Teachers' perceptions of intergenerational knowledge flows

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Subject knowledge and classroom management skills are seen as supplies of old teachers.
- Innovative teaching methods and ICT skills are seen as supplies of young teachers.
- Perceived teachers' attitudes might affect flows of knowledge demands and supplies.
- A large variety of intergenerational knowledge brokerage activities is found.
- Processes of socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization occur.

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study we look at knowledge brokering from an intergenerational teacher perspective. This study aims at describing how teachers perceive colleagues from other generations in terms of knowledge demands and knowledge supplies, and how processes of knowledge-sharing across teachers of different generations take place. Our findings suggest that teachers' perceptions about skills and knowledge of colleagues from other generations can be understood as knowledge demands and supplies and that knowledge flow between knowledge demands and supplies can be affected by perceptions about teachers' attitudes. Furthermore, our findings exemplify the occurrence of intergenerational knowledge brokerage processes within school teams.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, labor markets are characterized by a large outflow of older employees due to the retirement of the so-called Baby Boom generation. On the other hand, active ageing and working longer is necessary to sustain health, welfare and retirement systems (CEDEFOP, 2012; Compton et al., 2014). Therefore, facing the difficulties of potential loss of critical organizational knowledge and experience when employees retire, and taking advantage of the knowledge, skills and competences of older employees, are challenges for many organizations. In order to cope with the growing trend of age diversity in teams, organizations need to support the implementation of new dimensions of knowledge management and conditions that improve intergenerational learning (CEDEFOP, 2012).

This is also true within the context of educational institutions in Flanders (Belgium). Although schools have been collecting and sharing knowledge for many years, it has not been until recently that the potential power of knowledge management for school and class improvement has been discovered (Messelt, 2004). The concept of 'knowledge brokerage' refers to moving knowledge from one place or group of people to another (CHSRF, 2003; Vanhoof & Mahieu, 2013). Whereas older teachers are described by some as workers who have little potential and a low level of performance (Baugh & Sullivan, 2008; Stam, 2009), others argue that the explicit and implicit knowledge of the workers close to retirement is largely underestimated (Duval, 2003; Nonaka, Kohlbacher, & Holden, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Vaiman, 2008). Meanwhile, schools are confronted with a large outflow of older employees. It is argued that the ability to retain knowledge of employees close to retirement and to learn intergenerationally becomes a key feature of successful schools (Bender & Fish, 2000; Sutherland, 2005).

Intergenerational knowledge brokerage in school teams

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contains components of knowledge and learning of different generations of teachers. According to Shulman (1987) teachers' knowledge includes content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends. Sternberg and Horvath (1995) looked at the differences between novice and expert teachers regarding their knowledge base. For instance, expert teachers are said to have more knowledge that enables them to solve problems within their domain, as compared to novices. Besides, the expert teacher has knowledge of the organizational context in which teaching takes place and is competent to adapt to certain limitations within their teaching practice (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). While prior research focused on differences between novices and expert teachers with regard to knowledge and teacher learning (e.g.Grosemans, Boon, Verclairen, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2015; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011), the current study aims to contribute to this field by examining knowledge sharing from an intergenerational perspective.

