

**A Japanese Teacher's Beliefs
in Implementing Cooperative Learning
Resulting in the Changes of School Culture**

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Abstract

Drawing from the current situations in the researches of beliefs of language teacher, the present study examines the changing teacher beliefs of an English teacher at a public high school in Japan in the process of implementing cooperative learning in his classroom. A qualitative research was conducted through four Skype interviews with the participant. The results is that some small attempts, inspiration and comradeship of the high-school English teacher resulted in the drastic changes not only in classroom practice but also, unexpectedly, the fundamental school-wide cultural transformation in the end.

This paper shows the changes in a teacher's beliefs before and after implementing cooperative learning at a high school English classroom, which resulted in transforming the school atmosphere on the teacher culture.

In Japanese educational contexts, teachers do not have perfect knowledge of cooperative learning and its rationales. The teachers implementing cooperative learning use an arbitrary mixture of frameworks developed in different contexts including, for instance, *Collective Learning* that is group learning traditionally rooted in the Japanese context (Negishi, 2016), but it is not based on a well-read theory or approach; however, contextual applicability is placed more priority in classroom practice. Therefore, the teachers implementing a new approach possibly experience changes in beliefs.

Recently, however, there has been an initiative to define cooperative learning in the Japanese context. Mizokami (2007) maintains that an umbrella concept, *active learning* (p. 271) is composed of several components and cooperative learning is referred to as one of the tools to initiate active learning. Active learning overarches cooperative learning, *student-centered class*, *problem-solution/inquiry-based learning*, *problem/project-based learning*. Depending on the different contexts, it seems that these categories under active learning are sometimes utilized interchangeably with active learning. Therefore, active learning signifies cooperative learning when they focus on a teaching or learning aspect. Japanese scholars and practitioners often customize cooperative learning approaches in their contexts based on their teacher beliefs.

The purpose of this research is to compare a teacher's beliefs before and after implementing cooperative learning in his classroom practice and investigate the key components to ensure success in cooperative learning so that it may be beneficial for those practicing or considering practicing cooperative learning in classrooms or school-wide now that cooperative learning is attracting attention.

Literature Review

This paper will explore the changes of a high school English teacher from three perspectives: his beliefs in student changes, his own changes, and the institutional changes. There are very few studies published on teacher beliefs implementing cooperative learning, though there are some on teachers implementing Communicative Language Teaching (Fushino, 2014). Therefore, what needs to be done is to define *teacher beliefs* and explain the issues related to them.

Beliefs are formed at early stages in life and when one finishes schooling, they are fully developed; and individuals develop a belief system that give access to all the beliefs acquired through the process of cultural transmission (Pajares, 1992; Borg, 2015; Sasajima & Nishino, 2014). In this way, one belief is connected with and influenced by other beliefs. Pajares (1992) suggests that beliefs can refer to as “an individual’s judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition, a judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do” (p.316), developing a framework of 16 basic aspects of teacher beliefs. Beliefs rarely change during adulthood but in case they do, the most common cause may be a conversion from one authority to another or a gestalt shift (Pajares, 1992; Borg, 2006 & 2015). In other words, when there is an event or a person of higher importance that influences a person dramatically, it is likely that the person’s beliefs can change. In a classroom practice, when teachers change their teaching style from lecture-centered to student-centered, they get to have an experience of the authority conversion.

Teacher beliefs are changeable depending on *significant others* or a *critical incident*. This conceptualization is derived from the socio-cultural theory (Sasajima et al, 2014). Teacher beliefs depend on the relationship with the others; and at an institution, immediate surroundings to teachers are co-workers at work. The interaction with his or her own teacher as a student and with the co-workers are essential to establishing teacher beliefs. Furthermore, teacher beliefs are transformable by reflection. They construct close connection, exchange knowledge, and is involved with teaching practice with complexity. The causes for change might be reflective practice in addition to authoritative presence. When cooperative learning creates changes, it also creates a new culture to the environment. Teachers and students have to adjust themselves to the changes, which also occurs in classroom culture and also to teachers’ culture.

