



# Teachers' self-directed learning and teaching experience: What, how, and why teachers want to learn



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The study treated teachers as active agents who self-direct their learning.
- Examined teachers' preferred learning in relation to their years of experience.
- Early- and late-career teachers showed greater preference to learn about classroom management compared to mid-career.
- Negative linear trend was found for experience with learning activity 'experimenting'.
- Teachers had autonomous reasons to learn about self-selected learning domains.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 June 2016

Received in revised form

19 February 2017

Accepted 8 April 2017

### Keywords:

Professional development

Teaching experience

Self-directed learning

Secondary education

## ABSTRACT

This study focused on teachers' *self-directed learning*: a concept derived from adult learning theories that accommodates for the idea that teachers formulate their own learning needs and consequently direct their learning. Teachers from 11 Dutch secondary schools ( $N = 309$ ) were asked about their preferred learning domains ('what'), their preferred learning activities ('how'), and their reasons to learn about a selection of learning domains ('why'). In regression analyses we tested for linear and non-linear relationships between teachers' teaching experience with their self-directed learning. Early- and late-career teachers showed higher preferences compared to mid-career teachers to learn about classroom management domains.

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## 1. Introduction

In-service teacher learning is often referred to as (continuous) *professional development* (PD) and is considered a crucial factor for increasing teacher quality, and improving schools and student learning (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Programs for teacher professional development have been criticized for not involving teachers in the choice of the content of these programs (Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012), or not taking teachers' needs into account in PD design (Gravani, 2007). Several scholars suggested that adapting professional

development programs towards teachers' learning needs could increase the programs' effectiveness (Van Veen et al., 2012; Gravani, 2007; Shriki & Lavy, 2012), especially if PD is understood as situated in the school context (Wilson & Berne, 1999). A problem in the mismatch experienced in PD is that teachers are often regarded as recipients of PD rather than active participants that are able to explicate their learning goals and have a say in their own learning (Van Veen et al., 2012; Ball & Cohen, 1999).

Another concern is that in the design of PD activities teachers' experience is hardly taken into account. Teachers at the beginning of their career have different aims for learning than mid- and late-career teachers, due to differences in expertise and professional life phases (Anderson & Olsen, 2006; Berliner, 2004; Day et al., 2007). It has been suggested that in order to design a curriculum for PD further research is needed on differences in teacher learning across a career (Van Veen & Kooy, 2012). However, empirical evidence on which to base such a differentiated curriculum is still lacking. When

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teacher learning research does take teaching experience into account this is mostly in settings for formal learning (e.g., participation in university courses), whereas in-service teacher learning has been found to occur in both formal and informal settings, both outside the school and in the workplace (Kwakman, 2003; Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016).

Teachers show a high level of ownership over their own learning: they themselves decide what they learn from the learning opportunities the workplace offers them (Admiraal et al., 2016). This level of ownership can be seen as teachers' self-initiated or self-directed learning (Lohman & Woolf, 2001). Because teachers show great ownership when directing their own learning in the workplace, it is of interest to explore what teachers themselves choose as their learning goals, what kind of learning activities they choose to engage in, and what reasons teachers have for professional learning (Kyndt et al., 2016; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Mansfield & Beltman, 2014; Thomson & Turner, 2013).

In this study, we combined the questions of what, how, and why teachers want to learn in the concept of teachers' *self-directed learning*, a concept derived from adult learning theories based on the view that teachers are able to formulate their own learning needs and consequently direct their learning. We explored teachers' self-directed learning by focusing on a) teachers' own learning goals, how they want to learn, and the reasons they have for why they want to learn, and b) differences in teachers' years of experience.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. PD and teachers' self-directed learning

Following Wermke (2011, p. 668), continuous professional development includes not only in-service education and training in the form of organised programmes but also every self-determined and systematic development such as the independent reading of books and journals, attending university courses, programmes and conferences, as well as interaction with colleagues and principals.

