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Challenges in Japanese Teachers' Professional Development: A Focus on an Alternative Perspective

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Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that the contemporary situation of School-Based In-Service Teacher Training (SB-INSTT) such as *jugyou kenkyu*¹ in Japan provides various opportunities for change and enriching classroom practices, for teachers' professional development and for improving school activities and environment (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Sarkar Arani & Matoba, 2002, 2005; Lewis et al, 2004; Takahashi & Yoshida, 2004; Fernandez et. al. 2003; Akita, 2005; Mun Ling et al, 2005). But this is not without problems especially from 2002 year in which the new national curriculum was introduced in elementary and junior high schools. Recent research, much of it from the University of Tokyo, shows that conflicting messages and expectations regarding appropriate classroom practice have created a stressful work environment for many teachers (Sato, 2005; Kaneko, 2005; Kariya 2003). On the one hand, the government has not abandoned its call for an emphasis on teaching that develops thinking skills and other life skills and abilities. On the other hand, teachers feel compelled, because of pressure from the media and policy makers, to emphasize basic academic skills, often through drills. And the government's appeals for teachers to devote increased attention to students' "individual aptitudes" have further complicated the situation (Bjork & Tsuneyoshi, 2005: 623).

The new national curriculum emphasizes and clearly specifies interdisciplinary and comprehensive learning, life skills, international understanding, the environment, and global learning. The "period for integrated studies" was added to existing subjects. Annually, between 105 and 110 school hours are allocated to the period of integrated studies for elementary school students at the third grade or higher and more than 70 school hours annually are allocated for lower secondary school students. Also, upper

secondary school students take 105-210 integrated studies credits in total. Moreover, since April of 2002, the traditional academic content of school education has been reduced by thirty percent.

The integrated studies period in the new national curriculum was designed to develop new skills and abilities and requires students to be excited about learning and to think independently (Tsuneyoshi, et. al. 2005). Schools were given great flexibility to determine the length of integrated studies lessons, the arrangement of instructional content at each grade level and the subjects that would be introduced. Integrated studies lessons were to be driven by student-generated questions with the goal of encouraging pupils to think and work independently. Because of the individualized nature of the program, no integrated studies textbooks were published and teachers were advised to incorporate more hands-on activities, problem-solving exercises, and student-centered learning into their courses (Bjork & Tsuneyoshi, 2004, 2005).

In this paper we examine challenges of Japanese teachers' professional development which points to the essential change in in-service teacher training programs. Emphasis is placed here on an integrated model for professional development that should be deliberately designed to assist teacher training to construct an understanding of the spirit of the new national curriculum approach and to develop new skills including the ability to communicate, to learn from each other, to open school to society, to design learning material, to engage in self-managing school and to change school from an "institutions of learning" to a "learning organization".

Challenges in Japanese Teachers Quality

Traditionally, Japanese teachers are extremely busy in preparing their daily work and in undertaking other school duties (Ninomiya & Okato, 1990). According to the survey conducted by Menlo and Poppleton (1990), about 90% of teachers experience "stress in the job" and feel that, to a great extent, matters connected with work occupy the mind outside working hours. Although teachers are quite satisfied with their present jobs, they feel too busy, and sometimes too tired. According to a study of teachers' culture (Kudomi, 1988) 80.6% of the teachers claimed "being busy". Based upon this research as well as our own study findings (Sarkar Arani & Matoba, 2002, 2005), we believe that teacher training should have more precise goals, and that these goals should be more efficiently and flexibly attainable. The policy should be to encourage teachers to apply themselves to self-directed learning. This must become a normal part of their reflection upon the ongoing teaching-learning process. As Sato notes one of the most

urgent tasks facing our schools today is defending the professionalism, autonomy, and dignity of the teaching profession (2005:33).

Stigler, et. al. observe that Japanese society views teaching more as a craft, as a skill that can be perfected through practice and that can benefit from shared learning. If music were used as an analogy, the Japanese conception of the ideal teacher would be like that of the concert pianist. The great pianist is not expected to write the concerto but only to perform it well. An innovative teacher in the United States is one who organizes her own curriculum, makes her own materials, and implements her lessons with independent initiative. In Japan, the innovative teacher is one who skillfully teaches the lesson that is prescribed by the text (1996:216).

