

Research Summary

The Japanese have been known to be a leader in both primary and secondary (junior high school and high school) education with its students performing extremely well in international studies on student academic ability and performance. The main objective of this study is to understand the knowledge sharing practices among Japanese teachers in overseas Japanese schools or *Nihonjin Gakko* that are funded and accredited by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science for expatriate Japanese children (MEXT 2010) for developing countries in South-east Asia to emulate and learn from. The effective knowledge sharing practices among teachers would result in the effective sharing of pedagogical, technological and content knowledge among fellow teachers that would consequently affect the classroom teaching-learning process.

Employing qualitative multiple case studies, document analysis, observation and in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with the teachers, administrators and principals of overseas Japanese schools in Malaysia and Singapore to identify and understand the factors that facilitate knowledge creation and sharing within the teacher community in these schools. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the aid of NVIVO 8.0, a qualitative research application to identify the main themes and practices that emerge from the qualitative data.

It was found that the selection of Japanese teachers to serve a period of 2-3 years at one of the 85 *Nihonjin Gakkos* throughout the world is a competitive process and is seen by many respondents as a form of education for the teachers themselves to further enhance the international perspective of Japanese teachers and students (MEXT 2010). To prepare for their posting overseas, teachers would search for information over the Internet and get in touch with fellow teachers who have previously served at *Nihonjin Gakkos* or their seniors/master teachers they have known when they started their first year of teaching during their 20-30 days of intensive *shido* and *kensu*. These teachers will also liaise with the principal and teachers that they shall take over from via the Internet regarding the subjects to be handled at the *Nihonjin Gakko* as well as the local aspects of the host country. It can be observed that these spontaneous and yet in-depth pre-assignment communication ensures that newly posted teachers are provided with as much knowledge (subject content, pedagogical, local, culture and change management) as possible by his/her counterparts in Malaysia or Singapore. It is during these stages of communication that newly posted teachers develop and forge a relationship with his/her future colleagues.

The mentoring system being practiced which is a form of the *sempai* (senior) – *kohai* (junior) relationship further strengthens the bond between the newly posted teacher and his/her more experienced colleague in Malaysia/Singapore. According to the respondents, the *sempai* is seen as being responsible for all the actions of the *kohai*, to the extent that the *kohai*'s mistakes would result in the *sempai* losing 'face' among fellow teachers at the school and back home in Japan. Hence, this cultural tradition ensures that both mentor and mentee work hand in hand to ensure that the mistakes or problems are minimized and avoided. With the assurance of a common goal between them, a sense of deep mutual trust and collaboration is engendered, resulting in open and free flow of knowledge between each other. As such, respondents claim that they learn a great deal from their *sempais* and they themselves look forward to the moment when they shall mentor new teachers.

While knowledge management gurus have just begun to advocate the benefits and ‘power’ of communities of practice over the past decade, Japanese teachers have long had this in the form of ‘lesson study’ or *jogyo kenkyu*. It is observed that the teachers are very happy with their accomplishments in terms of classroom strategies, pedagogy and teaching practice which are in part facilitated by the effective *jogyo kenkyu* in overseas Japanese schools. The entire teaching community would share ideas and classroom interventions based on a specific need or aim. Teachers would then share their teaching plans to the community, receiving feedback and suggestions on how to further improve their interventions. After several iterations of fine tuning and feedback, the teacher will implement the lesson which is then closely observed by fellow teachers. The outcomes and results of the lesson will be discussed by the group, with suggestions for improvement provided. After scrutinizing these lessons, teachers will then externalize the knowledge gained from these lessons in a form of a report or write-up of the lessons learnt – successes, failures, best practices and suggestions for improvement. These schools would then compile these lesson study reports into a compendium/monograph which is then shared with the school community and with other schools to advance the knowledge acquired by the teacher and community of practice as a whole. These lesson study reports are held in great esteem by the school and teachers have great attachment to their projects.

In addition to this lesson study sessions, meetings are held regularly to share information amongst teachers. The communal physical setup of teacher offices and practice of having lunch breaks together further enhances the social bonds of teachers within the school, ensuring that shared mental models and goals are created by the teaching team for the advancement of the students’ education as a well-rounded Japanese citizen.

From the study, it is found that Japanese teachers at *Nihonjin Gakkos* practice a wide-variety of knowledge sharing activities ranging from apprenticeship, mentoring, meetings, social ties, communities of practice to documentation of findings and best practices. In essence, these activities echo the knowledge conversion modes proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) made of up socialization, externalization, combination and internalization bringing rise to a knowledge spiral that allows for the creation of new knowledge within the school community. While these activities are easily duplicated in other settings or contexts, the key strength and facilitators of knowledge sharing in these overseas Japanese school systems lie in the strong social bonds, mutual respect and trust that are forged and solidified over time. Without these facilitators, the frequent changes in staffing due to the 3-year overseas posting period would not allow for a conducive teaching and learning environment for all. As such, it is exigent that these unique social aspects as well as processes are investigated further by researchers to ‘borrow’ these traits for the benefit of schools and students in developing countries such as Malaysia.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

22-23 June 2011, Penang, Malaysia, ASEAN Conference on Scientific and Social Sciences Research
2011, Gerald GOH Guan Gan {abstract of paper sent to conference organizers }

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)