Ropes (2011) defines intergenerational learning as an interactive process between and among people from different generations through which one or both parties learn. Intergenerational knowledge brokerage in school teams facilitates knowledge sharing between knowledge demands (needs) and knowledge supplies (sources) across the younger part of the teaching workforce and the older part of the teaching workforce. In order to describe this knowledge sharing processes, we build our conceptual framework on the work of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) that includes socialization, externalization, combination and internalization. Brokerage processes can occur at the workplace or during other learning activities, in other words, on the job and off the job. Three types of workplace learning can be distinguished: (1) formal learning; intentional and taking place in organized training and learning activities, (2) nonformal learning; usually intentional, taking place at the workplace, and (3) informal learning; usually unintentional, as a part of everyday life (Heikkinen, Jokinen, & Tynjälä, 2012; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Tynjälä, 2008). Nowadays, two opposite processes seem to occur within teachers' professional learning (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). On one hand, there is a growing trend towards the formalization of informal and nonformal learning. On the other hand, processes of informalization of formal learning take place. Since both processes are intertwined, the three types of learning also converge and the lines between them are fading (Heikkinen et al., 2012, 2015). Tynjälä and Heikkinen (2011) state that teacher learning should be seen as a continuing professional development process that combines formal nonformal and informal learning throughout the career from initial training to retirement. Notwithstanding that many knowledge brokerage activities take place implicitly (Vanhoof & Mahieu, 2013), a variety of methods can be used in order to transfer knowledge from employees of one generation to another one, e.g. face-to-face meetings, communities of practice, knowledge databases, mentoring, coaching, job rotation, storytelling, orientation, after action interviews, interviews, phased retirement, videotaping and training (DeLong, 2004; Liebowitz, 2009; Nonaka et al., 2006; Wamundila, 2008).

Intergenerational relationships support intergenerational learning, reduce barriers and result in a decrease of negative stereotyping (Ropes, 2011; Spannring, 2008). Abrams, Eller, and Bryant (2006) support the idea that stereotype-threat can be decreased by creating more understanding among different generations. Understanding the framework of values, beliefs and work ethics of each generation is needed in order to build relationships that lead to co-operation and job-satisfaction (Ruch, 2005; Swearingen & Liberman, 2004). Moreover, this understanding supports team cohesion and prevents conflict among team members (Lipscomb, 2010). Negative feelings between employees of younger and older generations can have a negative impact on organizational climate (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2011). Thus, teachers are supposed to have a certain level of understanding about each generation in order to cope with an increase of age diversity within their school team.

Previously, we referred to younger and older employees in terms of generations. As stated by Cekada (2012), not everyone can be placed in one group of a generation. Kuyken (2012) assumes that each generation contains different identities and sub-cultures. Individual differences have been denied in the categorization of generations. Therefore, we consider the conceptualization of generations as complex.

Given that reciprocal understanding among generational cohorts is seen as an important condition for decreasing stereotyping and enhancing collaboration, we are interested in how different generations of teachers look at each other. The way that individuals understand colleagues from other generations might influence how people act at the workplace. Consequently, it might also impact processes of knowledge sharing between teachers from different generations. The purpose of this article is to examine how teachers perceive their colleagues from other generations and how intergenerational knowledge brokerage (IKB) processes take place within school teams. The following set of research questions (RQ) is set forward:

RQ 1. How do teachers perceive colleagues from other generations in terms of knowledge demands and knowledge supplies?

RQ 2. How do intergenerational knowledge brokerage processes take place within school teams?

In the following, we open with a discussion about the conceptualization of a generation. After that, we explain our model to describe IKB processes. Finally, we present the results of a study about the perceptions teachers have about their colleagues of another generation, and the occurrence of IKB processes within school teams.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The concept of a 'generation'

Mannheim (1952) suggested that members of a generation have a similar point of view to interpret their environment as a result of mutual social experiences and shared historical events during the formative years of their lifespan.

There is no general acceptance of the labels of generations; many different names have been used as well as a variety in years of birth that indicate the span of one generational cohort. The three major generations currently in the workplace include Baby Boomers; Generation X; and Generation Y (DeLong, 2004; Edge, 2014; Stone-Johnson, 2011). The latter are also known as Millennials, Generation Me, or Digital Natives (Schullery, 2013). Hereby, the conceptualization of generations is mainly based on chronological age and is therefore related to employees' calendar age. Although 'chronological age' is the most dominant way to understand age, some researchers suggest that this approach is not adequate enough to use in a work context (Kooij, de Lange, Jansen, & Dikkers, 2008). According to Sterns and Doverspike (1989) age can also be understood as a multidimensional concept, distinguishing 'functional age', 'psychosocial age', 'organizational age' and 'lifespan age' in addition to 'chronological age'. These different approaches to age are often interrelated (Kooij et al., 2008).

Murray, Toulson, and Legg (2011) argue that there is no clear