Japanese SB-INSTT programs are designed to emphasize the responsibility of teachers in the classroom, and to examine the technical skills of teaching. In contrast, we believe that teachers' professional development should be about challenging dominant myths, assumptions and hidden message systems in teaching and schooling as they are currently organized. This view is concurrent with that of Smyth who states that professional development, "... should be concerned with creating improvements in educational practice and the social relationships that underlie those practices, and ought to be about crafting and living out mutual forms of accountability among teachers, administrators, parents, and students" (1995:86).

We must reflect upon teachers' ability, competence, role, career and staff development. It is a traditional expectation upon teachers that they, as "teaching machines" (teachers as actors), need only to worry about the techniques of teaching, classroom management and discipline techniques. Based on this view, teachers just react to the plan and curriculum decisions prescribed for him or her by the educational management and policy. Sato looked at this problem from social-political aspects, he argued that, the crisis in teaching has undermined the respect with which teachers were long regarded. One of the most obvious manifestations of this is the proliferation of training programs in which classroom teachers must participate. Many teachers today undergo corporate training, including department-store training to learn such "social skills" as the correct way to greet and treat "customers". Many others are made to take cram-school courses to boost their proficiency in a subject area. For teachers accustomed to thinking of themselves as education professionals, this is nothing short of insulting. And the outcome of it all is to redefine the teacher's status from that of professional to that of servant in the employ of the taxpayers (Sato, 2005:33).

In the new national curriculum, Japanese schools need to develop new abilities in teachers' skills in providing and designing effective teaching and learning, and in

improving the quality of learning. These skills are closely related to all of aspects of educational activities, school life and curriculum, and develop in teachers a new responsibility and professionalism (Sarkar Arani & Matoba, 2002).

Although Japanese teachers understood that with the integrated studies period students are interested in investigating and learning there were many teachers who tended to express more insecurity about their ability to deliver the integrated studies curriculum and felt pressure to develop integrated studies period effectively. They worry about academic achievement and preparing their students for the entrance examination and feel pressured to cover the knowledge and skills in the previous version of the national curriculum (Bjork & Tsuneyoshi, 2005). According to a recently published survey conducted by the MEXT, about 60% of junior high school teachers mentioned that integrated studies period should be abolished (Kariya, 2005).

Teachers don't have textbooks and curriculum guidelines for the integrated studies period. Therefore, SB-INSTT should be deliberately designed to assist in-service teacher training to construct an understanding of the spirit of the new national curriculum and to develop new skills including the ability to communicate and exchange ideas. As Ashcroft & Griffiths note that "the development of classroom skills, e.g., voice control and questioning, are necessary but not the only requirements for becoming a reflective teacher. It is essential to develop other skills, including the ability to communicate and exchange ideas; to analyze and evaluate data collected; to engage in self-assessment; to use a variety of motivational strategies; to address students' different learning needs and to develop the ability to criticize existing states of affairs from a moral-social-political point of view" (1989:36).

An Alternative Perspective: More Authority

For teachers to develop effective teaching competences we must be prepared to give them more responsibility, authority and participation in the leadership of schools, including in school management, curriculum planning and teaching-learning activities. It is obvious that these are teachers' responsibilities and they should be prepared to take them. The more they take responsibility, the more they should be independent in their roles. This belief is supported by Sayer who notes that, "teachers need to have professional scope and space, to have ownership of the teaching task, to feel responsible and professionally accountable for the quality of service they provide" (1996:10-11).

In the 21st Century teachers as professionals, as curriculum planners, as decision-makers, as researchers, as intellectuals, and as learners have a lot of responsibilities related to society, school and classroom. They should be skilled in many

areas: developing curriculum, changes in assessment, improving the teaching-learning process, shared decision-making in school improvement, participating in a self-managing school and so on. SB-INSTT programs must be sure to include all of the above mentioned aspects of teachers' performance.

At present, Japanese SB-INSTT focuses mainly upon teachers' responsibility and authority in the classroom and during the teaching-learning process. But in the new perspective, we believe effective teaching and increased professionalism in teachers will come from developing new skills including; developing curriculum, shared decision-making, engaging in self-directed growth, designing learning and so on.

