Beginning teachers' experience of the workplace learning environment in alternative teacher certification programs: A mixed methods approach

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Most schools do not provide stimulating learning environments for student teachers.
- Opportunities for knowledge exchange depend on incidental informal communication.
- Autonomy is highly valued but double-edged: a source of motivation and isolation.
- Problem solving is more common sense and intuition than evidence-based.
- Structurally embedded collaboration increases opportunities for learning.

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ABSTRACT

Workplace learning in early entry (EE) teacher education programs has been proposed as an alternative to traditional programs and as bridging the theory-practice gap in teacher education. However, there is little empirical evidence for the underlying assumption that one can become a highly qualified teacher by merely being a teacher. This article discusses to what extent students of teaching in EE programs experience their work environment as a stimulating learning environment. The results of semi-structured interviews and an online survey suggest that schools tend to hinder rather than serve the purpose of workplace learning. Obstructions and supporting conditions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, teacher educators have tried a variety of approaches to address the long-standing gap between theory and practice (Zeichner, 2010). In order to mitigate the reality shock experienced by beginning teachers when entering the profession, the amount of field-experience in teacher education was increased (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). A shift occurred from campus-based teacher education models, where theories are learned on campus and afterwards applied in schools, to school-based models where prospective teachers learn in and from practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009). Within this movement we can situate the emergence and growth of early entry teacher education programs that allow student teachers to take on full responsibility for a classroom after no, or hardly any, pre-service preparation at all. These 'alternative' teacher education programs — so named because they provide an alternative to the traditional path to teacher certification (Feistritzer, 2005; Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; Zumwalt, 1991, 1996) — have a tradition of over twenty years in the U.S.A. (Feistritzer, Haar, Hobar, & Losselyong, 2004) and approximately one-third of new teachers being hired in the U.S.A. are entering the profession through alternative routes (National Center for Education Information, 2010).

A common practical aim of alternative certification programs is the concentration of teacher preparation in a smaller amount of time, to facilitate teacher training and help tackle teacher shortages

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(Stoddart & Floden, 1995). The underlying theoretical assumption is the idea that student teachers can become highly qualified teachers by learning what they need to learn about teaching on the job. Alternative programs legitimize this 'primacy of practice' (Tillema, 2000) by citing the many studies reporting that teachers value practice over theory (Allen, 2009) and attribute much of what they have learned about teaching to the experience of teaching itself (Wilson et al., 2002). Ball and Forzani (2009, 2010) however question the empirical base for this view that knowing one's subject and then gaining teaching experience is all it takes. Grossman (1989) too warns that learning from experience alone can be problematic. In theory the workplace can constitute a powerful learning environment, but in practice this does not always seem to be the case (Edwards & Protheroe, 2003; Kwakman, 2003). Confrontation with the complexities and responsibilities of a classroom can lead to dramatic experiences and counterproductive learning for novice teachers (Corcoran, 1981; Huberman, 1989; Veenman, 1984; Vonk, 1983; Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998). Without skillful guidance during the induction phase (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), the first years as a beginning teacher are characterized by teacher-centered personal and procedural concerns of surviving in the classroom (Good & Brophy, 2000). These survival experiences are not inevitable (Bullough, Young, & Draper, 2004; Rogan, Borich, & Taylor, 1992). Athanases and Achinstein (2003), Achinstein and Athanases (2005) for example found that qualitative mentoring can interrupt teacher-centered concerns and bring into focus the learning of students and the effects of one's teaching on this student learning. Learning at the workplace is thus not self-evident (Van Eekelen, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2006) and alternative certification programs should take the responsibility to secure a powerful learning environment at the workplace for their trainees (van Velzen & Volman, 2009).

Empirical research on the effectiveness of alternative certification programs is gradually growing, especially in the U.S.A, but is still limited (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007; Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). Also it is hard to draw conclusions about alternative certification in general because of the great differences that exist between programs that range from short summer emergency certification programs to sophisticated two-year programs for carefully selected candidates with ongoing support, integrated coursework, close mentoring and supervision (Feistritzer et al., 2004; Zumwalt, 1991, 1996). With respect to these great variations within and between alternative and traditional pathways, Cochran-Smith (2014) emphasizes the need for research to go beyond the 'horse race', which compares one route to another to declare the 'one best' approach. It is not alternative certification programs 'an sich' that succeed or fail in producing qualitative teacher preparation, rather it is specific contexts and aspects of programs that facilitate or obstruct professional development. Research needs to untangle the interaction between different features of divergent programs, school contexts and teacher candidates to identify the essential ingredients needed to produce desired learning outcomes. Further investigation is therefore needed and should focus on the quality of practice and the workplace conditions in which field-experiences are gained, rather than the amount of practice. It is the workplace learning conditions that make all the difference in assuring that prospective teachers learn the desirable lessons from practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008).

2. A Curriculum for workplace learning environments

School-based teacher education relies on the workplace learning of student teachers. In the last decades workplace learning has developed as a field both of practice and of research (Billett, 2002; Smith, 2003). According to Smith (2003) this increase in interest is partly due to the renewed attempts to find ways to make students of teaching connect theory and practice, but it is also related to the heightened awareness that workplace learning contributes to organizational innovation and change. This competence of individuals and groups to gradually improve and innovate operating procedures, products and services is referred to as *knowledge productivity* by Kessels (2001a). The knowledge productivity of an organization involves its ability to pick up knowledge, to assimilate it, to enrich it, to generate and disseminate new knowledge and to apply this knowledge in order to achieve improvement and innovation. Learning at the workplace is at the heart of this process (Keursten, Verdonschot, Kessels, & Kwakman, 2006) and both structured and unstructured on-the-job activities can result in this workplace learning (Billett, 2002).

Some theories have tried to define different domains in which learning at the workplace can take place. One of these theories is the corporate curriculum theory of Kessels (1996, 2001b). The corporate curriculum theory can be viewed as a heuristic framework for thinking. It does not give instructions on exactly how a learning environment should be designed to achieve learning in a working organization, and neither is it a formal curriculum prescribing isolated training programs and courses that workers should attend (Keursten et al., 2006). Rather, it involves transforming the workplace into an environment where learning and working integrate. The corporate curriculum is a conceptual framework to identify elements in a work environment that promote and facilitate learning (van Lakerveld & Engels, 2010). The corporate curriculum theory distinguishes between the following five domains in which an organization should be aiming for growth:

- subject matter expertise/professional knowledge
- problems solving skills
- reflection and meta-cognitions
- communication and cooperation skills
- self-regulation of motivation, emotions and affects.

Kessels (1996, 2001b) describes two other domains that are of a slightly different nature because they refer to domains of learning as well as conditions of learning (van Lakerveld & Engels, 2010). Professionals develop competence to:

- handle and create calm and stability
- evoke and steer creative turmoil.

These seven domains of learning are defined as the corporate curriculum. van Lakerveld and Engels (2010) recently used this theory to study the elements that turn a school organization into a work-learning environment for teachers and managers. The study provides support for the first five learning functions, which will each be discussed in greater detail below.

2.1. Subject matter expertise

This domain refers to the policy and the activities an organization develops to acquire knowledge and skills related to the main objectives of the organization. Formal pre- and in-service teacher education have traditionally focused on this learning domain (Kessels & Keursten, 2002). The large-scale review on teacher professional learning of Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) confirms that the involvement of external expertise is one of seven key elements in the professional learning context of teachers to promote professional learning. Timperley et al. however immediately remark that the development of domain specific expertise