Teaching and Teacher Education 47 (2015) 151–161

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Informal learning of primary school teachers: Considering the role of teaching experience and school culture

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Primary teachers undertake a variety of informal learning activities.
- Experimentation and collaboration are considered to be the most important activities.
- Experienced teachers undertake as many learning activities than novice teachers.
- Learning activities of novice and more experienced teachers are different.
- Teachers need to feel it is safe to share problems and approach colleagues.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 June 2014
Received in revised form
6 October 2014
Accepted 30 December 2014
Available online

Keywords:
Informal learning
Teacher learning
Teaching experience
School culture

ABSTRACT

Teacher learning does not solely occur within formal professional development activities; in fact, the majority of learning occurs through daily practice. The current study focuses on this everyday learning and examines primary teachers' informal learning. Results showed that teachers learn through a variety of learning activities including 'experimenting', 'reflection', 'learning from others without interaction' and 'collaboration'. In addition, differences between novice and more experienced teachers were identified. More experienced teachers learn as much as their novice colleagues, however they undertake different learning activities. Finally, results reveal that although collaboration is an important source of learning, primary teachers value their autonomy.

Within the current fast-changing society, knowledge and skills quickly become out-dated. Usually this is mostly associated with professions in the technology, ICT or medical sectors. However, teachers are also confronted with changes, high pressure, increasing demands, reforms and innovations in their job (e.g., Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Lohman, 2006; Van Eekelen, Bosbuizen, & Vermunt, 2005). Furthermore, pupils have a more diverse background than ever before while expectations concerning what the children are taught are rising. To be able to keep up with this situation, it is important teachers continue to develop themselves professionally (e.g., Armour & Yelling, 2007; Cameron, Mulholland, & Branson, 2013). According to Elman, Illfelder-Kaye, and Robiner (2005) professional development can be defined as continuously acquiring, extending and refining complex competences or solely skills, knowledge or proficiencies. Professional development activities "can be promoted in workshops or education programs, but also through professional and personal experiences such as reading, mentoring and consultation" (Elman et al., 2005, p. 368).

Both within practice as in prior research, formally organised learning activities such as training and schooling appear to have received much more attention and appreciation from policy makers (e.g., Fraser, 2010; Jurasaite-Harbison, 2009). However, at the European level, informal learning in the workplace increasingly forms an integral part of the policies on lifelong learning (European Commission, 2001; OECD, 2003). Also, for teachers, the interest in informal learning has increased as the awareness is growing that what teachers learn in professional development initiatives (i.e., formal learning activities) is insufficiently transferred to the daily practice of teaching (e.g., Fraser, 2010; Poulson & Avramidis, 2003). Consequently, the importance of informal learning – i.e. teacher

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.12.011
0742-051X/

learning within the daily practice of teaching – for the development of employees has become more widely recognised (e.g., Cunningham & Hillier, 2013; Rytivaara & Kershner, 2012; Shapiro, 2003). Eraut (1998) argues that most of what people learn is acquired in an informal way, when dealing with the daily challenges of the workplace or when interacting with colleagues, customers or clients (Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Imants, 2009).

Prior research has shown that time for learning in the workplace – for teachers this usually means non-teaching time and preferably joint non-teaching time – is an important antecedent of teachers' informal learning (e.g., Christensen, 2013; Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Winchester, Culver, & Camiré, 2013). Because primary teachers often have less (joint) non-teaching time in comparison with secondary teachers, their informal learning might be even more precarious. While it has been suggested that informal learning is the most commonly used form of workplace learning (e.g., Hicks, Bagg, Doyle, & Young, 2007; Skule & Reichborn, 2002), research on informal learning of primary teachers remains rather scarce (Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen, 2009). The current study aims to contribute to the international research on informal teacher learning by examining which learning activities primary teachers undertake in their daily practice. In addition, prior research (Rolls & Plauborg, 2009) also described how teachers evolve throughout their career and how this is related to their learning. However, the role of informal learning throughout teachers' career development remains unclear. Therefore, the current study wants to contribute to this line of research and examines whether novice and more experienced teachers differ in the informal learning activities they undertake. Furthermore, Hargreaves (1994) claims that if one wants to understand what the teacher does, the teaching community and work culture of the teacher should be taken into account. Accordingly, this study considers the role of school culture for teachers' informal learning.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Informal learning

Throughout the literature, informal learning is often defined in contrast with formal learning (e.g., Eraut, 2004; Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Although it seems there is a very clear distinction between formal and informal learning, this is not the case. Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm (2003) point out that formal and informal learning should not be seen as separate categories, but should always be combined. The authors argue that both formality and informality are attributes of learning. Sawchuk (2008) agrees with this insight and states "informality and formality in learning express a relational continuum rather than dichotomous categories" (p. 1).