Educational policy related to teachers' competence and responsibility should be more conducive to changing the conceptualization of teacher quality and teacher authority. This can be done by developing effective in-service teacher training courses within the school, based on skills necessary for self-directed growth as well as collaborative research related to the classroom activities.

An Integrated Model for Professional Development

Considering the alternative roles of in-service teacher training as a starting point, we can develop SB-INSTT and *jogyou kenkyu* into a new model of improving teachers' competence that consists of four interrelated projects of teachers' professional development. This new model offers a possibility in which the school/classroom is not only a place of work but also a source of professional development, where teachers have common tasks to make the teaching-learning process more effective, to develop curriculum, to design learning, to develop teaching materials and to participate in the leadership of school activities.

- **Teachers on their own:** This is a self-improvement project. It includes self improvement, self-renewal, self-directed learning, self-evaluation and self-actualization knowledge. In case of Japanese schools, ethnography field notes, journal writing and *karute* (reflective papers) is a method of in-service teacher training based on teachers' self-directed learning. Furthermore, teachers attend some private study circles which are spontaneous and provide opportunities for teachers to study based on their needs, interests, justifying ongoing decisions, self-improvement projects, and independent development experiences.
- **Teacher with teachers:** This can be regarded as a collaborative development project. It involves such aspects as exchanging experiences, planning cooperatively, learning through participation and enhancing professional dialogue. In Japan, teachers have opportunities such as: *jogyou kenkyu*; collaborative research on the

teaching-learning process, *jugyou kentoukai*; collaborative reflection on classroom activities, and *tano gakko no jugyou sankan*; in which the teacher visits another school to observe some classes, talk with the teachers of that school about new designs for teaching and learning, and writes a report for his own school.

- **Teacher and students:** Teacher-student interaction means activities such as: teacher-student participation, teacher-student sharing in teaching and learning. In the case of Japanese schools, each teacher, based on their grade, subject, and subject matter content, attempts to develop student interaction in peer group (teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction) through participation, and sharing teaching and learning. They make database for each student in school and mutual relationships among students in classroom activities as a proposal for *jugyou kenkyu* which is called *zaseki jugyouan*.
- **Teacher and parents; school and community:** Teacher-parent and community cooperation involves teacher-parent discussion and curriculum planning, and the common responsibility of children. In Japanese elementary schools, teachers have a special program known as *jugyou sankan*. Teachers of each grade invite parents to observe their classes, make notes and suggest ways to improve the teaching-learning process in the after class discussion. In this area teachers should make more effort toward involving parents in curriculum planning and school management. Recently Japanese schools try to open school to community and classroom through *kenkyu jugyou* (research lesson) which is considered as an event.

Conclusion

These are highly challenging opportunities for teachers to improve the quality of their teaching, to do research on the teaching-learning process, to exchange experiences with teachers and parents, to understand parents' expectation, to provide collaborative learning, to understand learners' needs and characteristics, to obtain self-renewal and continuous change and establish collaborative relations with administrators based on self-directed, collaborative professional development.

However, school learning will not improve markedly unless we give teachers the opportunity and the support they need to advance their craft by increasing the effectiveness of the methods they use. Teachers must be the primary driving force behind change. They are best positioned to understand the problems that students face and to generate possible solutions (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999). As Fujita commented, if Japanese schooling and teaching could continue to be successful more or less, it would

be not because of the current education reforms, but because of the dedicated efforts of Japanese teachers and their professional competencies (Fujita, 2004).

From this study it can be claimed that the Japanese SB-INSTT approaches (especially *jugyou kenkyu*) are well developed and effective in the first (teacher on their own) and second (teacher with teachers) elements of the new model of teachers' professional development. However, based on the new model, the third (teacher and students) and fourth (teacher and parents; school and community) elements require further development in Japanese SB-INSTT.

The on-going professional development of teachers is a very important area which has real meaning. But Japanese SB-INSTT programs are designed to emphasize only the responsibility of teachers in the classroom, teaching methods and to examine classroom management. Since implementing the new national curriculum, Japanese teachers should be skilled in many innovative areas related to their new responsibilities such as developing curriculum, communicating and exchanging ideas, self-managing schools, managing teaching materials, designing learning, participating in the leadership of school and developing the ability to criticize existing states of affairs from a moral-social-political point of view.

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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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