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Principal Sensemaking and Implementation of Teacher Professional Development:

A Case of Lesson Study in Florida

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Abstract:

Principals from a mid-sized Florida district which had made a considerable commitment to the implementation of lesson study were interviewed to answer how the school leaders made sense of the district commitment to lesson study and respond to it within the context of their individual schools, and how these leaders perceived the most effective ways in promoting lesson study, specifically in developing organizational structures and approaches to support their teachers' practice. The findings revealed that although the principals understood the importance of teacher buy-in and the collaborative culture necessary to successful implement, two distinct philosophies emerged; principals who actively participated to establish culture and buy-in, and principals that passively and purposefully, abdicated responsibility. Examining how school leaders make sense of a promising professional development model such as lesson study allows us to understand what types of policies and approaches offer the best support of teachers' professional learning.

Introduction

Lesson study is an approach to instructional improvement that engages teachers to collaboratively study student thinking and prior knowledge of a chosen topic, jointly plan and teach a student-centered lesson, and discuss student understanding and learning as a result of the lesson (Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004; Hart, Alston, & Murata, 2011; Lewis & Hurd, 2011).. Lesson study was imported to the United States from Japan in the late 1990s after an international video study revealed that in comparison to U.S. math lessons that focus on lower-level mathematics skills, Japanese math lessons focus on promoting students' conceptual understanding (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). Despite its foreign origin, lesson study embodies job-embedded, coherent, continuous, and collaborative teacher learning activities (Perry & Lewis, 2009)—the characteristics of professional development empirically shown to improve instruction and student learning in the United States (Borasi & Fonzi, 2002; Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998).

Florida is the first state to promote lesson study as a statewide professional development model for implementing the state standards aligned with the Common Core State Standards and improving instruction and student achievement using part of the \$700 million Race to the Top (RTTT) grant. The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) viewed lesson study to be an effective way to reach diverse populations and specified a state requirement on lesson study in 2010 stating that “A local education agency (LEA) with a persistently lowest-achieving (PLA) school will modify these schools' schedules to devote a minimum of one Lesson Study per month for each grade level or subject area” (Florida Department of Education, 2010, p.6). Despite the increasing number of districts and schools implementing lesson study in Florida and across the country, there have been few systematic studies of the district and school policy and

implementation of lesson study (Hart, Alston, & Murata, 2011). More specifically, little is known about how school principals made sense of the policy mandate, what policies and approaches they developed to promote lesson study, and what they considered to be important for implementing lesson study.

Principals are a key component at the school level to the implementation of professional developments like lesson study since they control much of the funding and ensure that teacher professional development is in alignment with school and district priorities. The educational landscape is a particularly complex when it comes to the implementation of an initiative like lesson study that requires a strong leadership to lead collaborative and inquiry-based professional learning process. To fill the knowledge gap, this study investigated how school principals decided to approach both the promotion and implementation of lesson study at their schools. Of particular interest was how these educational leaders fostered a sense of community to support teacher leadership in practicing lesson study. Based on the results of the district longitudinal study regarding lesson study in Florida (Akiba, Ramp, & Wilkinson, 2014; Akiba, Howard, Wilkinson, & Whitacre, 2015; Akiba & Wilkinson, 2016), a case study district that had made a considerable commitment to the implementation of lesson study was selected to address the following research questions:

1. How did school leaders make sense of the district commitment to lesson study and respond to it within their individual schools?
2. How did principals perceive the effective way of promoting lesson study within their schools and develop organizational structures and approaches to support teachers' practice of lesson study?

Theoretical Framework

Lesson study was imported to the United States from Japan in the late 1990s after an international video study revealed that in comparison to U.S. math lessons that focus on lower-level mathematics skills, Japanese math lessons focus on promoting students' conceptual understanding (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). This study found lesson study to be the driving force that enabled Japanese teachers to practice mathematics instruction focused on conceptual understanding. Previous case studies on teachers' practice of lesson study, however, revealed major challenges for practicing lesson study in the United States (Choksi & Fernandez, 2004; Fernandez, 2005; Fernandez & Cannon, 2005; Fernandez, Cannon, & Chokski, 2003; Hart, 2009; Hart & Carriere, 2011; Murata, 2011; Perry & Lewis, 2009). These challenges are: 1) teachers' work schedules that do not allow sufficient time to engage in a continuous learning process of lesson study, 2) a lack of familiarity with a research process of studying the curriculum, collecting and interpreting the data, and drawing conclusions and implications for teaching and student learning, and 3) a lack of resources and opportunities to develop content and pedagogical content knowledge necessary for facilitating the lesson study process by themselves.

