

Lesson Study: Scaling Up Peer-to-Peer Learning for Teachers in Zambia

Overview

This case study explores how Lesson Study, a program administered by the Zambian Ministry of General Education, in partnership with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) from 2005 until 2015,¹ provides primary and secondary schoolteachers in Zambia with the knowledge and skills to continuously improve their teaching through a monthly cycle of “Plan-Do-See” activities.

Key Contextual Conditions

Zambia’s introduction of free basic education in 2002—a policy reform mandated by the country’s “Educating Our Future” framework (1996) for developing its national educational system—substantially increased access to basic education within a few years and allowed the country to move from 63 percent of students completing primary school in 2000 to near universal primary completion (94 percent) by 2010 (UNESCO 2012). The success in primary school completion, however, did not translate into success in improving students’ learning outcomes. Among their regional peers, Zambian students continued to score close to or at the bottom of the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) assessments for grade 6. The government of Zambia considered the quality of teachers in Zambia to be one of the factors contributing to students’ low performance (UNESCO 2012). Not only was there an insufficient supply of qualified teachers, but there was also a lack of knowledge and skills among existing teachers. Against this backdrop, in 2005, the government of Zambia invited a technical cooperation organization of the Japanese government to strengthen Zambia’s teaching and learning achievement using a school-based continuing professional development program called Lesson Study.

Development Challenge

Although there has been a significant increase in Zambia’s primary school completion rate, there has been little progress in improving students’ learning outcomes. For example, between 2000 and 2007, Zambian students’ scores in reading and mathematics fell, dropping the country’s rankings in reading from 13th (out of 14) to 14th (out of 15), and in mathematics from 12th (out of 14) to 15th (out of 15) in Southern and Eastern African countries (SACMEQ 2016). The percentage of students mastering the minimum required knowledge in reading and mathematics also dropped during this period (UNESCO 2014).

Addressing Delivery Challenges

Stakeholder engagement. A necessary component of Lesson Study’s success was teacher buy-in. In Zambia, teachers traditionally did not share their lessons with each other or seek out or receive advice and feedback on their teaching. Lesson Study, according to JICA officials, had to shift the mindsets of teachers toward the practice of continuing professional development—a new concept for many—as well as to change the culture of teaching in Zambia. Moreover, Lesson Study introduced the concept of peer-to-peer learning, which empowered teachers to act as agents of change and themselves become the trainers.

PROJECT DATA

SECTOR:

Education

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:

Low level of learning outcomes among primary schoolchildren

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:

Project design, stakeholder engagement, and embracing local champions

COUNTRY:

Zambia

REGION:

Africa

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Project design. Lesson Study emphasized “flexibility and autonomy rather than uniformity.” Rather than sticking to rigid project design agreements, a focus on evolving practices and interventions during implementation greatly enhanced the program’s adaptability to a variety of educational settings.

Embracing local champions. Lesson Study was introduced in Zambia at the request of the Zambian government, but not until after officials from Zambia had had the opportunity to learn about and to observe the program in use in schools in implementing countries, such as the Philippines. While observing the Lesson Study cycle in action and hearing from Filipino teachers about their experiences, Zambian officials began to see the benefits and opportunities for developing teacher capacity in their own country. Consequently, a small group of advocates supported the program early on and became a core driving force within the government in the effort to scale up the program.

Lessons Learned

This case study captures lessons that may assist other implementers facing similar development and delivery challenges.

- JICA was a committed partner throughout Lesson Study’s 10 years of growth, development, and expansion. Its cooperative partnership with the government of Zambia was critical to creating a healthy balance between autonomy and cooperation, particularly in providing the necessary space for local stakeholders to adapt Lesson Study to the local context and in providing technical assistance and support when the program needed an external catalyst or extra guidance.
- The success of Lesson Study depended on the view that teachers are agents of change rather than targets of training. This shift in thinking not only helped to change the mindset of teachers toward continuing education and professional development—relatively new concepts in the Zambian teaching profession—but also demonstrated the respect the government of Zambia held for its teachers.
- Local champions of Lesson Study were another core driving force behind the government’s long-term support of the program. These champions, especially those who held insights into the local realities of teaching and learning in Zambia, helped to ensure implementation took place seamlessly and increased the credibility of the program’s design and adaptation.

Endnote

1. The program with the Ministry of General Education is still ongoing; however, JICA support for Lesson Study ended in 2015.

References

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