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## **Ethnography for Teachers' Professional Development: Japanese Approach of Investigation on Classroom Activities**

**Masami Matoba & Mohammad Reza Sarkar Arani**

### **Introduction**

For most Japanese teachers, learning and teaching is a collaborative work and the best training is where ideas and experiences are shared and reflection is accomplished through discussion in peer groups and networks (Sarkar Arani, 2006; Matoba & Sarkar Arani, 2005; Hibi & Matoba, 2004; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998; Inagaki & Sato, 1996; Yoshimoto, 1986). Therefore, School-Based In-Service Teacher Training (SB-INSTT) programs should consist of opportunities for teachers to work together and learn from each other. Lieberman (1995) characterized effective professional development as that which is “grounded in inquiry, reflection, and participant-driven experimentation, naming the role of teacher-researcher as an appropriate means” (Levin and Rock, 2003:136). This is because teachers are able to think deeply about their educational experiences and efforts through exchange and understanding with other teachers (Xu, 2003; Levin and Rock, 2003; Smylie, 1995).

Educational theories held by teachers are formed as a result of frequent contact with other teachers and by sharing information. Rather than learning about theoretical or abstract principles, teachers are thought to acquire professional skills through planning, observation, ethnography and journal field notes, reflective on practice and collaborative research related to the classroom activities that comprise *jugyou kenkyu*<sup>1</sup> (Ueda & Ando Elementary School, 2005; Lewis, 2002; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Hoshino, 1995).

Many scholars have recently suggested articulating a qualitative or ethnographic approach for teacher education and teachers' professional development (e.g., Frank & Uy, 2004; Green, Dixon, & Zaharlick, 2002; Denyer, et al, 2001; Frank, 1999). The purpose of ethnographic and sociolinguistic observation is to understand teaching from

the perspective of the practitioner and to uncover the social practices of the members of the classroom (Frank & Uy, 2004: 270).

In this paper, we examine how journal and ethnography field notes in *jugyou kenkyu* help teachers to understand the diverse range of talents and abilities of their students. Especially, we focus on how ethnography field note and reflective papers (*karute*) help teachers to change their assumptions about student learning.

The data presented in this paper come from our research in Ando Elementary School, a typical municipal elementary school in Shizuoka, Japan. We employed a case study method for data collection and a qualitative approach for teaching analysis. Our approach involved classroom and all the *jugyou kenkyu* meetings observations, record (cassette & videotape) and narrative interviews with teachers. We tried to understand the school way of using ethnography and journal notes to think about new and creative perspectives for classroom activities. We continued to have contact with the elementary school for a long time in an effort to understand culture of change and how teachers and students interact. We also examined teachers' reflective papers, learning journal notes and school documents such as reports on *jugyou kenkyu*, its historical background and approach.

### **Jugyou Kenkyu as a Fundamental Aspect of Japanese SB-INSTT**

There are many diverse kinds of school-based teachers' professional development in Japanese schools, but *jugyou kenkyu* is the most significant and fundamental program. *Jugyou kenkyu* as "collaborative research on teaching" has also progressed in various ways. Generally and in a systematic view this is based on a quality circle with four stages: *Plan-Do-Check-Action*. First the staff must make a plan for their collaborative research. Then they implement this plan and finally they evaluate and reflect upon the success of the process in terms of revising and improving their instruction. Critically, this process is a *collaborative* activity.

Within *jugyou kenkyu*, it is possible that the classroom can be a model for teachers to promote significant change in their careers, by serving not only as a place of work but also as a source of professional development. Furthermore, teachers hold joint responsibility for the teaching and learning process that involves lesson plans; the designing of learning materials; dealing with students and the evaluation of student work.

*Jugyou kenkyu* as collaborative research is thought to make possible the exchange of experiences between teachers, collaborative planning, participatory learning, the enhancement of professional dialogue among teachers, and teachers' reflection. These

activities provide teachers with opportunities for empowering themselves professionally in their relationships with students and in their classroom activities. They emphasize learning from practice, instruction improvement, and raising teacher quality. Japanese teachers with this background create strategies to build new standards in educational practice. According to the Tsuchida and Lewis study “the classroom practices of Japanese teachers, however, seem to reflect a more constructivist view of learning and teaching” (1996:211).

