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FACILITATING TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH LESSON STUDY: INSIGHTS FROM TWO YEARS LESSON STUDY AT SMP TUNAS AGRO

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Abstract

SMP Tunas Agro is a private school managed by an oil-palm plantation in Central Kalimantan. SMP Tunas Agro has been regularly practicing school-based lesson study for two years. Open lesson is organized every month during which a teacher conducted a normal lesson. However, there is an agreement amongst the teachers that the model teacher should present innovative ideas in her/his teaching. This paper summarizes teachers' insights after practicing lessons study for two years. Teachers revealed that lesson study helps them to improve their professionalism (self-confidence, teaching skills, and understanding of the students). Lesson study encouraged teachers to develop innovative teaching strategies. Moreover, through lesson study teachers developed better understanding of the students, especially students who have learning difficulties and personal problems. However, the teachers warn that lesson study can be a fake and unnatural teaching if the model teacher does not conduct a real lesson. Trust between model teacher and observers, genuine intention of teachers to improve professionalisms and self-confidence are essential factors for a fruitful lesson study. Everyone involves in lesson study should keep these three factors in minds.

Keywords:

innovative teaching strategies; professional development; school-based lesson study

School setting

SMP Tunas Agro is a private school managed by an oil-palm plantation. It is located in the middle of oil-palm plantation in Central Kalimantan. Students are mostly coming from the surrounding villages and the settlements of the plantation workers. There are a number of features that differentiate the school from "common" schools.

- a. Location: The school is located in the middle of an oil-palm plantation. It takes around one hour to go to the main access road (nearest small town) and around eight hours to travel to capital of the district.
- b. House-school distance: Most students live relatively far away from the school. Since there is no public transportation, students rely on the shuttle bus provided by the company. Many students have to wake up very early in the morning to catch the bus. Consequently, many of these students are not physically fit for the school.
- c. Motivation: Most students are coming from less educated families. Therefore, most parents do not really care for the education of their children. As a result, many of the students do not have strong motivation to learn. Many of the students do not have a clear vision of their future. For many of them schooling is just killing the time. Learning is a burden for most students. Unlike students in the city who pay a large amount of money for extra lessons in the afternoon, free additional lessons provided by the school is considered as "punishment".
- d. Quality of the input students: Due to poor quality of the primary schools, most students do not have strong academic background. Basics academic skills, such as reading, writing and counting are not well-mastered by many students. As consequence, it is difficult to set up high standard of academic achievement.
- e. High turnover rate: Since many of the students are the children of the plantation workers, changes in the employment also affect the school. Almost every month there are students who move in or move out from the school. Therefore, even though the total number of the students is relatively constant, the students are actually different. Very high turnover rate is usually observed after Idul Fitri and in June (in June workers receive bonus from the company).

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School based vs. subject matter-based lesson study

Recognizing the condition of the school, a search for the best alternative way to improve the quality of the school (both for the teacher and the students) was conducted. After considering a number alternative it was decided to adopt lesson study. The decision was based on a number of reasons, e.g.

- a. The effectiveness of lesson study in improving students' learning. A number of studies reveal that lesson study improve students' learning (Firman, 2010; Stigler & Hiebert).
- b. The effectiveness of lesson study in supporting teachers' professional development (Widodo, Riandi, Hermawan, Herman, 2009)
- c. The unique condition of the school
- d. The geographical condition in which the school is located

For a number of reasons, subject matter based lesson study is more common in Indonesia. In the current practice, lesson study tries to maximize the role of the existing teacher conference (MGMP). Therefore, subject matter-based lesson study is very popular in Indonesia.

In the context of SMP Tunas Agro, it is difficult to run subject matter based lesson study because of the following reason: a) the school has only one teacher for each subject; b) there are only few SMP in the surrounding; c) the other SMP are spread over a wide area and transportation is a serious issue; and d) there is no active MGMP. Therefore, it was decided that the school will run school-based lesson study. Indeed, we realize that the absence of teacher from other schools mean that we would not have rich experience as much as subject matter based lesson study. To minimize this disadvantage, we slightly modify our lesson study to fit our condition and expectation.