Immediately after Fushino’s argument that there was no research published on teacher beliefs of practitioners for cooperative learning (2014), one study was published which intends to explore to what extent teacher collaboration occurred in the professional development of a graduate student and elementary school teacher of English and her colleagues’ teacher-learner autonomy in their school context (Kojima, 2014). In Collaborative and Reflective Supervision (CRS) with her colleagues, the participant of the study, a private elementary school teacher, played a leading role as a key person in the community of learning and practice. The result is that she became a key person in the elementary English school, where collaboration among teachers is essential for English instruction to be successful. However, more focus is placed on teachers’ collaborative relationship rather than on beliefs of a teacher implementing cooperative learning and driving changes in the school culture. Teacher beliefs implementing cooperative learning and its influence has not been studied so much in Japan. Therefore, this research intends to explore the changes a Japanese teacher of English implementing cooperative learning experiences, which is the central research question.

RQ1: What changes did a Japanese teacher of English make in terms of classroom

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practice, teacher beliefs, and school culture in implementing cooperative learning?

RQ2: What are the key components to success in implementing cooperative learning approaches in the classroom?

Research design

In this section, the design of the study is discussed including the participant selection and participant profile, the interview designs and its timeline, the approach to the interview including interview protocol, and data analysis method.

Participant selection and profile

As for a participant, a high school teacher was introduced by a researcher of cooperative learning as a practitioner of cooperative learning to be analyzed in this research. Mr. Yamada (pseudonym) is a Japanese teacher of English at a public high school in Greater Tokyo. In his thirties, he had several years of teaching experience at a cram school before becoming a high-school teacher. When he was introduced to the author, he had plenty of experience with teaching in a cooperative learning style and was one of the most popular presenters at an English teachers' association for his presentation on cooperative learning practice. He has presented on cooperative learning at conferences supported by the prefectural board of education.

Interview design, data collection method and timeline

The interviews were phenomenological to ask about Mr. Yamada's experience within a constructivist paradigm. There were three semi-structured interviews in depth for 30 to 40 minutes each with one follow-up interview. The data collection was conducted through the interviews. The medium was telephone- or computer-mediated interviews with the use of Skype and there were no face-to-face encounters. The interaction basically started on the question-answer sequence (Roulston, 2010), but the author tried not to speak much but to minimize her words to elicit Mr. Yamada's speeches. Since the researcher was exploring Mr. Yamada's beliefs, perceptions and understandings of cooperative learning, open questions were effective for him to answer in his own words as Roulston explains, "since researchers want to understand the participants' feelings, perceptions and understandings, open questions are particularly useful in providing a format for interviewees to answer in their own words" (p. 16). There were three interviews conducted weekly for three consecutive weeks in February 2016. The ubiquitous technological device, Skype was used; therefore, the researcher and the participant did not have a chance to meet face to face.

Approach to the interview and interview protocol

The process of this phenomenological interview followed the three-interview series; (1) to get background information of the participants focusing on his or her life history, (2) to reconstruct the experience more in detail, and (3) the interviewee's interpretation, reflecting on the meaning, as Seidman (2006) suggests. These interview steps intended to ask how instead of why to elicit more of the experience and perception. The first interview was designed for a grand-tour view of the background information with the questions centering on the participant's teaching experience before implementing cooperative learning and the motivation for changing his teaching method up to the present time. The second interview focused on the meticulous

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details of experience at the participant's critical moments (process) of transformation to cooperative learning in the past rather than the present. The third interview inquired about how he practiced cooperative learning and how the students reacted to it. In the last interview, the questions were asked about how he perceives and interprets the changes of his teaching style.

Data analysis method

The approach to transcribing and analyzing the collected data is to be discussed in this section. According to Roulston (2010), phenomenological approaches to analysis first “reduce the data to the essential meaning elements” (p. 161). The unnecessary data is stripped off and the data is narrowed down to the minimum “meaning statements” required for the analysis. Next they are grouped according to themes and create text and structure of the experience. To do so, the researcher used the coding software titled MAXQDA (version 11, 2012). The coding method was values coding, focusing on value, attitude, and belief, representing his or her perspectives or worldview explained by Saldana (2016, pp. 131-135). This is appropriate to explore cultural values and belief systems, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences. Lastly, the analysis involves a combination of the structural and textual descriptions.