Since lesson study is relatively new to the United States and is being implemented within a very complex educational system, the investigation uses sensemaking theory to understand how principals place the new information into their preexisting cognitive frameworks (Coburn, 2001). The premise of sensemaking is that implementing agents interpret policies through relevant prior beliefs and understandings (Spillane et al., 2002b). As such, sensemaking argues that when the meaning of information or events is not explicitly stated, educators must make sense of the messages they are receiving and must actively construct understandings and interpretations.

Therefore, it is their interpretations of the policy, rather than an invariant and objective policy idea, that is implemented. As Weick et al. (2005) point out, “sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action” (p. 526). The explanation of policy implementation, therefore, requires investigation of the nature and determinants of actors’ policy interpretations. Research using sensemaking theory have shown that instructional practices of educators is influenced by their prior knowledge, the social context within which they work, and the nature of their connections to the policy or reform message (Coburn, 2001; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Using sensemaking theory in this investigation as a lens is applicable because of the limited guidance and instructions given to district and school leaders regarding the implementation of lesson study in Florida (Akiba & Wilkinson, 2016). Without formal guidance, the principals were left to make sense of the message using their preexisting cognitive frameworks. Previous studies have also identified that the existing organizational contexts play an important role in the sense-making process by influencing the understanding of the new idea that is feasible within the organizational structure and routines (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 1998; 2000). Thus, we paid attention to organizational contexts, including routine practices and resources, in understanding how principals made sense of the district approach and policy on lesson study and developed district policies and practices for supporting lesson study.

Methods

Based on results of the Lesson Study District survey that was conducted in 2013, 2014, 2015 (Akiba et al., 2014, 2015, 2016), a district that has made a considerable commitment to the implementation of lesson study was selected for this case study. The case study district was a

Florida mid-sized district with an enrollment of 64,058 and 82 buildings; slightly larger than the state average of 38,196 and 51. The poverty level of the case study district as measured by the average percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch was lower than the state average (39.3% vs. 48.0%). The ethnic diversity level measured by the percentage of ethnic minority students was similar to the state average (38.9% compared to 42.0%). Within the case study district, six schools that had active lesson study groups were identified. Lesson study planning sessions, research lesson and debriefing sessions were videotaped and analyzed. Documents such as lesson plans, notes, and student work were also collected and analyzed.

The principal of each school was interviewed to help answer the research questions. During the interview, semi-structured questions were asked to allow the principals to share their understanding of lesson study and to elaborate and detail the school's approach to the implementation of lesson study. During the interview, the principals were asked to share: 1) the origin and history of lesson study practice in both the district and school, 2) their impression and understanding of lesson study, 3) specific approaches (e.g., facilitation, training, funding, and resources) taken to promote lesson study and the reasons behind them, 4) current level of lesson study practice in the school, 5) challenges and successes the district experienced in promoting lesson study. Face to face, video-conferencing, or telephone interviews were then conducted. Each interview lasted between 45 – 150 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. In addition to the principal interviews, the lesson study team members were interviewed and specific questions regarding their perceptions about their principals' support were asked to address the research questions.

Results

The interview data showed that the principals expressed a lack of formal guidance, policies, procedures and trainings from both the district and Florida Department of Education regarding the implementation of lesson study. Principal A, a veteran administrator of 29 years within the district stated,

Researcher: "What was your first impression when you was exposed to lesson study?"

Principal A: "I was overwhelmed. There was a lot of information there that was coming at us without much explanation...It was very different from what I had experienced or known about...it was totally new information for me. There was a lot to take in, the whole idea of lesson study, and the time..."

Later when asked about support from the district regarding lesson study, Principal A continued to express a similar lack of oversight and support from the district,

Researcher: "What kind of additional support could the district provide to principals or schools that you think would support lesson study practice?"

Principal 1: "well...I don't think we have had anything in the districts for years regarding lesson study. Maybe that could be offered. You might reach far more teachers if they saw what it was. There was just an awareness of lesson study."

Principal B, a newly appointed principal to his school but who had over a decade of teaching, assistant principal and principal experience in the district has a similar occurrence,

Researcher: "When did you first learn about lesson study?"

Principal B: "Honestly, I learned about it this year. I talked with our teacher leader and her idea about bringing here to this school."

Researcher: “Was lesson study part of any of your other schools?”