Formal learning, on the one hand, is often described as learning that takes place in a structured and organised environment. Its main characteristics are that learning is structured in terms of learning context, learning support, learning time, and learning objectives (Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek, & Dochy, 2014). Informal learning, on the other hand, has been defined in many different ways (e.g., Eraut, 2004; Hoekstra, Brekelmans et al., 2009; Marsick & Volpe, 1999). However, these definitions have several elements in common. Informal learning is generally not classroom-based, but mainly takes place in the workplace without systematic support (Hoekstra, Brekelmans et al., 2009). It emerges in an unstructured environment and throughout people's daily activities and routines (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Informal learning occurs both individually as well as in collaboration with others (Eraut, 2004). The learning outcomes are not predetermined, as informal learning mostly arises spontaneously and not highly consciously (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Finally, this kind of learning is expected to result in the development of professional knowledge and skills (Lohman, 2006). While the continuum between formal and informal learning is an interesting and adequate starting point for conceptualising informal learning, it also tends to lead to a lack of clarity concerning the specific learning activities examined within empirical studies. Therefore, it is important to explicitly indicate which types of activities are under investigation. In this study, informal learning will be defined in line with prior research on informal teacher learning, as unstructured, spontaneous learning in the workplace without systematic support (Hoekstra, Brekelmans et al., 2009; Marsick & Volpe, 1999).

1.2. Teachers' informal learning activities

Following Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al. (2009), teachers' informal learning activities will be defined in this study as "the activities a teacher undertakes in the workplace that contribute to a change in the teacher's behaviour and/or cognition" (p. 278). Throughout the literature, several types of activities are distinguished (Hoekstra, Brekelmans et al., 2009; Kwakman, 2003; Scribner, 1999).

A first category of activities pertains to '*reflection*'. This is the action where teachers consider their own teaching practice (Kwakman, 2003). Through reflection, the teacher becomes aware of what happened in a situation and can make sense of it. According to the theory of Schön, there are two types of reflection: reflection on action and reflection in action (Van den Bossche & Beausaert, 2011). Reflection on action means that someone reviews what he or she has done in order to discover how one's know-how in action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome. Reflection in action happens when the action itself is still in progress, without interrupting it, making it possible to adjust what someone is doing, while they are doing it (Van den Bossche & Beausaert, 2011).

A second category of learning activities entails reading, information seeking and keeping up-to-date. Kwakman (2003) states that one of the responsibilities of teachers is to stay informed about "new insights and developments influencing the professional field" (p. 153). Meirink, Meijer, and Verloop (2007) give a broader interpretation of this category by defining it as '*learning from others without interaction*'. They explain that teachers do not only learn from texts written by others, but also from listening to presentations. Furthermore, they also argue that observing colleagues' teaching methods is part of this category. Teachers can see what their colleagues do and learn from it, even without engaging in interaction with each other (Meirink et al., 2007).

A third category refers to learning by *experimenting*. This means that teachers intentionally try something new, in order to improve their own practices in the classroom (Kwakman, 2003). Furthermore, teachers can also learn by doing. They do something (e.g., preparing a class, explaining a subject to their pupils) and try to improve it by trial and error (Van Eekelen et al., 2005). Although Kwakman (2003) does not make an explicit difference between experimenting and learning by doing, these categories are often seen as separate learning activities (e.g., Hoekstra, Brekelmans et al., 2009; Meirink et al., 2007; Van Eekelen et al., 2005). The main reason for this distinction is that '*learning by doing*' is less conscious than 'experimenting' (Meirink et al., 2007).

Another learning activity of teachers is to collaborate with their colleagues (Kwakman, 2003). Meirink et al. (2007) give this category a broader definition, namely '*learning from others in interaction*'. This includes conversation and discussion with each other as well as joint activities. This means that teachers work together, share ideas, and request or give advice (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). Collaboration can also inspire teachers and subsequently