Results

This section mainly unveils the interview results by summarizing Mr. Yamada's accounts of nine years' teaching experience from the perspectives of his teacher beliefs of himself, classroom practice, and his environment. All data was collected in the three interviews and summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Summary of Mr. Yamada's teaching career

<i>School Year</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Notes</i>
-Mar., 2007	Taught English at a large-scaled private academy	
Apr., 2007 Term 1	Joined a public high school as a teacher of English Met the sociology teacher	Overwhelmed by the students
Autumn, 2007	Visited Moto Yoshiwara Junior High School in Shizuoka	
Term 3, 2007	Started using cooperative learning approaches	
Mar, 2009	School-wide class observation project approved at the teachers' meeting	
May, 2010	School-wide class observation project in effect	Started feeling sure about CL
Jul., 2011- Jan., 2012	Participated a study tour at Iowa State Univ. for one semester	Teaching practice for 2 weeks in the city
Apr., 2013-	Lower-motivated uncontrollable students	
Mar, 2016	The uncontrollable students graduate leaving	

positive feedback behind

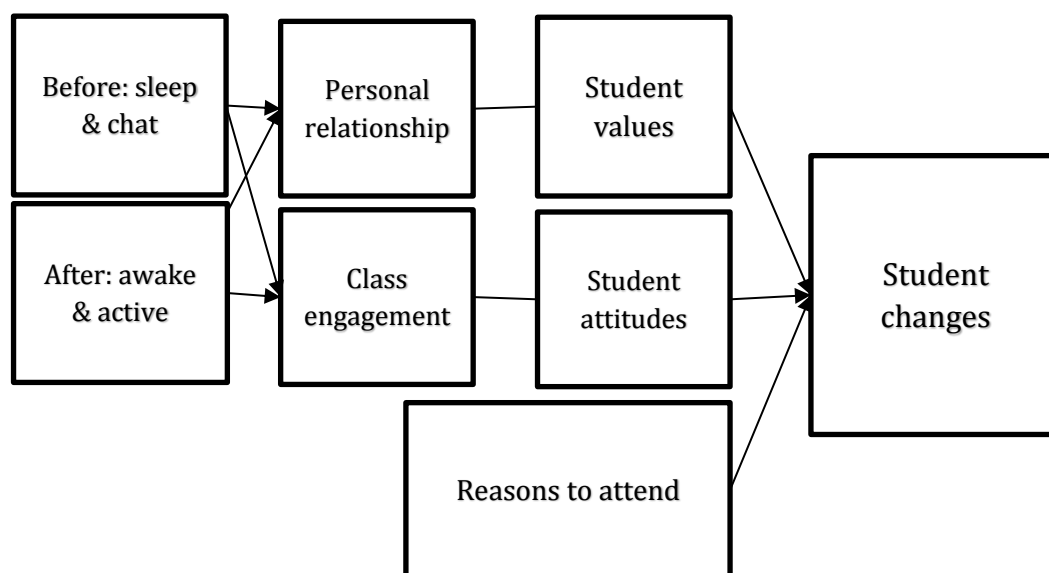
The data extracted from the interview transcript were categorized under three themes: student changes, change of the teacher (participant), and the change in the school culture in order to answer the research questions. Each theme was analyzed with three sub-categories according to the values coding method, focusing on value, attitude, and belief.

Changes in students: trial and error

In the first two semesters of the first year at the high school, where the students' English proficiency was very limited, Mr. Yamada had a hard time. He was shocked to see students chatting or sleeping throughout class, so started exploring a new way to get students involved.

Figure 2

Diagram of codes for Mr. Yamada's beliefs on student changes



In those days, he thought that the major issues in classroom culture came not only from their level of English but also from their level of general zest for living. He had a hard time engaging them in class. Then he started looking for an alternative teaching method; that was the starting point of his encounter with cooperative learning approaches.

