

# Teacher Culture Inquiry of Classroom Observation at an Elementary School in Taiwan

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## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Abstract**—Three dimensions of teacher culture hinder educational improvement: individualism, conservatism and presentism. To promote the professional development of teachers, these three aspects in teacher culture should be eliminated. Classroom observation may be a useful method of eliminating individualism. The Ministry of Education in Taiwan has attempted to reduce the isolation of teachers to promote their professional growth. Because classroom observation discourse varies, teachers are generally unwilling to allow their teaching to be observed. However, classroom observations take place in the country in the form of school evaluations. The main purpose of this study was to explore the differences in teachers' conservatism, individualism and presentism after classroom observations had been conducted at an elementary school in Taiwan. The research method was a qualitative case study involving interviews with the school principal, the director of academic affairs, and two classroom teachers. The following conclusions were drawn: (1) Educators in different positions viewed classroom observations differently; (2) The classroom teachers did not highly value classroom observation; (3) There was little change in the teachers' conservatism, individualism and presentism after classroom observation.

**Keywords**—Classroom observation, Lortie's Trinity, teacher culture, teacher professional development

## I. INTRODUCTION

LORTIE [1] addressed numerous themes regarding teacher culture in the book, *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. A. Hargreaves was interested in Lortie's description of individualism, conservatism, and presentism, which he called the "trinity" [2].

Hargreaves [2] stated that once individualism is eliminated, conservatism is cured; thus, teacher culture will change if individualism is eliminated. Numerous strategies have been designed to eliminate teachers' conservatism by means of diminishing their individualism, of which, classroom observation is one. However, D. H. Hargreaves suggested that the autonomy of the teacher is an extremely basic value within the profession and intrusions into the privacy of the classroom are resented [3]. Therefore, although classroom observation is now well designed, some teachers still feel nervous and intruded upon, perceiving it as an attack on their classroom autonomy. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether classroom observations change teacher culture.

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Lortie's Trinity and peer classroom observation are explored separately, and the relationship between Lortie's Trinity and classroom observation is discussed.

### A. Lortie's Trinity

Lortie considered conservatism, individualism, and presentism not as separate entities; however, in this paper, an attempt is made to present and discuss these three terms separately.

#### 1. Individualism

Lortie reported that teachers prefer an individualist approach to informal communication but that this appears to conflict with observation data. However, if teachers accepted others' mutuality of influence, cooperation between professionals could be both limited and specified:

*"Teachers stressed the desirability of limited, specified, and circumscribed cooperation; they did not endorse denser and more intense relationships among adults. The individual teacher is shielded" [1].*

Analysis of Lortie's text reveals that interruption is another type of individualism experienced by teachers. Lortie reported that the reason teachers do not wish to be interrupted is because they want to focus on their students' education. They do not mind if they are interrupted when engaged in other activities, but they believe that class time should be productive. Lortie named such periods as "potentially productive time":

*"The preoccupation with potentially productive time assumes that the individual teacher is the critical ingredient in student learning. We did not encounter talk about system resources – about the importance of combining the contributions of individuals into a more effective whole" [1].*

Lortie also used boundaries to depict teachers' individualism.

*"Boundaries ward off the constant threat to task completion and the ever-present sense of time eroded... They want to focus on instruction; they wish others would understand that and respect their wish by helping them to fulfill it" [1].*

Classroom boundaries thus form an isolating layer that constitutes visible individualism.

#### 2. Conservatism

Lortie reported that teachers are conservative and have two such tendencies, even though they have completed a teacher education program:

*“Two conservative tendencies: relying on personal convictions; the personal values of teachers are heavily influenced by past experience” [1].*

One of the reasons teachers resist change, is that change may not solve their difficulties and it makes them nervous,

*“Anxious teachers are likely to give up the search for superior solutions and to cling to what they know from the past” [1].*

The uncertainty of teaching work is another explanation for teachers' conservatism:

*“Uncertainty may reduce innovation and serve conservative ends. There is a connection between organizational objectives, evaluative procedures and the balance of continuity and change” [1].*

