new approach of the professional teacher meetings. The teachers were also interested in discussing ways to organise lesson plans, rather than learning from the realities of children's learning. Therefore, initially, in this school, too, there was a lack of interest in the new approach of professional teacher meetings. In the initial series of professional teacher meetings, it was clear that few teachers were willing to comment on the observed lessons. Rather, they appeared to be confused and unsatisfied with why they needed to conduct these meetings in such a manner. Therefore, the teachers became frequently inattentive to their colleagues' utterances and demonstrated various types of distracted behaviours. Additionally, here, too, the comments regarding the children were negative.

One incident that occurred in a professional teacher meeting in November 2006; however, changed the teachers' minds. At the beginning of the lesson, some teachers shooed away the children that had gathered at the door of the classroom for the demonstration lesson. This led the first author to conclude that the principle of child-centred education had never penetrated into this school, despite the teachers' intent to present that they were conducting child-centred education in the demonstration lessons. Further, to make matters worse, few teachers attempted to listen to the demonstrator during the reflection, which made the authors decide to intervene by expressing their frank opinions.

The first author noted a series of points: lack of attention to the demonstrator despite there being tremendous potential to learn from the demonstrator's comments, a serious lack of collegiality among the teachers, and the inevitable impossibility for those who were unable to care about their colleagues to care about the children. The author then mentioned the necessity of respecting the dignity of children and discarding the simple belief of child-centred education as teaching techniques. Further, the author proceeded to comment on the potential existence of negative views of teachers towards children, as observed in the reflection, and even suggested discontinuing such professional teacher meetings because of the risk of teachers strengthening their evaluative, authoritarian, and negative views towards children.

The first author also pointed out the necessity for the teachers to change themselves first, in order to conduct real child-centred education. The author claimed the necessity for teachers to change themselves in a collective manner; thus, child-centred education is a matter of policy, management, and culture of a school and would inevitably require the involvement of the entire school.

The vice-principal for academic affairs, who played a major role in developing professional teacher meetings in school B, stated the following in June 2007:

> I could not accept the comments and lost my motivation to conduct professional teacher meetings. This is because until then, I believed that everything was fine in our school. Yet, in one professional teacher meeting, I noticed our problem. At that time, almost none of the teachers listened to the demonstrator. Then, they made only really critical and negative comments. Then, I asked myself, "Is the relationship among us fine, at such a level?"
>
> Then, we reviewed the failure in our school, and the principal and both vice-principals got together to develop a plan for reform: grade leaders would play pivotal roles in revitalising professional teacher meetings, managers themselves would also participate in planning lessons, the managers would also seek real materials from living environments, and they would learn together again by reading the documents provided by the project.

Since then, the first author observed a dramatic change in the school. As described by the vice-

principal, the teachers attempted to emphasise dialogue among children and introduce real materials in lessons. They began to seek, by themselves, what child-centred education would entail for them. The attention paid to colleagues during reflection increased. Even the teachers who were silent and refused to comment became willing to participate in discussions. The dull atmosphere in the discussion gradually became a more enjoyable one.

3.3. School C

This school is located in the capital of the province and is considered as one of the elite schools in the city, with a strong reputation and popularity for competitiveness in examination results. There were many senior teachers in the school and most of them seemed to take pride in themselves. Additionally, most of them were highly reluctant to participate in the professional teacher meetings and strongly doubted their intent. Thus, the atmosphere of the meetings tended to be very oppressive and dull. Most of the teachers were indifferent to the remarks made by other colleagues. This situation remained unchanged till the end of November 2006.

In this school, there was another major problem, namely, that of dealing with children in classes that were not observed. From September to early December, the teachers kept back all the children and let them leave at around 4:30 pm, when their parents usually came to pick them up. However, because of the necessity for the teachers to ensure that the children were handed over to their parents, they could not concentrate on reflection and had to stop it at an unfinished level. However, despite the managers' appeals, the authorities did not grant permission for a flexible time arrangement in school C.

