



Co-teaching as a context for teachers' professional learning and joint knowledge construction

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H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ Co-teaching as a context for teachers' learning and joint knowledge construction.
- ▶ Learning a collaborative process with serendipitous origins.
- ▶ Shared knowledge construction crucial in the learning process.
- ▶ Co-teaching may support teachers in meeting their professional responsibilities.

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The study examined two primary teachers' professional learning and joint knowledge construction in the context of co-teaching. The teachers narrated their learning as a collaborative process with serendipitous origins. Shared knowledge construction was crucial in the learning process, as was implementing the resulting new ideas in practice. It is concluded that experiences of co-teaching may support teachers in meeting their professional responsibilities effectively. Professional development programmes need to be sensitive to teachers' individual and collaborative learning experiences to be able better to support them in the natural context of those experiences in particular local and national contexts.

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1. Introduction

In discussing the knowledge base of expert teaching in the mid-1980s, Shulman (1987, 12) remarked that, unlike other professions, teaching is “devoid of a history of practice... Practitioners simply know a great deal that they have never even tried to articulate”. Shulman concluded that further research efforts were needed to gather and interpret teachers' practical knowledge within a codified case literature. Since then considerable attention has been given to the ways in which teachers' beliefs, values and practice relate to their practical knowledge – which is commonly seen to combine experiential knowledge embedded in particular settings with formal, explicit knowledge of school subjects and educational processes in various national contexts (Lunenberg & Korthagen, 2009; Van Driel, Beijaard, & Verloop, 2001).

Teachers' narratives of their practice and professional learning emerge within the sociocultural interplay of wider educational structures, cultures and politics. Pedagogical cultures and practices can differ significantly between countries as well as more locally. Alexander (2000) found in his comparative study of primary education in five nations, that educational policy and practice can be considerably influenced by the particular balance and dynamics of centralisation, social control, national identity, wealth, and historical change in each location, although individual national systems are not entirely sealed off from each other or immune to other ideas. Just as national systems may influence each other over time allowing particular practices to migrate in translated forms across borders, local levels of school and classroom practice may also carry the power to innovate even within highly controlled national systems. Alexander refers to the 'regulatory power of classroom discourse' (p.562–3) through which meanings are created by the participants, even within external top-down regulatory powers of government. This macro-micro perspective helps to establish the network of influences on teachers' professional learning in more and less centralised educational systems.

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Teachers' thinking need not be over-determined in any national context, but the more decentralised systems which support collaborative dialogue, innovation, and peer challenge may be better placed to allow teachers to engage in deep forms of knowledge construction within their practice. This view informs the case study that follows and the discussion of its potential international applications.

The educational culture and conditions of the Finnish system are particularly relevant to understanding the teachers' experiences in the case study presented below, since Finnish teachers have relatively high levels of professional autonomy in comparison with many other Western school systems. The Finnish national context allowed the primary school teachers in this case to work collaboratively and innovatively at their own pace, unlike the opportunities that are generally available to most teachers in England for instance (Webb et al., 2004). The dialogue between the co-teachers in this study was found to be central to their professional learning, and this is the focus of the detailed narrative analysis that follows. The teachers' collaboration was in turn echoed by the dialogue between the two authors of this paper, who were involved in interpreting what the teachers said from their own contrasting perspectives on the Finnish and English educational systems. Small-scale case studies that acknowledge the contextuality of teachers' work and their knowledge-construction process are needed to gain more information about the local applications of, for example, world-wide aims relating to inclusive education (UNESCO 1994; UNESCO 2009).