In the third semester of the first year, Mr. Yamada started using cooperative learning approaches in class, inspired by a senior colleague of social studies, Mr. Sanada, (a pseudonym) after their visit to the model school. Previously Mr. Yamada provided lecture-style classes, but in the third semester, he drastically changed his teaching style and started pair and group activities when students worked with translation exercises. One year later, in the third year of his career, he realized from the looks of the students who were not sleeping or chatting that cooperative learning was effective. Throughout this period, the cooperative activities he introduced were mainly translation activity or sentence building in pairs or groups.

Next April, after coming back from a one-semester study tour for English teachers in

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the U.S., Mr. Yamada was shocked to discover that the brand-new first-year students had a much more limited English proficiency than he expected. Therefore, he had to fully redesign the lesson plans. These students, however, demonstrated the most observable positive growth, representing the potential of cooperative learning including network building.

Mr. Yamada frequently made this remark in the interviews, “Our students do not have a reason to attend English class. So it is necessary for us to prepare them a reason.” The reason which Mr. Yamada found is to provide individual students with a place to be and opportunities to learn through getting involved through English lessons in a cooperative relationship.

In terms of student changes, there were observable differences in their behavior as well; in the third year, he realized there were very few sleeping students. Those distracted students, enjoying chatting or started sleeping in class previously, showed more favorable attitudes by participating pair or group activities. There were several possible reasons, he analyzed. One of the significant reasons was that the cooperative learning built relationships in the classroom, which became their reason or motivation to participate an English class. When one student gave a presentation in front of the class, it was not the presentation given by a stranger, but someone familiar, which made students listen more attentively. Another reason for successful cooperative learning was that the students were provided with some space for negotiation among students, which was not likely to happen in the previous lecture-style communication. He also commented that the student feedback of cooperative learning classes was always positive.

