Lesson Study: The Freedom to Learn?

Ella Michelle O'Doherty, David Allan, David Boorman, Paul Smalley

Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire, UK

Research shows the state of professional development for teachers to be ‘rather depressing’ (Earley, 2010:482) with limited access to effective collaborative, classroom-based, research informed, professional learning (Pedder and Opfer, 2011). Coaching can offer such an approach (Cordingly, 2005; Lord et al., 2008) but its use in schools remains under-theorised and subject to a ‘clash of cultures’ between professional development and performance management (Lofthouse et al., 2010:10), not least, because the solution is said to be ‘more integration’ between the two (Pedder and Opfer, 2010:450). More recently, it has been acknowledged that such tensions are problematic (Opfer and Pedder, 2011) but the challenge remains of how to provide teachers with a zone of proximal development (Warford, 2011), a space to experiment and learn.

Lesson study is a classroom based, systematic approach to professional learning which aims to improve teaching and learning through collaborative lesson planning and evaluation (Dudley, 2013). As such, it can be aligned with existing models of co-coaching (Curee, 2005; Lofthouse et al., 2010). A distinguishing feature is that it is the observation of pupil learning that is key to professional development rather than a focus on an individual teacher’s performance. Lesson study therefore has the potential to enable teachers to negotiate the fault lines of power relations that undermine the effective embedding of coaching in schools. The empirical base for lesson study in UK mainstream settings is emerging (Dudley, 2013; Cajkler et al., 2014) but the discourses of lesson study and coaching theory remain relatively distinct. This paper bridges this gap.

Originating in Japan, lesson study is currently being piloted in three regions in England. Initially, qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews with 50 teachers in 20 mainstream primary schools in the northwest. Observations of lesson study lessons, planning and review meetings in case study schools have also been undertaken. Schools range from high to low performing, and differ in size and location; whilst participants include; trainees, NQTs, teaching assistants, early career teachers and senior leadership staff. These schools have completed one full year of using lesson study and are continuing with a second cycle. This paper suggests lesson study is being realised as an evolutionary, rather than a functionalist, form of coaching that allows for a progressive but dynamic exchange of professional capital through the mediation of power relations. The paper concludes that schools are embedding lesson study having accorded value to such freedom to learn.