Moreover, studies point to the importance of regarding teachers as active agents in educational change efforts (Hoban, 2002) and teachers as undertaking self-initiated professional learning activities (Kwakman, 2003; Lohman & Woolf, 2001; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). Therefore, we treated teachers as active agents in their own development who self-direct their learning. The research tradition on self-directed learning has been derived from theories on adult learning emphasizing adults' sense of personal autonomy in their learning. This means that learners take control of the goals and purposes of learning and assume ownership of learning (Garrison, 1997; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). It also means that adults would like to be seen and treated by others as being capable of self-direction (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 44). We assume that if teachers are treated as responsible individuals in control of their own learning they are more likely to be engaged in learning (cf. 'autonomy' as basic psychological need for motivated learning Deci & Ryan, 2000; cf. Ellinger, 2004). Also, viewing teachers as capable of self-direction means that teachers are treated as professionals, which would solve the central mismatch experienced in PD if a program neglects teachers as active participants in designing their own professional learning (Van Veen et al., 2012).

In self-directed learning processes different phases can be distinguished (Knowles et al., 2015; Tough, 1979). These phases generally include a needs assessment, planning, engaging in learning, and evaluation. A learning need can be explained as a discrepancy or gap between the desired competencies and the learners' current level of ability (Knowles et al., 2015). Comparing

desired with current competencies suggests a deficiency perspective on learning by focusing on skills or knowledge a learner has not mastered yet. We assume that learning needs not only relate to feelings of competence (i.e., sense of self-efficacy) but could also derive from professional growth, which means 'an inevitable and continuous process of learning' (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 947).

#### 2.1.1. What do teachers want to learn?

In both perspectives the needs assessment phase is important for determining learning goals and hence the direction of what is to be learnt. What learning domains teachers choose in this phase can vary. Following Shulman (1986) conceptual framework of teachers' knowledge, different domains can be distinguished, for example knowledge of subject content, classroom management, curriculum, and students' learning processes. We also distinguished less classroom-related domains of learning, such as learning about school organizations, about themselves as professionals, and how to act as mentor for novice colleagues (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; van Eekelen, Vermunt & Boshuizen, 2006).

#### 2.1.2. How do teachers want to learn?

In the planning phase, learners choose the specific learning activities they would like to engage in and decide how to evaluate their learning. We assumed that teachers choose those learning activities they have a strong preference for. In research on teachers' learning activities different categorizations are adopted, depending on the theoretical framework used (Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2007; Evers, 2012; Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen, 2009; Kwakman, 2003; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011). For this study we followed the categorization by Meirink et al. (2007), in which four types of learning activities are distinguished: 1) learning by experimenting, 2) learning by reflecting on own teaching practice, 3) learning from others (with/without interaction), and 4) learning by doing. We expected that the last category, 'learning by doing', is such an ongoing part of teachers' practice, that it is less likely to be part of the 'planning learning activities' phase (Webster-Wright, 2009). Therefore, this category was not included in the study. In addition to these three categories, we distinguished a category 'keeping yourself up-to-date' (e.g., reading professional literature, follow training on your subject) (Kwakman, 2003).

#### 2.1.3. Why do teachers want to learn?

Teachers' self-directed learning should not be understood as a solely individual activity, but is considered to be informed by the problems teachers experience in practice, school climate, recent learning experiences, tasks and responsibilities, and national and school policies (Kwakman, 2003; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999). When teachers assess their learning needs their decision-making can be seen as influenced by a combination of these different internal and external factors (Merriam et al., 2007). It is likely that adult learners will consider something a learning need and consequently self-direct their learning if they hold the positive expectation that the object of learning will be valuable to their work situation, if they experience control over the learning, and if they think that the investment will actually lead to the goal (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Garrison, 1997; Knowles et al., 2015; Thomson & Turner, 2013). The 'most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like)' (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 45).

To study why teachers want to learn the theory of self-determination (SDT) can be used, which has as its central assumption that all individuals have an inner tendency to strive for growth, integration, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Deci and

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