From the influence of the teachers’ group, self-reflection and discussion of the classroom feedback, the follow points can be made regarding the process of classroom improvement and the raising teaching quality through *jogyo kenkyu*:

- Teachers learn on the job;
- Teachers are learners in their classrooms and in their schools, and they are capable of making decisions about how they should improve themselves;
- Teachers learn from going through a process of assessing, planning, teaching, observing, journaling, reflecting, and feedback on decision-making in practice;
- Teachers learn through cooperation in review database of each student in school, planning lessons, participation and observation in others’ classrooms, and through daily discussion and communication about teaching improvements;
- Teachers learn from observing themselves, review of ethnography and journal field notes, engaging in practice, and through participation in self-directed projects;
- Teachers learn through reflection, evaluation and interpretation of students’ communication and interaction in their classrooms.

The importance of reflection for teacher development is that it is helpful for teachers to reflect upon the relationship between the “teacher as someone who teaches, and the student as someone who learns”, to allow students to express their ideas; to highlight differences in opinion; explore those within oneself and to support the revision of one’s ideas. Teachers take an interest in the students in their classrooms and while pursuing their own teaching career they try to find their own way of teaching. This is the kind of awareness raising that teachers say they would like to engage in through SB-INSTT. In order for this kind of consciousness-raising to happen it is necessary that teachers have awareness of themselves as both *researchers* and as *decision-makers* (Sarkar Arani, 2004).

This approach (questioning, planning, acting, observing, reflecting and replanning) enables teachers to learn from each other and to improve their teaching in practice. These activities provide teachers with opportunities to raise their professional

skill level and their relationship with students, as well as engaging in research activities, thus emphasizing learning by doing, improvement of teaching, and rising the quality of teachers (Matoba & Sarkar Arani, 2005).

### **One School's Framework**

The teaching and learning process emerges as a collaborative and continuous effort where the most effective training consists of an exchange and discussion of ideas and experiences within a network of peer groups. The teachers of Ando Elementary School acquire professional skills through observation, journal and ethnography field notes, practice, critical reflection and collaborative research on classroom activities. In Ando Elementary School *jogyou kenkyu* is delivered based on a specific unit plan which is developed based on database of students in school, teachers' ethnography field notes and content of subject matters. The basic purpose of the unit plan is pay attention to students' mutual relationships and interaction based on the subject matters. Each unit plan involves one or several lesson plan.

For instance, *jogyou kenkyu* in the 5th grade mathematics (calculating the area of trapezoids) to bring more opportunity for slow students to be active; in the 4th grade social studies (*Gomi-garbage*) to enhance learning with community, or in the 3rd grade science (electricity) to understand interaction and needs of each student in daily life of school.

They make database for each student in school and provide mutual relationships among students in classroom activities as a proposal for *jogyou kenkyu* which is called *zaseki jogyouan* (see figure 1). It means the way which teachers make connect and interact between students during several lessons and different subject matters (Hoshino, 1995: 44-45). This proposal has strong impact to make peer group of students in each subject matter and help teachers to understand each student needs and abilities.

As we observed, the School has already developed a framework for improving the quality of teaching and deep understanding of each student needs (Ando Elementary School, 2004). The framework shows the process of *jogyou kenkyu* which is emphasis on the issue of individual difference of student in each subject matters, interaction of student in classroom and collaborative research on the teaching-learning process among teachers in school(see figure 2). Ando School has a long historical background in delivering this kind of quality circle model which emphasis on interaction, talents and abilities of each student. They have already started to apply *jogyou kenkyu* base on the *zaseki jogyouan* for understanding each student needs and talents as well as for teachers' professional development and improving teaching since 1965(Ueda & Ando Elementary

School, 2005). The main particular of this model of *jugyou kenkyu* is that start from observing and assessment. They review of database of each student in school and previous ethnography and journal notes, with consideration of subject matter and purpose of their collaborative research. Then, they make a unit plan cooperatively which has diagram of several lesson plans. Finally, they implement this plan and evaluate and reflect upon the outcomes of *jugyou kenkyu* in terms of understanding each student needs, enhancing learning through growing shared interaction of students and improving their teaching. By all indications, this model is recently popular and highly valued by Japanese teachers at elementary school level. This kind of quality circle is flexible and emphasis more on each student talents and abilities, teachers' ethnography notes and reflective papers, shared sense of what is important in school, and shared commitment to help students learning.