Mr. Yamada’s changes in the beliefs on classroom practice

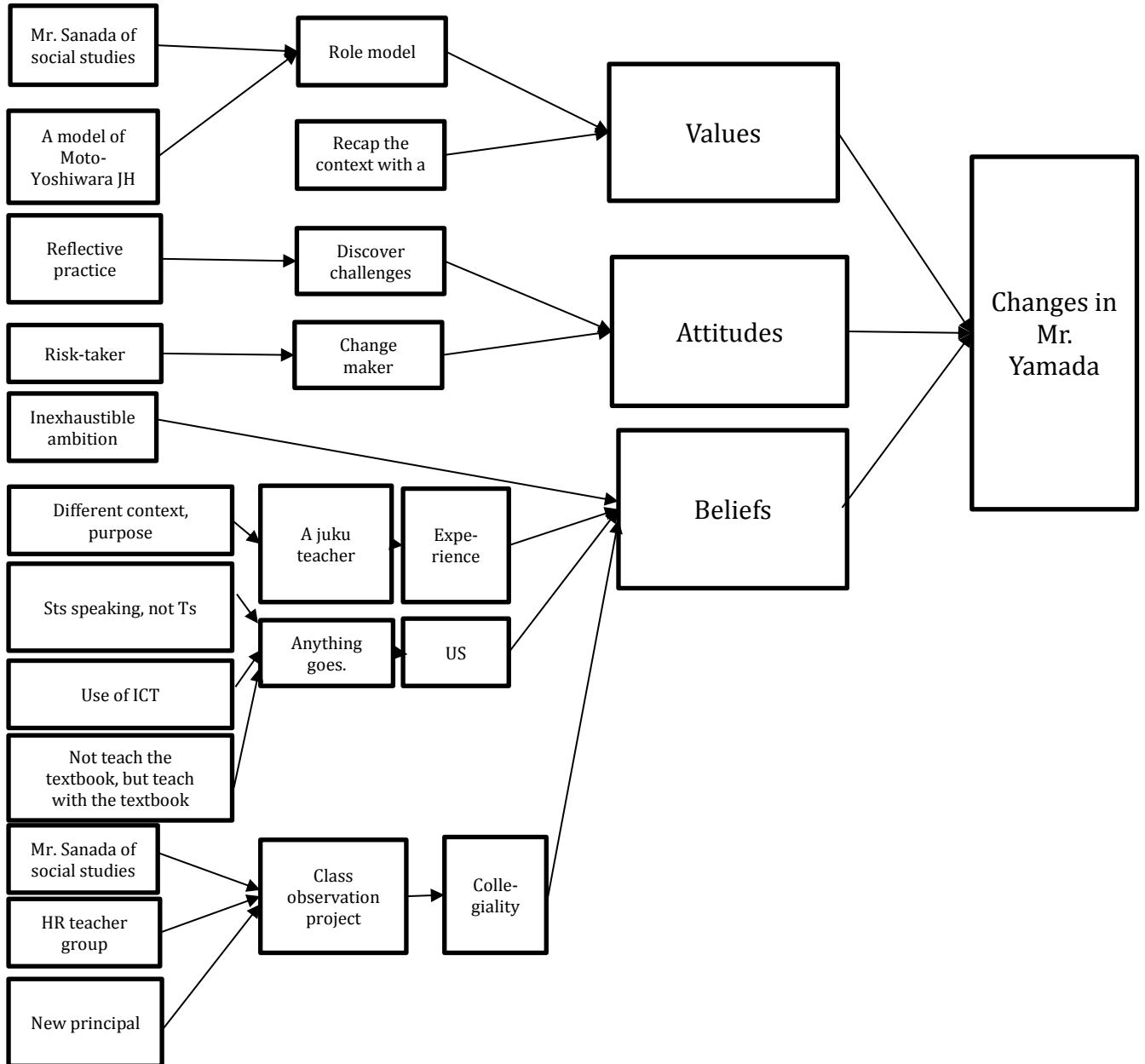
Next, the results of the analysis into Mr. Yamada’s beliefs are to be presented in Figure 3 (Please find it on the following page). Based on the values coding, there were three themes that came up under his view of an ideal teacher, the changes in his sense of value in terms of class practice and collegiality.

Mr. Yamada expressed his own sense of value of an ideal teacher a few times in the interviews. When asked about his experience of learning English, Mr. Yamada mentioned a valuable encounter with an English teacher as a teenager and he thought that he benefited by meeting with that teacher, which constructed his belief of an ideal teacher. He wished his students to feel benefitted by meeting him and that is the type of teachers he would like to be. A certain ideal image of English teacher had already been constructed when he embarked on his teaching career. His teacher beliefs including values were almost crystalized until he became a teacher, but they were challenged by meeting students and colleagues. He remembered the idea of an ideal teacher which he held as a teenager.

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Figure 3

Diagram of Mr. Yamada's beliefs on his classroom practice



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There were changes in Mr. Yamada's sense of value with a class observation of Mr. Sanada, his colleague of social studies. This can be identified as the first *critical incident* that happened in the first year at his workplace and influential on Mr. Yamada's teaching career. Mr. Yamada was shocked to witness the students working so actively and engaged in group work in the class of social studies, who showed unfavorable behaviors in his English class. He thought that Mr. Sanada's lesson was "convincing," though it was not the same as the reputation of the teacher community. As far as he knew the voices of the teachers' room in those days, Mr. Sanada was not as reasonably respected as he deserved. However, Mr. Yamada in the first year, young and new, was requested to follow the teachers of Disciplining group, so he did not know where to turn to. He found that positions on both sides were reasonable and understandable. He wished to be neutral; however, disciplining teachers, who spoke ill of students, led quiet class because students were forced to do so. They were quiet or sleeping. Mr. Yamada explained about himself that he was not the authoritative type for a teacher, so he knew that it would be impossible to do the same as disciplining teachers did. That was one of the reasons for him to discover his teacher identity and teaching style through changing the teaching style. Mr. Sanada's lesson seemed more than powerful enough to convince him that cooperative learning was effective to their students despite all the harsh criticism against the teaching style that was widespread in the teachers' room. Mr. Sanada provided him with substantial information such as books and websites on cooperative learning and invited him to observe his class without any authoritative or pressing tone, "Please come if you want to." Guided by Mr. Sanada, that was a starting point of his interest in cooperative learning.

