



The importance of job resources and self-efficacy for beginning teachers' professional learning in differentiated instruction



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine job and personal resources in beginning teachers' learning in DI.
- Self-efficacy, autonomy, and reflective dialogue predict changes in DI-practice.
- Self-efficacy mediates the relation between autonomy and changes in DI-practice.
- Self-efficacy mediates the path between collective responsibility and DI-practices.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 February 2014

Received in revised form

30 October 2014

Accepted 4 December 2014

Available online

Keywords:

Teachers' professional learning

Beginning teachers

Differentiated instruction

Professional learning communities

Teacher self-efficacy

Teacher autonomy

ABSTRACT

Professional learning in differentiated instruction (DI) is a challenging learning process for beginning teachers. This study investigates the interplay between job (i.e., teacher autonomy and characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs)) and personal resources (i.e., teacher self-efficacy) as hypothesized determinants of professionalization in DI. A sample of 227 beginning teachers from 65 primary schools participated. Path analyses showed that the PLC-characteristic 'reflective dialogue', teachers' self-efficacy and autonomy directly predicted self-reported changes in DI-practice (i.e., measure of professional learning). Moreover, autonomy and the PLC-characteristic 'collective responsibility' indirectly predicted self-reported changes in DI-practice via self-efficacy. Implications for educational practices are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there is a consensus among scholars on the importance of teachers' professional learning to improve the quality of education (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Alethea, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Along their teaching career, teachers learn and professionalize in different ways as they encounter different experiences, challenges, and problems. In particular, the professional learning of beginning teachers is considered as complex and demanding (Avalos, 2011; OECD, 2005). Whereas beginners in other fields start with minor responsibilities and gradually get more demanding challenges and duties along their path of professionalization, beginning teachers immediately

have full pedagogical and legal responsibility (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011).

One of the most challenging tasks beginning teachers face nowadays is the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) in the classroom practice (Smit & Humpert, 2012; Tomlinson, 2003). DI is defined as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that aims to obtain a match between learning tasks and activities on the one hand, and the needs of individual learners on the other hand, to maximize students' growth (Levy, 2008; Stradling & Saunders, 1993; Tomlinson, 1999). Currently, teachers are increasingly confronted with diverse student populations. Learners do not only differ culturally and linguistically but also in their cognitive abilities and learning preferences (Huebner, 2010; Jokinen, Heikkinen, & Morberg, 2012). This evolution resulted in a call from policymakers and researchers to implement a differentiated teaching approach into the classroom. Also in Flanders, where special needs education and mainstream education was strongly separated up to now, this trend is visible. Year after year the PISA-results show that there is a tremendously big gap between high-

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performing and low-performing students within Flanders. This implies that equity in learning opportunities is low for Flemish students (OECD, 2013). This finding reaffirms that Flemish teachers struggle with the use and implementation of DI within the classroom. Since 2008, the Flemish government has been urging mainstream education by decree to give students with special educational needs reasonable adjustments. The M-Decree approved by the Flemish government in 2014, enables students with minor mental disabilities or learning disorders to follow classes in mainstream education. These political regulations make the call for DI even stronger.

Given that implementing DI places new requirements on teachers' skills, this process of adapting the course content to the needs of each individual student within a diverse group coincides with many difficulties, especially for beginning teachers (Holloway, 2000). In trying to apply DI, beginning teachers experience what Bakker and Demerouti (2007) have identified as a high job demands environment where novice teachers are confronted with work overload and time pressure. Although scholars acknowledge the benefits of DI for student learning, they have doubts about the feasibility to plan different forms of instruction for a diverse group of learners. Integration of DI in lesson plans is time-consuming and difficult to accomplish without assistance from colleague-teachers (Smit & Humpert, 2012; Tomlinson, 2003). In addition, Flemish student teachers often feel not fully prepared to use DI when they enter the teaching profession because teacher training courses sometimes lack thorough DI-examples (Ruys, Defruyt, Rots, & Aelterman, 2013). Therefore, understanding which factors facilitate professional learning in DI and buffer the high job demands is critical to understand how beginning teachers deal with this difficult challenge and how they can be supported.