動く授業観の授業表授業案 (Figure 1) Zaseki Jugyoutan

5年5組 社会科学授業案 5月11日(水) 第1時 授業者 尾野美香子

おらい・米の自由化の考えを履かして、①には自分学習をして、②はさまざまな問題があることを、③はさまざまな問題があることを、④はさまざまな問題があることを、⑤はさまざまな問題があることを、⑥はさまざまな問題があることを、⑦はさまざまな問題があることを、⑧はさまざまな問題があることを、⑨はさまざまな問題があることを、⑩はさまざまな問題があることを、⑪はさまざまな問題があることを、⑫はさまざまな問題があることを、⑬はさまざまな問題があることを、⑭はさまざまな問題があることを、⑮はさまざまな問題があることを、⑯はさまざまな問題があることを、⑰はさまざまな問題があることを、⑱はさまざまな問題があることを、⑲はさまざまな問題があることを、⑳はさまざまな問題があることを、㉑はさまざまな問題があることを、㉒はさまざまな問題があることを、㉓はさまざまな問題があることを、㉔はさまざまな問題があることを、㉕はさまざまな問題があることを、㉖はさまざまな問題があることを、㉗はさまざまな問題があることを、㉘はさまざまな問題があることを、㉙はさまざまな問題があることを、㉚はさまざまな問題があることを、㉛はさまざまな問題があることを、㉜はさまざまな問題があることを、㉝はさまざまな問題があることを、㉞はさまざまな問題があることを、㉟はさまざまな問題があることを、㊱はさまざまな問題があることを、㊲はさまざまな問題があることを、㊳はさまざまな問題があることを、㊴はさまざまな問題があることを、㊵はさまざまな問題があることを、㊶はさまざまな問題があることを、㊷はさまざまな問題があることを、㊸はさまざまな問題があることを、㊹はさまざまな問題があることを、㊺はさまざまな問題があることを、㊻はさまざまな問題があることを、㊼はさまざまな問題があることを、㊽はさまざまな問題があることを、㊾はさまざまな問題があることを、㊿はさまざまな問題があることを、

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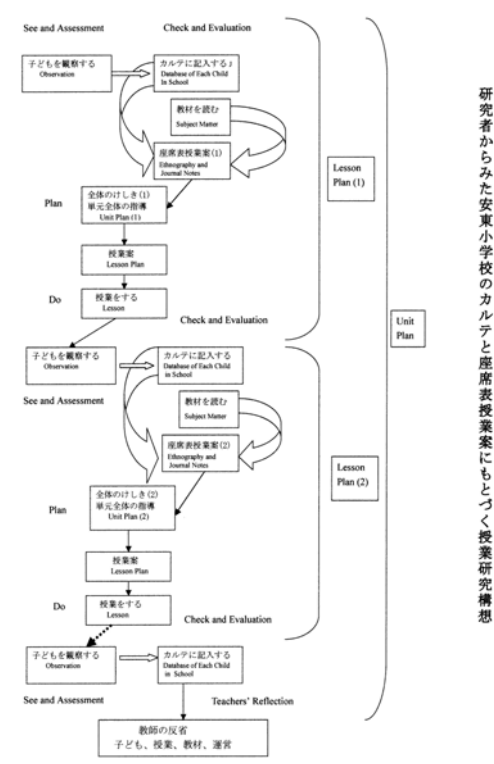


Figure 2 Framework of Ando Elementary School for Improving the Quality of Teaching and Teachers

Figure 1 Zaseki Jugyoutan

Figure 2 The School Framework

With regard to SB-INSTT quality improvements in teachers were found to be based on the subjective relationship of mutual development between the teacher and the student (Matoba & Sarkar Arani, 2005). Also, improvements in the classroom were

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found to be directly related to the mutual development of the teacher and student. In this approach raising teacher quality; lesson improvement; student development and experiences are all important factors that are closely interrelated.