Because teaching work is uncertain, teachers think that change is unworthy and therefore anticipate others' help:

*“Teachers believe the best program of improvement removes obstacles and provides for more teaching with better support” [1].*

In summary, Lortie argued that uncertainty and anxiety may cause teachers to look backward [1] and make them more conservative. In Lortie's words,

*“The ways teachers see their tasks reinforces a conservative frame of mind—a preference for doing things as they have been done in the past” [1].*

### 3. Presentism

When discussing teacher culture, presentism is seldom discussed, but it is similar to Jackson's immediacy. However, Lortie [1] linked presentism to the “front-loaded” career of teachers.

Because teachers' salaries change little over their teaching career, they have limited incentive to innovate. Thus, to collaborate to build a technical culture is not necessary for them, as Lortie wrote:

*“Presentism can be seen in the lack of enthusiasm teachers show in working together to build a stronger technical; it gets help from teacher individualism” [1].*

Moreover, because teachers' salaries hardly change, teachers' satisfaction is derived in the present, from their students.

*“The organization of career rewards in teaching fosters a present-oriented point of view; those who intend to stay in the classroom have limited need to delay gratification in the hope of future gain” [1].*

Although teachers gain satisfaction from students' immediate responses, they may be simultaneously disappointed with students' performances:

*“They are vulnerable to the ebb and flow of student response; even highly experienced teachers talk about bad years” [1].*

Because classroom teaching is constantly changing, it is difficult for teachers to feel complete mastery; therefore, they simply focus on the present. They do not consider their future:

*“Presentism is also related to the special nature of teaching task, as teachers find it hard to achieve a sense of*

*full mastery, even with experience. They do not signal assurance about their future” [1].*

Another reason for teachers' presentism is the nature of the teaching task, which involves breaking teaching up into short units so that they can feel gratification at the completion of each short task. However, this makes them lose sight of the goal of education:

*“The emphasis in pedagogy on breaking teaching up into short units (e.g., lesson plans, study units) stems from this lack of knowledge about long-range instruction. Teachers are more likely to experience reward if they can punctuate their work, concentrating on short-range outcomes as a source of gratification” [1].*

In summary, Lortie's concept of presentism was derived from the front-loaded careers of teachers and the special nature of the teaching task. Previous studies have only focused on the special nature of teaching tasks and have ignored the front-loaded careers of teachers which may be one of the principal factors contributing to presentism.

### B. Classroom Observation

There are numerous valid reasons for performing classroom observations. They have been recognized as an essential staff-appraisal mechanism and self-monitoring tool [4], are also an alternative form of assessment for evaluating learner performance, and are a unique educational supervision device [4], [5].

However, the most frequent style of observation is that conducted by student teachers. The opposite is also commonplace: during their visits to practicum schools, mentor teachers or university supervisors observe student teachers and provide feedback and assess their teaching performance [6].

Currently, improving teaching is the primary function of classroom observation, rather than evaluating teaching for the purpose of personnel decisions. In-service teachers play the roles of both the observer and the observed, which helps their own professional development. This occasionally involves peer observation for the purposes of formative evaluation [7]. Classroom observations thus serve as vehicles for professional growth, rather than as a means of performance evaluation.

Classroom observation activities are extremely limited in scope, especially in regards to teachers' professional development. Teachers are observed by their peers, and being observed in the classroom may make them nervous [6]. Furthermore, peer classroom observation is considered unreliable and not widely practiced [7]; hence, teachers rarely choose to observe their peers' classrooms as a means of enhancing their professional abilities.

To prevent teachers becoming nervous, announced visits are necessary and permit specific pre-observation discussion and preparation by both the instructor and observers. Giving teachers time to prepare in this way also allows the teacher to be seen at their best [7].

Classroom observation is least successful when the observer does not perform any analysis or engage in a dialogue with the teacher [6]. Therefore, there are at least three crucial stages to classroom observations: a pre-observation meeting between the

instructor and observer(s), the classroom observation, and a post-observation meeting to provide feedback.