This study aims to address this issue by focusing on factors that may play a role in the learning process of beginning teachers in DI. More specifically, this study investigates the interplay between teacher characteristics and characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs) as hypothesized determinants of professionalization in DI.

In their Job-Demands–Resources (JD–R) model Bakker and Demerouti (2007) have indicated that a high demands work environment can be buffered with important job resources such as support from colleagues and autonomy. Various studies stated that PLCs have characteristics of collegial support that stimulate teachers' professionalization in DI (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Furthermore, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2007) extended the JD–R model by providing evidence that the mediating role of personal resources such as self-efficacy should not be neglected in explaining professional growth. However, systematic research on the mediating effects of teacher self-efficacy on the relationship between job resources and beginning teachers' learning in DI is missing.

As such, this study wants to analyze how job resources like teacher autonomy and PLC-characteristics are related to professional learning of beginning teachers in DI and how self-efficacy plays a mediating role between these variables. A deeper understanding of this interplay between these variables can help us identify key elements in the way beginning teachers can be supported in dealing with DI.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Beginning teachers' self-reported changes in practice in differentiated instruction (DI)

The JD–R model indicated that job and personal resources foster teachers' professional growth and learning. In the following section

we will give a definition of professional learning and explain more in-depth the learning process we want to capture.

Professional learning of teachers in schools is regarded as crucial in improving the quality of education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Although many scholars studied and presented this concept in different ways there is a uniform understanding that teachers' professional learning concerns a process toward professionalization (Avalos, 2011). In this study we affiliate with Villegas-Reimers (2003) who perceived teachers' professional learning as a long-term, active, and constructive process that contains individual and collaborative components. During this process the pre-existing knowledge of teachers changes through individual experiences, but also through meaningful interactions with others taking place in a particular context.

Researchers have underlined the importance of teacher learning in improving classroom instruction (Parise & Spillane, 2010). According to Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) the identification of antecedents that support and promote teachers' learning is crucial to advocate teachers' changes in classroom practices. Hence, we consider the variable 'self-reported changes in DI-practice' to comprehend the learning process of beginning teachers in DI. Self-reported changes in practice refer to the behavioral changes teachers perceive in their classroom behavior, such as the use of new teaching techniques (Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010). Bakkenes et al. (2010) stressed that change in behavior focuses on permanent changes and does not include temporary experiments.

2.2. Job resources

As previously mentioned, autonomy and support from colleagues are identified as important job resources within the JD–R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Previous studies have shown that teacher autonomy and collegial support affect teachers' learning (Geijssels, Sleegers, Stoel, & Krüger, 2009; Vescio et al., 2008). However, there is still little research that situates beginning teachers' learning in DI within the JD–R model. Therefore, we integrate teacher autonomy and characteristics of PLCs as job resources in this study.

2.2.1. Teacher autonomy

Teacher autonomy gives teachers the space to be self-determined and allows teachers to try out different ways of learning. They can choose their own learning path to develop themselves professionally, experience more ownership, and have a more direct impact on their changes in practice. Studies have shown that autonomy is positively related to teachers' learning and is an essential factor for teachers' use of professional practices (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Porter, 1989). Also, Common (1983) observed that the higher teachers' sense of autonomy is, the more they are willing to change and support the change process. In addition, there is a growing body of literature indicating that teacher autonomy, as a job resource, stimulates teachers' performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010) and may buffer the impact of job demands on performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Kwakman (2001) examined the relationship between teachers' work stress, task characteristics and teachers' learning. Findings indicated that teachers who experienced high emotional demands in combination with high job autonomy and participation, performed more frequently professional activities related to professional improvement. Despite this large body of research, there is, to the best of our knowledge, no research examining the impact of teacher autonomy on the self-reported changes of beginning teachers in DI-practice. Therefore, we define teacher autonomy as teachers' feelings of personal control and the control they have on their work environment (Pearson & Hall, 1993). More specifically, teacher

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