The next critical incident occurred in autumn that year. Asked out to observe a model lesson at Moto-Yoshiwara Junior High School in Shizuoka Prefecture, famous for its school-wide practice of cooperative learning, Mr. Yamada had an eye-opening experience. According to him, his preconceived molds were totally discarded. By using some special large white sheets for writing which he was not familiar with, the students actively engaged themselves in a cooperative writing activity suitable for the junior high students. He was jarred to see that the junior-high students were excited to work cooperatively in English classroom and this inspired him profoundly, leading him to think that he could bring in cooperative learning approaches to his classroom.

The third critical incident was relating to the changes in collegiality. There are two timings to compare and contrast: his first year versus the second year and later. For the first year when he started working at the high school, there was a conflict between Mr. Sanada and some teachers of so-called Disciplining Group (*seikatsu shido bu*), who had established the school-wide culture until he joined it. The majority of them had a negative view toward students' weakness, blaming the students for their failure. Mr. Yamada was often critically questioned by them whether cooperative learning was really a good choice or not and suggested reconsidering implementing it. In those days, he felt by what he called his "skin sensibility" that approximately eighty percent of the entire teachers disagreed with Mr. Sanada and his new teaching styles. Then the third critical incident, which transformed the quality of collegiality, occurred. The proposal of the school-wide class observation project, which had been made by Mr. Yamada and the peer group that he formed, was approved at the year-end faculty meeting. Mr. Yamada recollected that during that year-end meeting, he, feeling nervous, assumed that the proposal would be rejected. Surprisingly, however, no one objected, and finally it was approved. He felt at that meeting that the negative opposing power began to die down to thirty percent likewise. Since then few teachers complained about a student's innate potential; instead, they were more likely to focus on individual differences. Compared to the first year, there were

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both teachers and students which cannot be accomplished in lecture-styled learning.

Throughout the interview, the term cooperative learning sounded differently from what the researcher knew. The cooperative learning that Mr. Yamada mentioned was pair work or group work in general that is usually utilized in a CLT classroom in Japan and its style was customized by him for the sake of the benefit and usability of the students at his high school. Jacobs, Power, and Inn (2002) states that there are nine principles that practitioners should follow; however, Johnson and Johnson (1984) suggest five principles. Although some of the principles are uniform or similar, different scholars have different views, in order to title a teaching or learning style as cooperative learning. According to Köyalan (2014), it should demonstrate observance of at least three principles common to them: a. positive interdependence, b. individual and group accountability, c. motivation through group collaboration. In this interview, the researcher could not make a confirmation of which principles the participant respected and appreciated most. Furthermore, cooperative learning in Japan has developed influenced by English-speaking culture but at the same time, Asian-specific collectivist or Confucius culture has also provided its foundation, which Mr. Yamada's cooperative learning might be committed. Therefore, it was not possible to determine his understanding of cooperative learning.

The observation experience he had at Moto-Yoshiwara Junior High School immensely stirred his motivation to change his classroom practices. Moto-Yoshiwara Junior High School in Shizuoka, is a model school where Japanese cooperative learning is practiced. Mr. Yamada mentioned that the school which he visited with Mr. Sanada for class observation in autumn, 2007, is a public junior high school famous for its commitment with Japan Network for school as learning community. The junior high school is one of the frontiers to implement cooperative learning in classroom practice based on the concepts of learning community as a school-wide initiative. Its official website (<http://www2.city.fuji.shizuoka.jp/~j-motoyoshi/>) represents the grand design of the learning community concepts set forth as a strand of school-wide objectives. In the Plan-Do-Check-Action cycle, there is a list of school management objectives, which states the goal that the percentage of the children who say that class is interesting shall be 80% or more, and that the children who say that they keep valued peers shall be 80% or more. The school-wide teachers as a unit to make efforts to attain those objectives.