### C. Lortie's Trinity and Classroom Observation

Lortie did not explicitly define the trinity, so a completely accurate definition of its meanings cannot be given. Fortunately, Hargreaves and Woods provided clear explanations. Defining individualism as exemplified by "a classroom teacher unwilling to collaborate with colleagues," conservatism as "resistance to radical change," and presentism as "the avoidance of long-term planning and the concentration of efforts on short-term projects that are believed to make a difference [8]."

Hargreaves [2] supposed that once individualism is diminished, conservatism is eliminated. Thus, with presentism as an unstated constant, if conservatism is diminished, then individualism will be diminished. Peer classroom observation encourages teacher cooperation and reduces individualism, and hence, if we conduct peer classroom observation and improve teacher cooperation, then both individualism and conservatism can be reduced.

### D. Peer Classroom Observation in Taiwan

There are numerous schools of thought regarding peer classroom observation in Taiwan, including the perspective of Sato's cooperative learning community. Instead of Sato's theory and practice, this study is focused on a policy published by the Taiwan Ministry of Education (TMOE) named 'Teacher Evaluation for Professional Development (TEPD).' Herein, this program is examined on three levels—national, local government, and school. The national and local levels are discussed in the following sections, and the school level is addressed in Section III.

#### 1. TEPD in Taiwan

The TMOE announced the TEPD in 2005. It accounts for a large percentage of the classroom observation performed in the country and is an attempt to decrease the isolation of teachers and thus promote their professional growth. The earlier discussion on classroom observation concluded that three steps are needed to decrease teachers' isolation: a pre-observation meeting of the instructor and observer(s), the classroom observation, and a post-observation meeting to provide feedback. By observing teacher's classroom individually, the culture of isolated teachers can be broken [9].

The TMOE encouraged teachers in elementary schools (grades 1 to 6) to high schools (junior high school, grades 7–9; senior high school, grades 10–12) to observe each other's classes voluntarily.

The bureaus of education in local government follow their superiors' policies and seriously enforce TEPD. Although teachers participate in TEPD voluntarily, the local bureaus convince school principals and administrators to encourage teachers to comply.

#### 2. Bureau of Education–Taicun (pseudonym) City Government

One of the strategies used by the Bureau of Education in Taicun City (BOETC) to encourage teachers to conduct peer

classroom observation is to incorporate classroom observation into the school evaluation program. BOETC announced the "School Evaluation Program for Junior High Schools and Elementary Schools in Taicun City–Developing Highline School" and began to implement it during the autumn semester of 2013. This program comprised two parts: peer classroom observation and school evaluation. Every teacher (grades 1–9) in the city must observe the other teachers twice each semester and be observed once a semester. Therefore, during one school year, teachers observe others four times, and they are observed twice.

Moreover, a classroom observation must be performed during the school evaluation period. Every selected teacher is observed for 15–20 minutes by an outside evaluator. To reduce teachers' anxiety, the slogan of the school evaluation program is *Love and Peace*.

The Taicun City Government oversees 226 public elementary schools and 80 public junior high schools. The BOETC planned for all of the public elementary and junior high schools to be evaluated over eight semesters (four school years). However, opposition to the classroom observation involved in this program led to BOETC pausing the program during February 2016.

## III. RESEARCH DESIGN

### A. The Research Field: Grace Elementary School

Grace Elementary School (GES, pseudonym) in Taicun City was selected for the field research. A school whose teachers had experience of classroom observation was required. The researcher spoke to the principal of GES, who was enrolled in a doctoral program at the researcher's university. The principal then invited teachers at GES to be interviewed for the current study.

GES is located in old Taicun County near old Taicun City. Taicun County was merged into Taicun City in 2010. Therefore, this school is currently governed by Taicun City's local authority of education. GES was founded in 1994 and currently has 58 faculty members, including 12 male and 35 female teachers. It has 581 students, of which, 296 are male and 285 are female. GES has a powerful school-level teacher association.

