

The Limits of Lessons Observations and Lesson Study



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Huntington Research School

Today the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) released some fascinating new trials, including two large scale trials on peer **lesson observations** and on a **'Lesson Study'** programme, with both showing no impact on student outcomes. So, what are we to make of the findings? What do they tell us about the challenges of teacher CPD, and the value and impact of teachers observing one another in the classroom?

Lesson observations are an ever-present feature of school life. They exist as proxy inspection tools in some schools, but as meaningful opportunities for shared CPD in others. The **'Teacher Observation'** project, held in 82 schools sought to evaluate the impact of regular peer observations, based on an American trial, on English and maths GCSE outcomes. The issues raised by peer observations including common issues voiced by teachers:

"Some said they had difficulty fitting the observations into their timetable, while others said that they felt uncomfortable taking time out of teaching to complete observations, and that the level of expected observations was unsustainable. Even when observations did take place, there was no evidence that teachers who did more observations had better pupil results."

Now, the long-standing issue of grading lesson observations may well be behind us (re-read Prof Rob Coe's outstanding article again anyway), but issues with observing one another, or leaders coaching teachers using such vehicles, needs scrutiny and analysis.

Why do we think the trial showed no impact on outcomes? We can speculate that watching one another can feel like a useful and positive experience, but then going on to meaningfully change our practice is hard. Though peer observation is integral to new teacher training, is there potentially a **'knowing – doing gap'**. That is to say, we can talk about teaching and feel good about doing so, but can be hard to translate that into meaningful changes. Do we have a knowledge and shared language for expert teaching? Are great teachers even aware of what underpins their tacit expertise? Do we have an understanding of how to successfully implement a change of classroom practice? These are tricky questions we should face, as schools and as a teaching profession.

The **'Lesson Study'** project, one of the most robust trials ever conducted in the UK, challenges much received wisdom that the process of 'lesson study' can change teacher practice that leads to better student outcomes. The 181 schools faithfully implemented this very popular CPD model, but crucially the impact on students was missing, even for those schools faithfully implementing it for two years. Borrowed from Japan, the **'lesson study'** model involves 3 teachers observing one another and sharing practice and insights. In the project, participating teachers attended 5 training sessions in the first year and Headteachers attended an introductory conference, with teachers having timetabled sessions to co-plan and observe lessons.

Lesson study is viewed positively by many proponents of the model, as they argue it offers a space for teacher professionalism to grow and important time for reflection and talk. We may miss these values when we measure student outcomes, but it should give us thought. Is 'lesson study' a vehicle for CPD that lacks the expert input to change practice? Does it feel positive, but ultimately not lead to meaningful changes in the classroom? Does this trial reflect a lack of a shared language about teaching practice that is essential to Japanese success? Is the intensive effort required to undertake the model better than other CPD arrangements?

Sir Kevan Collins, the CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation, gives us all a challenge when considering CPD, lesson observation models, and approaches such as 'lesson study':

"Today's research tells us that schools shouldn't expect to see an improvement in results by increasing the frequency and intensity of their teacher observations. Even though some teachers in our trial struggled to fit them into their busy days, when they did, they made no difference to pupil results."

It is an important provocation. Should we abandon lesson observations and 'lesson study'? Of course, no single trial gives us such cast-iron guidance on how to act. And yet, we should confront our assumptions and strongly held beliefs by reflecting upon evidence such as the trials released today. It is time to think hard about the limits of observing teachers.