Of particular interest in this paper are the narrative and collaborative aspects of teachers' professional knowledge-building. Since Kelchtermans' (1993) classic study, teacher narratives have become an acknowledged means to explore teachers' contextualised practical knowledge (e.g. Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Watson, 2006). In this case study we focus on two experienced teachers' individual and joint accounts of co-teaching an inclusive class of young children, after having innovatively combined their separate "general" and "special" classes. The research questions are: How do the teachers narrate their learning experiences and knowledge construction? How do they narrate their collaboration? How do the teachers see the relationship between their collaboration, their knowledge construction and the development of their pedagogical practice in an inclusive setting? The focus of analysis emerged from an ethnographic and narrative inquiry that was carried in Finland out over a period of three and half years. The teachers are seen to be engaged in a distinctively cooperative learning process, which they remember and elaborate in a series of joint interviews. The teachers' practice of inclusive education is found to be closely integrated with their own professional development, including the knowledge base that they share and develop together.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Professional knowledge and inclusive education

At the heart of inclusive educational practice are classrooms in which heterogeneous groups of students learn together and achieve valued success. In teaching such groups, it may be assumed that certain types of specialist knowledge are important for supporting children who would otherwise be identified with special educational needs, even if it is accepted that basic teaching principles and strategies are similar for all (Davis & Florian, 2004; Kershner, 2007). Yet this is not just a matter of understanding individual children's capabilities and educational needs in order to integrate them with more "typical" others of the same age. In their contribution to a review of primary education in England, Ainscow, Conteh, Dyson, and Gallanaugh (2010) discussed the ways in which

educational difference itself is constructed in different contexts at different points of time. As Slee (2011) argues, "inclusive school cultures require fundamental changes in educational thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and school organization" (p.110).

For most teachers the immediate responsibilities for making inclusion work are classroom-based. The sheer complexity of classroom life calls for an integrated understanding of the relationship between teachers' changing awareness of classroom activity, the increasingly conscious concepts and principles that are formed in practice and the theoretical understandings that are produced from a range of different sources (Korthagen, 2010). Professional learning is not simply the superficial acquisition of further ideas, information and skills neither is it a mere cognitive process. Deep professional learning involves more fundamental and comprehensive transformations. Marton and Booth (1997), for instance, outline six conceptions of learning that move from seeing learning as primarily increasing, memorising and applying one's knowledge, to seeing learning as primarily seeking meaning through understanding, seeing something in a different way and, ultimately, changing as a person. As seen in the co-teaching example discussed below, teachers are uniquely placed in the education system to combine the formal, generic knowledge of education with the practical and personal knowledge emerging in day-to-day classroom experience.

In discussing inclusive pedagogy, Florian and Rouse (2010) apply Shulman's (2009, 192–193) conceptualisation of habit of mind, habit of practice and habit of heart, pointing out the reciprocal relations between teachers' "knowing", "doing" and "believing". They argue that all three elements are essential professional attributes, and having at least two out of three is necessary for the third to develop. Hence, for example, having a commitment to social justice is insufficient if the necessary pedagogical skills are lacking; and assessing children's apparent learning differences is insufficient without positive attitudes to children's active participation in inclusive classrooms. Having a commitment to social justice and relevant knowledge, however, may help to support the development of inclusive pedagogical skills and positive attitudes. In this paper our concern lies particularly with the collaborative aspects of these reciprocal learning processes.

2.2. Socio-cultural perspectives on teachers' professional learning and development

Teachers' professional learning is known to be based on active learning, reflective thinking, and collective participation (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009). This professional engagement is central to the processes of education which can be understood and mapped as a dynamic socio-cultural system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Within this system, activities range from the many "micro" level interactions that take place between children and adults to the 'macro' elements of social structures, research, culture, politics and economics that support and constrain educational thinking and practice over time. These have direct and indirect influence on teacher learning and moreover, on the experiences that define whether learning accumulates over time into significant personal and professional transformation. Conceptually, these transformational consequences of particular learning experiences are considered here as professional development, arising from the informal learning and knowledge-building that is embedded in daily practice as well as from participation in formal professional development (PD) programmes. The co-teaching case example discussed in this paper exemplifies the interconnections between these different learning experiences.

When teachers decide to work closely together, as in the co-teaching discussed later, outcomes commonly include the

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