As a means of collaborative research, improving teaching quality is based upon the subjective relationships between classroom activities and the mutual development of both teachers and teaching. Moreover, the improvement of teaching is directly related to the mutual development of teacher and student. For this approach to work improving the quality of teaching and teachers, lesson plans, student growth and experiences and educational assessments are also important interrelated factors (Lewis, 2002).

### **Research Findings**

We examined the effect of ethnography field notes on the teachers' assumptions about students. Our analysis of the data from various perspective and viewpoints provides insight into the professional development of teachers who participated in *jugyou kenkyu*. As some of our research finding, *jugyou kenkyu* in Ando Elementary School supports teachers to create a school that learns through:

- Develop students' mutual relationships and interaction based on the subject matter;
- Provide an learning environment in school which each student feel welcome;
- Develop teachers' competence to do collaborative research on lessons, observe their colleagues' classes, interpret of students communication in teaching and learning process in detail;
- Provide opportunities for teachers to discuss and learn in peer group, ethnography and journal notes, writing reflective papers(*karute*) and using field notes for reaching every students learning and improving teaching;
- Make database of each student in school and try to review, analysis, and evaluate the data for make unite and lesson plans;
- Enrich learning through managing interaction of students in peer group;
- Change assumption of teachers about student through interpretation of student-student and teacher-student communication in the teaching-learning process.

We make the following points as main outcomes of the framework in Ando School that seem reasonable, given our view of investigation on classroom activities and how it might be developed through using ethnography filed notes.

### ***The Development of Student Mutual Relationships and Interaction***

Upon observation of classroom practice during *jugyou kenkyu*, teachers facilitate

classroom interactions between pupils (student-student interaction) based on the *zaseki jugyouan*. Students learn through their participation and interaction in classroom activities, peer group, seatwork and share in common the teaching and learning experience. Peer groups of pupils (for example investigation teams in a subject matter) and team teaching are organized to demonstrate their individual characteristics as much as possible. This can also be considered as a unique approach of Japanese teachers which is continuously developing in the *jugyou kenkyu* process.

#### ***How Students Comprehend Teaching Material (Individual Student Observation)***

Teachers observe students individually in the teaching-learning process. For example, there is a clear awareness of students who are slow to begin work, along with mature students who begin work quickly, and variation learning is provided. Also, sufficient attention is paid to students who are docile, quiet, and who think over things carefully.

#### ***The Creation of a new Standard/Model and Order/System***

Students and teachers are working together to develop alternative strategies to build new standards and order within the culture of the classroom and school. They try to mutually understand what the problems are in a new and unknown situation. Teachers and pupils make connections between thinking and action in order to facilitate learning. Teachers connect asking questions and teaching, as we can often see in the characteristics of classroom learning. It is at this level of in-depth exchange, where interaction between pupils develops in whole class as well as in peer group base on the *zaseki jugyouan*.

#### **Conclusion**

Japanese teachers do a great deal of observing classroom practices and students activities and reflecting on their own thinking, decision-making, attitudes and actions. In the teaching and learning process they prepare various alternatives based on their learning journal, reflective papers, ethnography field notes and database of students in school as well as classroom activities. They are always using ethnography and journal notes to think about new and creative perspectives for classroom activities and reaching every student's learning. Teachers constantly review their expectations of students based on what is actually happening in classroom and are thinking of how they can facilitate student growth and development.

The framework of Ando Elementary School for improving the quality of teaching and teachers has an effective role as driving force for school change. Teachers who use

ethnography and journal field notes in *jugyou kenkyu* process were able to create and apply an alternative strategy in classroom management. They changed their assumption about students' responsibilities and teachers' roles. They have recently found an alternative approach to use ethnography field notes as evidence for their interpretation of what students were doing and what teacher should be doing in classroom.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Note**

- 1) *Jugyou Kenkyu* is a collaborative research on teaching-learning process. The Nagoya University research group translates it as collaborative research on classroom activities and the United States scholars enlighten it "Lesson Study".



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