GES was evaluated during the spring semester (February – July) of 2016. The school had prepared for the evaluation, but the evaluation had been suspended. Every GES teacher thus had experience of peer classroom observation making them suitable participants for this study.

The office of academic affairs scheduled the peer classroom observations of every teacher in the school. They asked teachers for times when they will observe and be observed. Additionally, they provided feedback form for use during classroom observation.

### B. Participants

Four teachers participated in this one-school case study including the principal, the director of academic affairs, and two classroom teachers. The participants were interviewed



about their lives and their perceptions of the origin and implementation of teaching observation. The backgrounds of the interviewees are as follows:

Ms. A, the principal, was a doctorate candidate in the field of education and about 50 years old as a teacher and school administrator before becoming a principal and has three years of experience as principal of GES.

Ms. B, a grade one teacher, was about 40 years old, has a Bachelor's in business and had completed a 1-year postgraduate teacher education program before becoming a teacher and had been teaching for 19 years.

Ms. C, a grade one teacher, was about 40 years old and has a Bachelor's in business and had completed a 1-year postgraduate teacher education program before becoming a teacher and had been teaching for 18 years

Mr. D was about 40 years old as the director of academic affairs and has a Master's degree in language education, had been teaching for 18 years and had been a director for two years.

The four interviews were conducted during the 2016 summer vacation before the school opened. The length of each interview was approximately one hour.

#### C. Data Analysis

The codes of this study were created by pre-set and open coding which was termed by Marsh as "hybrid, using two models" [10].

In the first phase, all interview transcripts were coded with an initial set of a *priori* codes related to the framework of Lortie's Trinity. In the second phase, inductive open coding and memoing resulted in the identification of GES's teacher culture. Inductive coding also uncovered three main categories, namely formalism, effectiveness, and individualism which were consistent with Lortie's Trinity of conservatism, presentism, and individualism.

Every transcript was assigned a six-digit code number. For example, in 342211, the first two numbers (34) represented the interviewer, the third and fourth numbers (22) denoted the page, and the fifth and sixth numbers (11) denoted the line.

### IV. FINDINGS

#### A. Formalism as a Type of Conservatism

To persuade teachers to conduct peer classroom observations, the observation format was simplified as much as possible by school administrators, especially the director of academic affairs (Mr. D). As Mr. D stated, "We designed the format for the teachers" (342211). However, he felt that this rendered the process superficial and formalistic:

*"I feel that the way my school handles classroom observation is superficial"* (342211-33).

*"Many things are done superficially, not only in this building... we know that almost all of the other schools are doing this, that all kinds of evaluation are the same"* (342002-03).

*"Superficial is formalist"* (341202).

Moreover, he argued that even when only doing something

superficially, not everyone can do it completely:

*"Even in formalism, even though they obey the rules, they do not do all the required things. For example, they have to observe other teachers four times in 1 year, but they only observe others' classes three times; they are not cooperative"* (341438).

*"Sometimes teachers do not complete the classroom observation form seriously. Also, they might observe a class for only 15 minutes"* (341523-24).

These were the perceptions of an administrator, but teachers were also interviewed. For Ms. B, classroom observation feels informal and similar to everyday work. The process of simplifying classroom observations may have made teachers feel as if their workload was too high. As Ms. B said, "Such teaching observation is done every day, and so it is informal." When the researcher asked her if she writes a teaching plan and sends it to the observing teacher in advance, she answered, "But observers write what they have seen and make suggestions on the observation forms" (321018). She also stated, "We announce which lesson we will teach; we needn't plan other things" (321021).

Although the school administrator did the best to help teachers by organizing the classroom observation schedule and simplifying the feedback form, not all the teachers supported the program. Nonetheless, some teachers followed the program and employed strategies to plan their teaching by choosing the subject for an observed lesson that they are comfortable with. Ms. B and Ms. C preferred teaching mathematics to teaching Mandarin:

Ms. B: *"I chose a lesson that students could operate or would respond well to"* (321817-22).

Ms. C: *"I chose a subject that students will respond well to when they will be an observation session"* (330716-17).