In the beginning of December, the first author proposed discontinuing the professional teacher meetings to the education offices both in the district and province, due to the difficulties in improving the situation. This astounded the authorities, and they immediately gave school C permission to let the children in the unobserved classes leave earlier, instead of following up with them on other days of the week. All the parties then agreed to continue with the professional teacher meetings.

After this agreement, mutual attempts by both the managers in school C and the authors began. By then, the principal faced pressure due to the project

and indifference among the teachers. Thus, all the mangers—the principal as well as both vice-principals—were requested to help each other solve the problems. At the first meeting after the agreement to continue with professional teacher meetings, both the managers and first author confirmed the setting of child-centred education as the centre of school policies and the managers' management of the school to achieve this goal. For this purpose, they also agreed to include middle-level mangers such as grade leaders.

One of the vice-principals had the following discussion with the second author in August 2007:

> The biggest difficulty was the reluctance and hesitance of the teachers to demonstrate lessons in front of other colleagues. This was because they were afraid of revealing their own incompetence. There was no relationship among the teachers such that they could consult with each other. For some months, we could not conduct the professional teacher meetings well. I attempted to meet with teachers to demonstrate lessons and asked them, "How are the preparations for the next demonstration lesson coming along?" I know that I cannot teach better than them, but I tried to communicate with them…It was around February this year that the atmosphere in the professional teacher meetings started to change. Gradually, the relationship among the teachers changed. Nowadays, the teachers have considerably more opportunities to talk to each other… The teachers really changed. They began to help each other.

However, at the end of the project, other concerns and questions among the teachers seemed to exist. A teacher first discussed these concerns and problems with the first author. Most of the concerns were related to the time-consuming nature of child-centred education and its management, the gap between child-centred education and the conventional nature of the terminal examinations, risk faced by school C of losing its ranking in terminal examinations, and the conservative nature of inspectors sent by the authorities. It is extremely difficult to find instant solutions to such concerns and there is no way other than making daily efforts to increase the efficiency of learning and to ensure every child's understanding of lessons through professional teacher meetings and informal mutual consultation within the school. Thus, the first author mentioned to this teacher that by publicly

voicing concern, this teacher could identify the tasks to be tackled in the coming years. After the meeting, the teacher promised to tackle the tasks based on child-centred education and through professional teacher meetings.

3.4. School D

This school is located in a district through which the main route from Hanoi passes. This district has good accessibility both within itself and with other districts and areas and is economically relatively developed. The managers in this school, particularly the vice-principals, were very eager and motivated to promote child-centred education. The teachers seemed to have a good relationship and solidarity among themselves from the beginning. They were attentive to other teachers during the professional teacher meetings even at the early stage. Therefore, the authors did not have to remind them to remain quiet during the meetings.

However, there seemed to be confusion and dissatisfaction among the teachers about the manner of conducting the professional teacher meetings under the project. The professional teacher meetings aimed to focus on the following issues: disseminating innovative teaching methods and techniques, critically reviewing the observed lessons, and accordingly, drawing unified conclusions on how to teach as resolutions of the meetings. All these were contrary to the aspects that the authors attempted to promote under the project. Therefore, despite apparently practicing the professional teacher meetings without serious problems, the teachers had doubts and dissatisfactions.

In November 2006, after a professional teacher meeting, the principal suddenly stood up and proposed to the first author that the demonstration lesson and the reflection on it should be conducted twice a month and not every week; however, the former insisted that the consultant provide lectures on child-centred education for the rest of the month. The author declined this proposal by referring to the possibility of reviewing the activities at the end of the project. Moreover, in a meeting with other district and provincial officials in February 2007, one administrator in this district education office expressed her dissatisfaction about the superficial nature of the discussion on the realities of child learning. Rather, another officials also agreed to this claim and they proposed holding further discussions on teaching materials and lesson plans.

They had experience in teaching at school D and had strong ties with the school even at that time. Thus, the authors identified this proposal as an indication of dissatisfaction within school D.

