



Professional growth through collaboration between kindergarten and elementary school teachers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Cross-institutional reflection indicates positive impacts on the collaboration process.
- Cross-institutional reflection indicates positive impacts on professional growth.
- Cross-institutional reflection indicates positive impacts on teaching practice.
- Professional experience may moderate utilizing the reflective dialog.
- Documentation may moderate utilizing the reflective dialog.

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that teachers can develop competencies necessary for teaching practices through reflective dialog about shared practice. In this regard we surveyed 310 teachers participating in a collaboration pilot project between kindergartens and elementary schools to scrutinize the impacts of reflective dialog in a cross-institutional context. The results indicate benefits condensing in complemented child-perception and a more student-centered practice. Furthermore, teachers' experience and a practice of documentation seem to mediate impacts. Ultimately, the approach of learning communities gives reason to expect benefits in such cross-institutional contexts and thus could contribute to an early childhood education and care policy.

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1. Introduction

Similar to other countries, in Germany, kindergartens and elementary schools are seen as two separated educational domains. The rationales behind this perspective may be found in systemic disparities such as the corresponding functions in society, underlying conditions or the particular design of everyday life (Drexl, Höke, Rehm, Schumann, & Sturmhöfel, 2012). But some responsibilities that have traditionally been located in one type of institution are gaining relevance in the other, and vice versa. For example, in respect of academic education in Germany, which has classically been the schools' responsibility, academic education is becoming an increasing component of kindergartens' responsibilities. In turn,

while individualization (to be responsive to the interests and needs of every single child) has primarily been addressed at the kindergarten level, this is more recently being found to a greater extent in elementary schools. One can assume that these two educational domains might benefit from each other through collaboration. The aim of the current study is to explore how kindergarten teachers and elementary school teachers can profit from a tight collaboration. In the examined collaboration project teachers of both institutions planned, conducted and reflected units of instruction for children of both institutions.

The potential advantages of collaboration between kindergartens and elementary schools can also be viewed from a more general developmental policy called early childhood education and care (ECEC), which aims at helping children develop their potential and promotes their social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. ECEC has become a policy priority in many countries. The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)

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conducted cross-national thematic reviews about the ECEC policy called “Starting Strong” (e.g. Bennett & Tayler, 2006) (see also Bennett, 2003; Kamerman, 2000; Moss, 2007), to support a successful early childhood education and care policy. Moss (2007) assumes that the future of ECEC lies in a fully integrated service for children from birth to 6 years. Furthermore a strong and equal partnership with the education system and smooth transitions are recommended as well as a professional education and an improvement of work conditions for ECEC staff (Bennett & Tayler, 2006; Moss, 2007).

In this sense, an enhanced collaboration between both types of institutions (early child education or kindergarten and elementary school) is demanded to establish a more flexible transition from kindergarten to school, as well as promoting an improved connecting-capability between the institutions (Faust-Siehl & Grundschohverband, 2001) to enable seamless education. This collaboration surely requires conversation and discussion between the two kinds of teachers. For instance in respect of sharing and adjusting goals, sharing values and building up mutual understanding, as these are in turn, premises for a successful collaboration. But not only the children and their development might profit from a cross-institutional collaboration. Keeping in mind the different responsibilities and perspectives of teachers of the different institutions and the potential of mutual enrichment, also both kinds of teachers might acquire new knowledge and skills through a collaboration which entails conversations, discussions, and reflective dialog about subject-specific or methodological matters.

The specific benefits from the collaboration for the teachers of both institutions were examined by the current study.

In this article, we will first introduce a theory that connects teacher cognition and teacher behavior by means of reflection to illustrate how reflection might help in acquiring new knowledge and skills. After that we will outline research regarding reflective dialog and professional development, depict professional development by learning communities within an institution, and identify the characteristics arising from the literature that affect professional development within learning communities. Then, we will transfer the findings to a cross-institutional context and delineate factors which could additionally promote the positive impacts of reflective dialog across institutions. Finally we will describe the results of our study, examining the impacts of reflective dialog between kindergarten and elementary school teachers within a pilot project about cross-institutional collaboration, indicating benefits for both professions, which could contribute to an ECEC policy.