Early experience with lesson study

In the end of 2008 SMP Tunas Agro conducted lesson study for the first time. For most teachers, lesson study is new practice. Lesson study was conducted in a "learning by doing" way in which we learn throughout the process. Unlike the program managed in other districts in which teachers are given intensive guidance by lecturers, at SMP Tunas Agro the program was very simple. After conducting a brief workshop on what, why, and how lesson study is, the teachers went to the first step of lesson study, i.e. planning the lesson. The schedule for the first open lesson was then agreed and the school principal would be the model teacher.

While in the common lesson study the school principal plays the role as moderator, at SMP Tunas Agro the school principal should play the role as model for other teachers. In this way the school principal do not simply observe the process of lesson study but he is a part of lesson study. Therefore, issues related to the lack of principal commitment that observed at other schools is never an issue for SMP Tunas Agro. The school principal does not take a position as supervisor but he places himself as a colleague for the teachers.

Teaching innovation

Since there was no external observer in our lesson study, we did not receive comment from external. We realize the danger that we simply went through the same way in our practice. Therefore, the teachers made an agreement that the model teacher should present innovative teaching strategies. Indeed, there is no clear criterion for "innovative" but we use the criteria that a teacher should not perform exactly the same things that have been done both by his or herself but also by other teachers. Therefore, model teacher should try very hard to present new aspects in their teaching. For this purpose teachers usually search in the internet to find new ideas for their teaching.

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Therefore, although lesson study may not give direct impact to the improvement of teachers' competencies but it drives teachers to improve themselves. Such indirect impacts of lesson study may include internet skills, independence, better understanding of subject matter, and teaching skills.

Trust and trust building

At the first rounds of the lesson study some teachers found that model teacher did not present the real lessons. Some lessons were considered as "acting" because the teachers did not teach as they usually teach. Rather than focusing on students learning teachers focused on themselves. They tried to present themselves as "good" teacher so that no observers find negative points to criticize.

It is not only the teachers who are "acting" in lesson study. The observers on the other hand, also did not genuine comments because they did not want to hurt the feeling of their college teacher. Therefore, they express only nice things about the lessons. This situation is exactly the common practice criticized by Widodo (2008). As the time passing by, however, trust is developed amongst the teachers. Now they become more relax and comfortable with each other. As a result, lessons become more natural and the observers also gave genuine and more constructive comments on the lessons. We developed 1:3 comments, which mean that an observer may express one negative comment after telling three positive things that they learned from the lesson.

Motivation

Motivation plays a very important role for the success of lesson study. At lesson study initiated by external parties, participation in lesson study is mostly due to instruction rather than initiative for fulfilling their professional needs. As a result, teachers consider their

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participation in lesson study as fulfilling the obligation. Quite similar was the case at SMP Tunas Agro. At the beginning teachers take lesson study as an obligation but it slowly helps teachers to develop intrinsic motivation. Participation in lesson study help teacher to reflect on their own teaching and realize their strength and weaknesses. Finally, it drives them to improve their professionalism as teachers.

Understanding of students learning

As previously mentioned, students of SMP Tunas Agro came from a community that are not well educated. Most of them do not have good academic competencies. Moreover, they also lack of motivation to learn. Teachers acknowledge that through lesson study they gain a better understanding of the students. They can observe a particular student not only in his/her lesson but also other lessons. From this observation they know how to treat such a student. Through lesson study and counseling the school then plan a number of programs to improve students' learning, such as home visit, meeting with parents, and special treatment to a particular student.

Self confidence

Participation in lesson study also improve teachers self confidence. At the early stage of lesson study some teachers are nervous, uneasy and lack of self confidence. As a result, lessons were clumsy and tense. Both teacher and students try to find the "right" role they have to play. Through lesson study, both teacher and students grow their self confidence so that they become more relax. After conducting lesson study for some time teachers get used to the situation and they develop self confidence to teach their subjects.

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Conclusion

After conducting lesson study for about two years, we observe improvement of teacher professionalism (self-confidence, teaching skills, and understanding of the students). Lesson study encouraged teachers to develop innovative teaching strategies. Through lesson study teachers also develop better understanding of the students, especially students who have learning difficulties and personal problems. However, lesson study can also become a routine that do not bring any benefit if all participating teachers do not have strong commitment.

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