For addressing this dissatisfaction among the teachers, the authors had to prove that the present approach of the professional teacher meeting would be meaningful and adequately beneficial for the teachers. Therefore, they decided that the first author would describe all the observations regarding a lesson to be observed a few days after the meeting, by playing a video recording, for almost the whole meeting. The author provided an analysis based on the realities of the children, showing the video to determine children's realities from both verbal and non-verbal cues, to probe their causal factors. Following this, there was no dispute on the approach of the professional teacher meetings. Instead, the teachers began to vigorously pursue efforts to clarify the invisible aspects of lessons by themselves.

Furthermore, there was a breakthrough in terms of lesson practices, which took place in an art lesson. It was a second grade lesson on 'folding an envelope'. Until that lesson, even the teachers in school D tended to include many activities, around six or seven, in a lesson for 35–40 min. Thus, the other teachers were inclined to rush children in each activity, and consequently, the depth of learning was far from satisfactory. On the contrary, the demonstrator spent sufficient time on fewer activities, letting the children handle their papers at their own pace. Quietly but enthusiastically, the children folded, cut, and designed the papers at their own pace.

After this demonstration, many teachers, including the senior ones, attempted to include this style in their own teaching. In other words, they began to share some know-how through observations. Mutual learning of the positive points in others' practices became a new custom.

3.5. School E

School E is located in a district with both flat and mountainous areas and is less developed despite being relatively close to the provincial capital. Unlike some other pilot schools, the teachers had a certain calm and settled quality. While the first author mainly collaborated with schools A, B, C, and D, the second author was in charge of school E. In the series of video conferences, few teachers actively commented on the lessons. However, both

the authors were surprised at the detailed eye of some teachers on every single child's learning, even though their comments about the children in the video tended to be negative.

In general, the teachers' attention was focused on ways to target a higher level of learning or to make lessons more cognitively interesting; despite this, they tended to be unaware of ensuring the involvement of all the children.

Alternatively, there were some positive points. First, both the principal and the vice-principal were very enthusiastic about and seemed to enjoy the professional teacher meetings and realise their significance. Second, the teachers began to connect comments and observations in the previous reflection sessions with the observed ones. Thus, they could explore the observed issues in greater depth. Several teachers then began to design original lesson plans, with some of the seniors paying special, creative attention to the materials.

Nonetheless, in January 2007, an incident that changed the direction of the professional teacher meetings, or even the school itself, occurred—the principal of the school changed. This change brought about changes in management styles. While the former principal had worked in the school for longer years and established mutual trust with many teachers, the newly appointed principal was younger and less experienced. Although the latter made serious efforts to adjust to the school and the teachers and to develop the school, both the new principal and the teachers faced difficulty in terms of developing collegiality with each other.

Thereafter, there seemed to be a decrease in the teachers' interest in the professional teacher meetings: The number of participants gradually decreased and less teachers seemed inclined to give their comments on the observed lessons. This could be partly due to the lack of a detailed and sufficient explanation by the authors to the new principal about the importance of the new approach and its accumulated practices.

To be frank, the situation in school E was very fluid, even as of August 2007. Thus, the authors should keep a balanced view towards the school, in describing its situation. However, some unresolved issues still remained.

4. Analysis

Here, the issues observed in the cases of the schools will be discussed. Thus far, the targets of the analysis with regard to the first four items mentioned in Section 2 are schools A, B, C, and D. However, the target of the fifth item is school E. Sustainability refers to the possibility for teachers in the school to continue reforming the school by considering professional teacher meetings as their central activity. The case of school E will be analysed independently because of its totally different nature with regard to the issues being discussed.

4.1. Gap

First, it should be noted that a gap existed in the initial stage between the teachers in the four pilot schools and the authors in terms of their views on the professional teacher meetings. That is, strong dissatisfaction existed in the teachers' minds towards this approach introduced by the project. The authors attempted to promote the new style of professional teacher meetings to encourage the teachers to share their learning based on the reality of the children's learning; based on the ideas of lesson study for learning community (Inagaki and Sato, 1996; Ito, 1990; Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003; Sato and Sato, 2003) as well as their own experiences in other countries.