2. Reflection – a connection between teacher cognition and teacher behavior

Korthagen and Kessels (1999) outline a three-level model to describe the connection between teacher behavior and teacher cognition in regard to teacher education. Korthagen (2010) uses this three-level model to analyze the so far gap between teachers' practices and its grounding in theory. The three levels to describe learning about teaching are the gestalt level, the schema level and the theory level. Shifts between those levels are accomplished through a reflective process.

The gestalt level is a broader concept of gestalt as Köhler (1947) described it and has more in common with ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991). Korthagen's (2010) description of gestalt is greatly complex and refers to the dynamic entity that contains the whole of a person's perception of a situation, namely all cognitive as well as affective and motivational, often not conscious aspects, which build the sources of teacher behavior.

To describe the schema level one can think of an unconscious source of a teacher's behavior that becomes, at least to some degree, aware to the teacher as a network of concepts or principles which are helpful in describing his practice or the corresponding situation. Such a network of concepts one might call a schema. Korthagen (2010) describes the rise of a schema out of a gestalt as follows: “Sometimes when a teacher starts reflecting, we can in the here-and-now see a previously unconscious gestalt develop into such a conscious cognitive schema” (p. 102). After many encounters with similar situations, a more abstract network of concepts and relationships or a more elaborated schema can be build up. Still, a practitioner likes to know how to act, whilst a scholar or researcher likes to have an abstract understanding, which colors their particular schemata (Korthagen, 2010).

On the theory level a logical ordering of the network of concepts is constructed. Several schemata and the relationship between them are linked into one coherent theory, hence helping to understand a class of situations. Korthagen (2010) suggests for fully reaching the theory level, it is necessary to grant the five characteristics of a good theory according to Kuhn (1977). This level is hardly reached by practitioners because they rather focus on particular situations (Korthagen, 2010; Korthagen & Lagerwerf, 2001). Korthagen (2010) posits a level reduction by which a less conscious way is needed to apply a learned schema or theory. If the schematized or theorized knowledge, over time and situations, becomes self-evident, it now functions as a gestalt. He comes to the conclusion, that the three-level model reconciles traditional cognitive theory with the situated learning perspective, thus emphasizing two complementary components, an individual and a social one, in teacher learning.

One might assume that professional or reflective dialog offers the opportunity for promoting the rise of a schema out of a gestalt.

3. Reflective dialog and professional development

In the context of schools, reflection processes and reflective dialog are already objects of investigation, with a growing body of evidence suggesting their positive effects (e.g. Avalos, 2011; Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000; Horn & Little, 2010; Louis & Marks, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). An early investigation exploring workplace norms and practices that foster professional development in teachers comes from Little (1982). She names four classes of interaction that are crucial for continuous professional development: (1) engagement in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete discussion of teaching practice; (2) regular observation and provision of useful critiques of one's teaching; (3) joint planning, design, research, evaluation and preparation of teaching materials; and (4) reciprocal teaching of the practice of teaching. In her study, Little (1982) states that for her sample “these four types of practices so clearly distinguish the more successful from the less successful schools, the more adaptable from the less adaptable schools, that we have termed them the critical practices of adaptability” (p. 332). Therefore, frequent, specific talk about teaching and its critical reflection based on a shared practice appear to be fundamental components of professional development.

In the further course of this article, we employ the term ‘reflective dialog’ as a key characteristic of an effective collaboration, referring to professional conversations that hold practice, pedagogy, and student learning under scrutiny. Reflective dialog also includes diagnosing individual students, discussing observations, joint planning, designing and evaluating of units of instruction, problem solving, discussing specific teaching practices and receiving meaningful feedback on one's methodologies. Since collaboration between teachers of different institutions needs regular exchange and

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