Principal B: “...no, I have never had any other experience of lesson study prior to this school year.”

Principal C, a veteran of the district with over 13 years of leadership experience and several years of teaching experience shared similar sentiments and stated,

Principal C: “I learned about lesson study when I was transferred here as the principal, because this school has already been doing lesson studies for several years prior to my arrival.”

Researcher: “What was your first impression of lesson study?”

Principal C: “It definitely was a learning curve for me because I didn’t really understand what the process was, you know, being a financial budget person here too, who pays for all of this...I had to really learn from the ground up.”

As a result of the lack of formal guidance and training, the school principal seemed to use their prior knowledge and experience about what works in the specific given complex organizational contexts to make sense of the policy messages, in ways that both morphed and adapted the lesson study model to fit the specific needs, time and funding constraints of the individual school. In doing so, lesson study within the same district, failed to have a consistent and specific model.

Principal D, an administrator with 6 years’ experience overseeing schools and over 10 years of teaching experience responded when he was asked about the lesson study model that spread over several months,

Principal D: “I just think that the original model, the longer stretched out model, wouldn’t work. The shorter model is better for us. When I saw that shorter three

day model, I had a little more hope, when I first say that first cycle in the longer model - I was just kind of like yikes. It's unfeasible, you know really."

Specific school climate seems to have influenced what was feasible when it comes to lesson study. Principal A was asked about teachers committing hours outside of contractual hours:

Principal C: "Yes the union is strong here in the district...right now they are working to the rule which means nothing outside of contract hours.... Now, this school, fortunately our teachers seem to be doing what they normally will do. However, I have been in another school last year during part of the year they were doing this work to the rule, only working contract hours."

This specific context of teachers in Principal C's school committing extra hours, which are necessary for the longer duration lesson study, allowed a model that may be unable to form in other schools within the same district.

The data also showed that all the principals shared the belief that in developing specific approaches to promote professional developments like lesson study, teacher buy-in is essential to its successful implementation, expansion, and sustainability. When asked about implementing lesson study, Principal A's response expressed the principal belief that lesson study is a teacher driven process.

Researcher: What recommendations would you give to another principal who was interested in starting a lesson study group?

Principal A: Seek out teachers that are interested. Provide where there could interact with teachers who have been engaging in lesson study to make sure that they have a sound understating of what is involved. Have the confidence to let

them fly with it. Support them because you have to support the teachers in this process.

Principal C response is similar and stated that the teachers needed to be actively involved in the lesson study process to capture the empowerment necessary for implementation success,

Principal C: "Stay as positive as I can and allow them to have input. It's like you know where you want them to go, so I have to guide them there and make them kind of feel that they power themselves to get there."

Similarly, Principal D expressed the importance of teacher buy-in.

Principal D: "Force, I think of maybe, you can try to force feed a kid. If the kid doesn't want to eat you're going to waste a lot of food. If the kid's hungry he's going to chow it down. He's going to be full. You've got to create, like it goes back to that culture. You've got to create a culture to where the teachers want to do it. Genuinely want to do it."

In establishing teacher buy-in, the principals understood, valued, and utilized the importance of capitalizing on the leadership and expertise of teacher leaders. During one of the interviews with Principal D, he invited a teacher leader to participate in the interview. The teacher leader reiterated the importance of teacher buy-in:

Teacher Leader: "Teachers have to understand that this is true, that it actually benefits your students. We sit through so many PD's in this district that don't have any impact on our actual teaching. I think once you, if you can get teachers to see the value, you're watching it, pow right there. How it can actually change the practice. I think that really helps with the buy in. If the teacher can see that little tidbit."

Although the principals seem to understand the culture of trust, collaboration, and teamwork necessary for the success of lesson study, the data showed that there was dichotomy in the way that principals attempted to support teacher leadership and establish a culture of trust within their schools. On one side, some principals actively worked beside the teacher leaders and lesson study groups. These “active” principals offered direct support to the lesson study teams, attended trainings on lesson study, communicated with the district administration on behalf of the lesson study teams, and actively supported the process through attending the lesson study meetings. Principal D, an active principal, expressed his perception of the principal role when asked,

Researcher: “What is your role in the process?”

Principal D: Talk to everybody. Try to figure out who that solid team is. Then ideally try to supplement them and provide incentive for them to do it. Try to find some money for them somehow and get them. Model that program. Then try to get people to see it.