However, the teachers were confused with regard to the reasons for laying emphasis on the realities of children's learning. Rather, their interest and concern existed in relation to adjusting themselves with the 'new teaching approach'. From such a point of view, it would be reasonable to perceive the reality of children's learning as being less important than teaching techniques and skills. Additionally, the teachers' utterances in the reflections tended to be merely descriptive, without their own analysis of or inferences on the causal factors of the reality of the children's learning. Thus, the discussions in the reflection were inclined to be very monotonous and general; inevitably, many teachers got bored easily. From the viewpoints of the teachers, they may have felt forced because of the introduction of content that differed from their expectations or was against their own will. Thus, for the first few months, the aforementioned stagnation would be an inevitable consequence.

This stagnation shows a strong difference from the Japanese case, particularly the cases of schools practicing lesson study under the learning community approach (Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003; Sato, 2006; Sato and Sato, 2003). This is because these schools implemented the practices based on the

principals' own will. Certainly, as Chokshi and Fernandez (2004) point out, teachers tend to be reluctant to allow others to observe their practices and to reflect on the lessons with them. However, despite the necessity to put in efforts to make other collegial teachers understand the meaning or purposes of conducting lesson study (Ito and Takeda, 1994; Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003; Sato and Sato, 2003), external resource persons did not have to start from explaining to the principals the meaning of conducting lesson study. In other words, the authors should have clearly explained the significance of the new professional teacher meeting approach to all the teachers, including the principals, in the pilot schools.

4.2. Opportunity

Turning to the critical events or incidents to clarify the gaps mentioned in Section 4.1, two types of incidents can be identified. The first type is strong intervention by the authors, as observed in schools A, B, and C. The second is the challenges posed by the teachers or administrators, as observed in the case of school D. Despite the teachers in other schools informally showing their doubts, the teachers in school D publicly raised their doubts and concerns to the first author.

Then, it should be stressed that another similarity exists among all the cases. All these teachers showed a strong interest, mainly in methodological aspects, as seen in Indonesia (Saito et al., 2006; Saito et al., 2007). In the beginning, it was difficult for the teachers, even the school managers, to recognise child-centred education as the essence of school policies and the professional teacher meetings as the central method for school reform. This lack of recognition was also inevitable because of the dominant belief of child-centred education as teaching techniques. This recognition by the teachers increased their frustration regarding the professional teacher meetings and they expressed it either verbally or non-verbally.

In the case of school D, the teachers publicly challenged the authors and demanded that the first author prove the meaningfulness of this approach. This might be a fairer relationship, in comparison with the cases of the other schools. This is because the teachers could make their concerns public and put them on agenda for open arguments.

However, it should be noted that even in the case of school A, the teachers challenged the consultants,

which led to the observation of the lesson by the junior expert. Yet, it should also be reiterated that it did not reach the extent to which it could transform their views towards children and lessons and develop collegiality in-depth. Regarding this difference, there seem to be a couple of factors causing it. First, there was a difference in the authors' depth of the learning of realities in classrooms. It should be honestly stated that the depth of learning before and after the 100 lesson observations and reflections was different. Another factor is that the perspectives of the teachers in school D were closer to those of the authors. As stated earlier, there were teachers with high professional capacities in school D, respecting the dignity of children. This does not necessarily imply that this was not the case in school A; however, the interest of the teachers in school D would be closer to that of the authors.

4.3. Learning process

The feature of the learning process following the opportunity in each school can be described as follows: The managers and authors could finally arrive at a consensus on the necessity to build up real collegiality in school A; in school B, after the intervention by the authors, the managers started self-reflections and began involving others; with regard to school C, the managers worked hard to build a consensus and to involve other teachers; and in school D, the teachers shared a consensus after listening to the reflections on an observed lesson by the first author in one professional teacher meeting, and they also began mutually learning for achieving a higher quality of lessons.

