

Promising practices

Promising practice 3. The use of lesson study to develop teachers in Japan

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This case study describes a “Promising practice” drawn from an OECD review of Initial Teacher Preparation in Japan from 5-9 September 2016.

The OECD Review Team – Hannah von Ahlefeld (OECD), Francesca Caena (University of Venice), Kjetil Helgeland (OECD) and Danielle Toon (Learning First) – identified a number of “Promising practices” in each country. These practices may not be widespread or representative, but seen in the context of other challenges, they represent a strength or opportunity to improve the country’s initial teacher preparation system – and for other countries to learn from them.

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Promising practice 3.

The use of lesson study to develop teachers in Japan

The Japanese use a collaborative process called “lesson study” to develop teachers’ skills over their career. The lesson study process is used during preparation, induction, and ongoing professional learning. It helps teachers develop the expertise for teaching a subject and is deeply rooted in practice (Jensen et al., 2016^[1]).

The lessons study process involves teams of teachers working together to research, plan, teach, observe, and reflect on lessons (Figure 1). A typical lesson study cycle focuses on a subject-specific lesson and takes at least five weeks to complete. To commence the cycle, the teacher team agrees instructional goals and jointly plans a lesson. One or more teachers will then lead the lesson while others watch and collect evidence on student engagement and learning. After this, a debrief discussion is held on what happened, how students approached the assigned task and how the lesson can be improved in the future (Takahashi and McDougal, 2016^[2]).

Figure 1. Lesson study cycle in Japan



Source: Adapted from *Lesson Study Research and Practice in Mathematics Education*, 2011, cited in Jensen, B. et al. (2016), *Not So Elementary: Primary School Teacher Quality in Top-Performing Systems*, p. 67.

Lesson study is nearly universal in Japanese schools, although its implementation varies (Lewis, 2016^[3]). In many schools, it is a part of a school-wide process to develop teachers and improve instruction by collaboratively analysing the impact of different teaching practices on a school’s theme for the year to improve student learning (Chichibu and Kihara, 2013^[4]).

What does Japanese Lesson Study entail: an example from Tamagawa Private University

Prospective teachers are introduced to lesson study concepts during their university coursework. These trainee teachers then use the process during their practical training placement, and again during their induction year once employed by a school.

Tamagawa is a private university and K-12 school in Tokyo that uses lesson study to train its teachers. In coursework that precedes and follows their practical training placement, teacher candidates prepare for and reflect upon the lesson study process (Tamagawa Academy (K-12) and University, 2018^[5]).

The sequence is as follows:

- Before the school placement, candidates attend 15 x 100-minute classes, during which practicing teachers explain life in the school including lesson study steps. They help candidates to make and practice lesson plans in specific subjects, discussing how to develop lessons from the curriculum and how children might react to lessons.
- During the practicum, groups of candidates take part in lesson study with senior teachers. They will work together to plan a lesson and anticipate student thinking. One candidate teaches the lesson, while her peers and a mentor teacher observes and takes notes on student reactions. After the lesson, the group will discuss the student reactions and how they might better present the lesson to improve student learning.
- After the placement, candidates attend classes to review their school placement and reflect with peers and university instructors on the teaching and student learning experience.

The process of lesson study, coupled with pre-and post-practicum coursework, comprises the core of an effective beginning teacher learning process that builds deep and subject-specific teaching skills. It is embedded in the work of teachers, connected to student learning, scaffolded by curriculum and mentor teachers, and repeatable over a teacher's career.

Why is it a strength?

The OECD Review Team in its visit to Japan from 5-9 September 2016 concluded that lesson study is a strength in that it:

- *Provides consistency between training & practice.* Trainee teachers use the same process of lesson study that they will use for professional development throughout their careers. This process helps them continuously reflect upon and improve their practice.
- *Fosters collaborative work and learning in all the stages of teacher learning.* Trainee teachers are immersed into a collaborative culture of learning from and sharing practices with other colleagues from the beginning of their careers.

How could it be improved?

The OECD Review Team also noted there could be:

- *More practical experience throughout training.* Japanese practical training placements are high-quality but very short, usually four weeks. The majority of stakeholders interviewed want new teachers to have more experience in schools, spread-out over the four years of the teacher training degree.

For more information

- Chichibu, T. and T. Kihara (2013), “How Japanese schools build a professional learning community by lesson study”, *International Journal for Lesson and Learning Studies*, Vol. 2/1, pp. 12-25, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/20468251311290105>. [4]
- Jensen, B. et al. (2016), *Not So Elementary: Primary School Teacher Quality in Top-Performing Systems*, National Center on Education and the Economy, Washington, D.C, http://ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/169726_Not_So_Elementary_Report_041317.pdf. [1]
- Lewis, C. (2016), “How does lesson study improve mathematics instruction?”, *ZDM - The International Journal on Mathematics Education*, Vol. 48/4, pp. 571–580 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11858-016-0792-x>. [3]
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- Tamagawa Academy (K-12) and University (2018), *Tamagawa Academy (K-12) and University, Graduate School of Education (Teaching Profession)*, 2018, <http://www.tamagawa.jp/en/highereducation/teach.html> (accessed on 19 February 2018). [5]