Principal D: “The first Lesson Study run at a new school is going to be critical to the success or the non-interest. If I can do it and get a team together and do a good job. Get support of the district. Get the university to support it. We knock it. They get to see the awesome stuff. I televise it on the news. Talk about it at a faculty meeting. Play the video clip to the faculty. Show them the discussion that's taken place. Just kind of bait them. Then they're hooked and you know the rest is history. Then they're banging on my door, because they want to do it. Then we got people hooked.”

Also, these active principals viewed their role as a recruiter for the process as essential important.

Researcher: "How did you present it to the faculty?"

Principal E: "Anytime that I had a faculty meeting I would plug it as something that you have to do. Something that you have to be a part of. I still have goosebumps when I talk about it. I hook them in and then I send an email asking for those that are interested to hear more to come to the media center for a brief presentation. Those folks that showed up, I did a 30 minute to 45 minute overview to let them see what it looked like."

As well as supporting the implementation process, these "active" principals also reorganized the school day in their attempt to fit lesson study into the structure of the school. Working with Principal D, the teacher leader had seen how this change had helped the implementation of lesson study,

Teacher Leader: "Principal support is vital. We had an administrator here that really wasn't that supportive of it...she didn't know about it. She didn't really take an interest, because things were so busy. However, the current principal, and him working with lesson study has made a huge difference here. He makes it work by finding the time for us to meet."

Principal E similarly took an active role in the process,

Researcher: "What is role regarding resources at the school level? Do you provide to support lesson study?"

Principal E: "Time out of the classroom, substitute support. Finding time for them to get together, to allow them to have a sub in the classroom. We access

funds through SACK, our school advisory council. Also we have an extended day program here that provides us some monetary resources each month to compensate for sub funding. I make it work”

In an attempt to lessen the load on the teachers, these active principals sometimes coupled lesson study with other policy requirements on the teachers. For example, School D coupled teacher evaluation with lesson study in an attempt to make it less stressful for the teachers.

Alternatively, the “passive” principals attempted to capture teacher buy-in and establish a conducive culture by allowing the teacher leaders to run the lesson study without principal interference. These “passive” principals supported the process by not becoming actively involved and allowing the teachers to take responsibility. For example, Principal B was asked about the role of the principal in recruitment,

Researcher: Is there any way that you have encouraged your faculty...or be involved in promoting lesson study

Principal B: not really... I just gave permission to talk at the faculty meeting. The teacher leader discussed it, she sent out a few emails as well that were a little more descriptive. Basically, the first announcement was at a faculty setting.

These “passive principals felt that abdicating the process to the teachers and staying out of the way would promote the culture necessary for longevity and sustainability. It appeared that these principals thought that since lesson study is teacher driven, a more organic grassroots implementation should be used.

Principal B: Basically, I just stay out of their way as much as possible. They have invited me to attend some of their talks, debriefs and lessons, until today I have

not had an opportunity to sit with them. The positive feedback has been really good. Some of the teachers are just really thrilled with what they are learning and the depth of what they are getting to with the lesson.

Researcher: If you were to talk to another principal and they were asking about lesson study, what recommendations would you give to them about starting lessons study at their school?

Principal B: I would encourage to let the teachers do what they need to do. Step back a little bit. Be an observer. It depends on the principal. Some principals are so involved that they need to control everything. I really do think that you can take more of a learner role and learn along with the teachers. Let them take the leadership role in the learning.

Discussion

Examining how school leaders make sense of a promising professional development model such as lesson study allows us to understand what types of policies and approaches both districts and schools use to support teachers' professional learning. The interviews revealed that without explicit guidance, school leaders made sense of the district policy and considered teacher buy-in to be a critical factor for a successful practice of lesson study. The differences in their beliefs about how to gain teacher buy-in led to different principal approaches to promote lesson study. Their beliefs were likely influenced by their ideas about teacher professional development, organizational contexts including time and funding constraints, and way they view their role as a leader. The results also indicated that left without specific instructions, principals defaulted into two leadership strategies to implement lesson study. Convolved that the professional development is teacher driven, active principals positioned themselves as strategic advocates for the cause and actively worked within the process. Alternately, passive principals may see that

their influence and active participation would actually interfere with the organic growth of the teacher driven professional development. On the outside, it may appear that these passive principals are not supporters of the process. However, these passive principals may be simply attempting to protect the integrity of the model.

Lesson study is a teacher-driven professional development that requires a substantial commitment and buy-in by both administrators and teachers. Further research into the growth and sustainability of lesson study by these two approaches will reveal which, if either, is more effective in lesson study practice for improving instruction and student learning.

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