In this process, again, there exists a difference between school D and the rest of the schools. In schools A, B, and C, the entry point of efforts for school reform was dialogue with the managers. The authors and managers held long discussions—in schools A and C in particular—and the managers, in retrospect, designed further measures to strengthen collegiality among the schools. On the other hand, in school D, most of the teachers directly shared their views and ideas with the authors.

Although the case of school D appears as though it would be more efficient, this should be attributed to incidental factors. First, the school is smaller than the others. While the number of teachers was around 40–50 in the other three schools, that in school D was around 30. The teachers' relationship might have been close from the beginning due to the

small size of the school. Furthermore, the concerns about professional teacher meetings were expressed as collective statements, rather than in a manner of informal complaints, in the absence of the authors.

In fact, the principal holds the key to managing school reform. This is because the principal is the most responsible person in a school in terms of decision-making (Barth, 1990; Ito and Takeda, 1994; Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003; Sato, 2006; Sato and Sato, 2003). Without the principal's determination to reform the school, no meaningful measures can be undertaken. In order to support principals' decisions and penetrate their visions of reform, the vice-principals and other middle-level leaders should collaborate with each other. In the cases of schools A, B, and C, the order of involvement followed this basic principle.

However, there was one similarity in almost all the schools. That is, development of collegiality among the teachers themselves. After experiencing the frank and straightforward discourses described in Section 3, the teachers deepened their mutual understanding. Not only the schools but also the authors began to understand the background, difficulties, and positive aspects of the schools. The invisible asymmetrical power relationship gradually became more equal and intimate, even though it did not completely disappear.

4.4. Shared ideas

In all the cases, irrespective of whether the attempts were made by the authors or the teachers, there was a sense of stagnation in practicing the professional teacher meetings. The problems raised by the authors were regarding collegiality, respect towards the dignity of children, and views on child-centred education and the professional teacher meetings. In turn, the teachers raised issues revolving around their doubts on the effectiveness and implications of conducting the professional teacher meetings under the project's approach. In this sub-section, the authors will discuss the types of ideas that were shared.

With regard to sharing, the development of collegiality was prioritised as a starting point. The authors suggested that the managers begin with building collegiality, because the existence of collegiality would drive their efforts for staff development to the most successful results (Leithwood, 1992); further, the primary condition for the success of school reform is the development of collegiality (Sato, 1996b).

Moreover, the authors attempted to create public spheres in all the pilot schools by developing collegiality among the teachers. As mentioned in Section 3.1, most schools were in a state of Balkanisation (Hargreaves, 1994). The new approach of professional teacher meetings was introduced as an opportunity to enable teachers to exchange their findings and learn by mutually allowing their own practices to be observed by other teachers, in order to integrate them as a community. This is because teachers can exchange diverse findings, ideas, insights, and ways of living through dialogical communication (Sato, 2007). In order to develop dialogical communication, teachers must begin by listening to each other, which will foster mutual acceptance and respect. As they accumulated the practices after the interventions or incidents in each school, the teachers gradually came to listen to each other.

Moreover, in the case of school D, the teachers' sharing went further to cover some visions of a higher quality of learning. Sato (2007) emphasises the necessity for both children and teachers to target excellence in learning by spending all the efforts, not in a competitive manner, under school reform for a learning community (p. 95). The gentleness, softness, and depth of learning evident in the art lesson brought vivid images of the lesson under child-centred education to the rest of the teachers. Thus, observing that lesson instilled humility in the other teachers to learn from the demonstrator and children.

4.5. Sustainability

In this sub-section, the case of school E will be discussed since it would provide valuable insights in terms of the sustainability of school reform for learning community. Both authors, including other Japanese consultants as well as their Vietnamese counterparts, had very positive impressions about the principal of school E in terms of the principal's holding of child-centred education as the central school policy and her strong drive to reform the school.