This is a type of adaptive conservatism, which tends to be positive or negative regardless of teachers' attitudes to classroom observation.

#### B. Presentism Involves Learning More Instructional Strategies Immediately and Effectively

Hargreaves and Woods [8] defined Lortie's presentism as "the avoidance of long-term planning and the concentration of efforts on short-term projects that are thought to make a difference" Another feature of Lortie's presentism is that "teachers are more likely to feel rewarded when concentrating on short-range outcomes as a source of gratification" [1]. The researcher realized that teachers are more likely to learn something effectively and immediately through approach. For example, Ms. B stated the following:

*"To observe other grades teachers' teaching; you cannot apply what you observe immediately"* (320706).

Ms. C admitted that peer classroom observation taught about classroom decoration and she voluntarily learned more about decoration during private workshops outside school:

*"I went to other classrooms to observe other teacher's and I learned about their decoration(s). My own*

*classroom is boring, and so I learned how to decorate it from private workshops*" (332307-36).

Teachers implemented classroom observation for their own professional development learning from what they noted in other teachers' method. Because of teachers' presentism, they hoped to learn techniques or teaching strategies useful, easy and quickly applicable. They were disappointed if something was not useful and applicable. Thus, teachers focus on useful skills which are used to implement short-term strategies.

### C. Individualism

Teachers were unwilling to visit others' classrooms and discuss teaching strategies with other colleagues. Ms. B and Ms. C made the following statements:

*"It is embarrassing for me to observe other grade teachers' teaching"* (320703).

*"No one dares to be the other faculty's teacher"* (331614).

Concerning Lortie's individualism, D. H. Hargreaves' concept of classroom autonomy captured most of the plots. Teaching methods, discipline, and teachers' "philosophy of education" are a matter of personal choice according to the principal of autonomy [3]. Ms. C made the following statement:

*"My colleagues do give me feedback. Most of my colleagues are kind and write on the observation form about my merits. After telling me about my many merits, they give me a few suggestions"* (332216-22).

At present, numerous teachers find that they can discuss and debate educational issues seriously only in the relative anonymity of conferences [3].

*"We are familiar with each other because we teach the same grade and we talk to each other during grade meetings. It is not necessary for us to communicate before classroom observations"* (331616-18).

Classroom observations may affect teachers' preparation time, as Mr. D mentioned:

*"Every teacher is busy. In the morning, I may have three classes and may want to drink water or take a short rest, but I have to observe another teacher"* (341526-28).

Teachers, especially those with experience, care about the time and effort they expend, Ms. A confirmed this:

*"Sure, a teacher may be serious but they are serious in their own classroom. I feel that teachers are close-minded"* (310435-7).

The principal would like to innovate and anticipated the cooperation of new and acting teachers:

*"I always invite some new teachers or acting teachers to do innovative things"* (310421-23).

Although the office of academic affairs schedules peer classroom observations for every teacher in the school, they do not tell teachers how many colleagues will observe them or what part of the class they will be observed. Ms. C felt uneasy about this:

*"I didn't know who and how many would come. I felt I wasn't respected"* (332615... 332628).

This reflected to D. H. Hargreaves' observation of teachers' resentment of the intrusion into the privacy of the classroom [3].

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated teacher culture through the implementation of classroom observation and employed Lortie's individualism, presentism, and conservatism. Little presentism was discovered, but conservatism and individualism were markedly apparent.

The interviews revealed that the principal appreciated the school evaluation process and hoped to strengthen the results of classroom observations. The director of academic affairs had to transform the city government idea and implement a system in which teachers would be willing to perform classroom observations.

Teachers' conservatism was presented in the form of formalism in this study. Teachers conducted classroom observation in a simplified and superficial manner. Moreover, they adapted to the requirement for observations by choosing subject and lessons in which they knew they would perform well. Therefore, the formalism included simplification, superficiality and adaptation. Because of their conservatism, teachers' individualism continues. Teachers still dislike influencing others' teaching style and they do not want to intrude in others' classrooms.

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