



Review

At the boundary of school: Continuity and discontinuity in learning across contexts



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ABSTRACT

In response to various societal changes, schools are increasingly developing an outward orientation, seeking to connect to students' out-of-school participations. Simultaneously, educational research is starting to adopt a multisystemic approach to learning. Focusing on continuity and discontinuity in students' learning across school and out-of-school contexts, we synthesize 186 empirical studies. After conceptualizing school and out-of-school in relation to each other, we find that continuity can be the result of different educational intentions, but it also occurs as a given. Discontinuity is mainly found for non-mainstream students, with severe implications for students' learning and participation in school. Some studies show how different actors, including students, deliberately seek discontinuity, challenging the widespread preference for continuity. We discuss the (im)possibilities for schools in connecting to students' wider lives and advance the degrees of freedom afforded in school as an underlying condition for establishing continuity.

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1. Introduction

Students do not stop learning upon leaving the school building. Recognition for this once-novel idea stems from a long line of educational research on learning in settings other than school, referred to by terms as informal, authentic, situated, or everyday learning. Studies exploring 'informal' learning often compare and contrast their findings to learning taking place in school. Yet, this comparison is typically made analytically, sketching, for example, how engagement in learning outside school appears rich, compared to the archetypal image that exists of students' lack of motivation and disengagement in schools (cf. Bevan, Bell, Stevens, & Razfar, 2012; Hull & Schultz, 2002).

Although analytical dichotomies and comparisons between formal and informal ways of learning have been a plausible way to categorize and reckon different activities and settings of learning, a disadvantage lies in (over)emphasizing the *context* of learning (cf. Hodkinson & Macleod, 2010). Besides easily leading to a normative impasse about what context is best (Rogoff, 2003), an emphasis on context can reinforce the idea that learning is bounded in a single time and place. It is this assumption that is often argued to be untenable (e.g., Barron, 2006; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). Students participate in a wide variety of contexts on a daily basis and can be expected to experience and make connections between them – if only because they may pursue their goals and interests over time. Looking at learning as a process potentially moving across contexts is considered more ecologically valid.

For about two decades, several educational scholars have started to adopt multisystemic perspectives in studying learning, cognizant of students' daily participation across the contexts of school, home, work, peer groups, and leisure institutes (see for an overview Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Multisystemic perspectives have generated new empirical questions about whether and how learning across different contexts takes place and about the extent and ways in which school and other contexts may simultaneously contribute to learning. Such questions can now be recognized in different areas of research, such as research on literacy development (Hull & Schultz, 2001), student engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013) and the use of digital technologies (Ludvigsen, Lund, Rasmussen, & Säljö, 2010).

The value of a multisystemic perspective in educational research is that it allows centralization of the process of learning and the person whom it concerns without neglecting how this process is situated within different practices and activities. Such a perspective seems especially relevant in light of several coinciding developments in contemporary societies. For one, we see how students have become more unique in terms of their specific academic, social, and, cultural backgrounds – *who* is learning (the subject) is diversifying (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). Second, we see how students embody their own specific contexts of participation and learning in and outside of school – *where* one learns (the sets of social and material environments) is more personal, depending on own interest groups and activities and one's local and global networks (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Siemens, 2014). Third, we see how the future aspirations and requirements of individual students become less predictable, depending on changing professions and societies and the qualifications that these bring to the fore – *what* is to be learned (the object) and pathways by which this occurs are more dynamic.

The sketched developments, despite being of a different nature, appear to have a similar consequence; they bring to the attention the individual student, who is socially, culturally, and academically unique and participates in his or her own set of contexts both in and outside of school, and who faces an undecided future. In light of these developments, existing predefined curricula and trajectories in schooling practices may easily appear limited or inflexible. The developments have led to new debates about what schooling is and what it should be (e.g., Biesta, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Roth, 2015). For instance, Biesta (2010) reasons that not only qualification – currently prominent as a result of accountability and standardization movements – but also socialization and subject becoming are central to education. In general, many have started to argue for a fundamental move toward personalization of learning and more adaptive and inclusive forms of education, also by stimulating schools to create partnerships and collaborate with other actors and practices concerned with the education of children and youth (e.g., Cole & Distributive Literacy Consortium, 2006; Herrington & Herrington, 2006; Lauer et al., 2006).

We aim to contribute to the current educational debate with a synthesis of the empirical literature on students' learning across school and out-of-school contexts. We think a synthesis of the emerging literature is indispensable as a body of literature addressing learning across school and out-of-school contexts is clearly emerging, but is still scattered across different research areas and traditions. Studies in abstract addressing the same phenomenon employ different theoretical frameworks, concepts, and research designs and are organized along subject-specific disciplines or levels of education, making it difficult to generalize from findings across typically small-scale studies. Bringing together the various empirical studies allows us to see what is at stake in actual situations of learning across contexts, for students and other actors involved.

In the following section, we theorize learning across contexts. Drawing on boundary crossing literature, we introduce a layered multisystemic perspective to understand students' experiences in learning across school and out-of-school contexts.

1.1. Learning across contexts

Although traditionally focusing on single educational settings, educational research is showing a rapid development towards a multisystemic perspective on learning. Multisystemic perspectives acknowledge that learning can extend fixed time periods and places and, hence, can be triggered and concurrently supported by different contexts of participation in and outside of education (Ludvigsen, Lund, Rasmussen, & Säljö, 2010; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). Multisystemic perspectives on learning can be traced back to efforts in different theoretical strands in social sciences, expanding the common unit of analysis of a singular individual or collective and a single context of participation. These theoretical strands include

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