As explained above, however, this principal was promoted and therefore transferred in the midst of the activities. This transfer affected the further progress of the attempts at school reform. The principal did not achieve the full results of reform but was on the path towards achieving it.

Thus, the transfer of the principal was too early, considering the progress of the reform. According

to Japanese experiences in reforming schools, it takes a few years, preferably 10, for results to appear (Ose and Sato, 2000, 2003). Then, Senge et al. (2000) stress the difficulty of sustaining the efforts of school reform, particularly after key principals, superintendents, or a few key teachers leave the schools (p. 33). This would suggest a major difficulty in continuing school reform for generations of principals, even after obtaining some results in the tenure of one particular principal.

It would be desirable, therefore, for the authorities to know and pay thoughtful attention to the contexts of each school, although it is very difficult to control personnel affairs. In many developing countries, personnel affairs are beyond the control of teachers or schools, and only the authorities can handle them. Thus, the authorities should ensure that the tenure of the same principal is continued for a certain amount of time.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the problems and challenges in the process of trials to build a learning community in the primary schools of Bac Giang Province, Vietnam. The following five lessons emerged. First, it should be understood that changing teachers' beliefs regarding how to conduct lessons is very time-consuming. Teachers tend to be largely interested in teaching methods, failing to pay adequate attention to the reality of student learning. To change teachers' way of thinking, some years are required, even if external resource persons participate in this process. To promote this change, reaching a consensus with school managers is the top priority so that they incorporate this matter into their policies and change their management for implementing the policies.

Second, the cases in this study challenge the effectiveness of large-scale delivery of the projects. Educational development projects, national and international ones, tend to be very large in scope, covering various areas of the nations, without sufficient interventions and care for individual schools. However, even with close contacts with the schools as seen in this study, the teachers and schools are very reluctant to change. This reality shows the strong need to reframe perspectives of policymakers in both developing countries and donor agencies regarding the framework, scale, and speed of their projects. This matter inevitably relates to the matter of all children having an equal

right to education, and a strong need exists to develop external human resources, to faithfully support school reforms. However, this matter is also a long-term process for policymakers and donor agencies to tackle.

Third, building a learning community is a process of building trust among actors, including external resource persons (in this study, the foreign consultants). Certainly, their relationship is highly unequal, as mentioned in Sato (1999), because of the one-sidedness in terms of teachers always being observed and power status being attached to external persons. However, the teachers also seriously evaluate and judge the ability of the external resource persons. The point is, however, to overcome such mental gaps. For this, the external resource persons should make efforts to win over the teachers' trust by showing their educational capacities and through dialogues.

Fourth, therefore, external resource persons, including international consultants, should recognise their own necessity to keep growing and learning. Despite the general recognition regarding their higher status in comparison with local teachers, the resource persons are not perfect. Once engaged in supporting schools to build learning communities, the resource persons would inevitably face various difficulties. In order to understand the core of the problems and find their key solutions, they need to keep learning by themselves. Otherwise, winning over the teachers' trust will be impossible.

Fifth, the concept of sustainability needs to be revisited. Since building a learning community largely depends on leaders' determination, the changes in leadership or relationships can easily affect its progress. Different from financial or administrative systems, building a learning community should be considered as something that is never-ending and that can never reach perfection. Yet, once managers and teachers stop their efforts, it is very easily for them to quickly loose interest and stop trying.

As further research tasks, the following four items should be addressed. First, there is an obvious necessity to continuously study the progress in each pilot school. Second, it is necessary to investigate in greater detail the roles of the local administration. In this paper, personnel affairs have been referred to as a matter to be considered. However, the other roles of administration or the internal mechanism, to share the insights of officers with others, based on

participation in the professional teacher meetings, also need to be analysed in detail. Third, there is an urgent need to analyse how the teaching and learning processes would change due to the implementation of the aforementioned professional teacher meetings. Last, but not least, issues pertaining to parental participation should be investigated.

Acknowledgements

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