Here, he noticed that the whole school was pioneering the one initiative as a unit in order to attain the objectives. To Mr. Yamada, this class observation at Moto-Yoshiwara Junior High School gave him some ideas of how he could change his classroom practice by customizing this junior-high cooperative learning classroom practice to match his high-school students. Furthermore, he realized that it would be essential that the whole organization of teachers as a cooperative unit should work together to maximize and accelerate the outcome. It was one of the critical incidents that influenced him throughout, providing a clear image of success.

School culture

What Mr. Yamada did through reflecting on his practice of cooperative learning appeared to contribute not only to his lesson but also to the school-wide culture and also his professional identity. The teacher had to take a meta perspective to organize his thoughts on the complexities at his workplace. He had to do this to prepare for a presentation with an audience of teachers whom he had never met, and who had little knowledge of his workplace. He had to conduct an analysis of his issues from an objective point, which he considers valuable and helpful to understand his own situation more profoundly. Looking back at his practice and organizing ideas with his audience in mind is a strategy he came up with to make his reflection successful.

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Through this reflective practice, it seems that he engaged in considering how he could make an improvement at the workplace more deeply. Such action changed his teacher beliefs and attitudes. For example, he came up with the idea of the school-wide class observation project and submitted it to the teacher meeting, which he thought would not be feasible, but unexpectedly approved by the teachers. He recognized that this contribution to the workplace that he made changed the atmosphere of the teachers' room, which was clear in his description that eighty percent of the teachers showed an unfavorable attitudes toward cooperative learning, which greatly decreased down to 30 percent when they made the class observation project possible and at that time no more teachers grumbled about the students' lack of skills but began perceiving that they might have special needs for the teachers to address. Through this experience, he also improved his self-efficacy and his perception of identity as a professional. The teacher's individual attempts of reflection of cooperative learning as a new teaching approach resulted in changes in the school-wide culture and his improved self-efficacy and changes in self-perception of their professional identity.

Implication

In the future, it is possible to conduct a research on beliefs of more varieties of teachers implementing cooperative learning. Although there is an increasing number of the researches of cooperative learning as a classroom practice with students as participants, there are very few researches of teacher beliefs or teacher cognition for cooperative learning practitioners. Both quantitative and qualitative researches need to be conducted on their knowledge and practice extensively in order to grasp the quantitative trend and also qualitative teacher development which may be individually different. As a Japan-specific issue, it may be interesting to explore what understanding cooperative learning practitioners may have. Furthermore, since introduction of cooperative learning can be challenging to the existing school culture, it may also be of interest to further analyze how a school experience changes with the implementation of cooperative learning.

Conclusion

Cooperative learning introduced by a model teacher caused changes in a young teacher and classroom practice and school-wide culture. Mr. Yamada perceived that his students established relations among them, got the reason to attend school. Cooperative learning class provided students the space to be and a reason to attend class. The changes occurred to the teacher as well. Although he was expected to take on an authoritative identity, he rather chose to use cooperative learning approaches and to present himself as someone friendly to students, which was the ideal teacher image constructed early in his life. A favorable collegial relation was formed with his senior colleague as a significant other through the class observation project. The group of teachers who were opposing once changed their attitudes toward students with the tide of cooperative learning. The teacher elevated his self-efficacy and teacher identity.

From now on, there may continue to be increasing demand of cooperative learning and its approaches under the title of active learning at Japanese educational institutions. Generally speaking, if a practitioner applies some systematic knowledge of the principles instead of simple pair work or group work, it can be inferred that ending up with a failure would be quite preventable. Therefore, teacher development should be promoted in terms of developing knowledge of cooperative learning. It is exceedingly of importance that teacher education

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should cover cooperative learning at the university or graduate school level aiming at professionalism for pre-service teachers. Then they need to create more opportunities for students to be actively engaged in classroom activity cooperatively in their daily practice. Cooperative learning has a strong potential to act as a positive force for change in the English education in Japan.

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