



The impact of the organizational transfer climate on the use of teacher leadership competences developed in a post-initial Master's program



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Use of teacher leadership skills learned in a Master's program is not self-evident.
- The organizational transfer climate supports or hinders use of leadership competences.
- Strategic partnerships between Master's teachers and formal leaders support transfer.
- Then, Master's programs contribute to teacher development and school improvement.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 January 2013
Received in revised form
3 October 2013
Accepted 8 October 2013

Keywords:

Teacher development
Teacher leadership
Master's programs
Transfer of learning
Organizational transfer climate
In-service learning

ABSTRACT

The transfer of learning outcomes of Master's programs for teachers is not self-evident. In this study, 18 teachers who recently graduated and their supervisors were interviewed on the transfer of leadership competences developed during their Master's program and on how the organizational transfer climate of the school supported or hindered this transfer. In schools with high levels of transfer, strategic partnerships between Master's-level teachers and formal leaders were observed, which facilitated a two-way process in which the application of new competences led to changes in the workplace. Therefore, the Master's program contributed to both professional development and school improvement.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The effectiveness of Master's programs as a strategy for professional learning

As teachers are the key to enhancing learning in schools, it is essential that they themselves have access to extensive learning opportunities (Bransford, 2000). Thus, it is important to establish which learning opportunities are effective in helping teachers provide their students with the best possible education. Research on in-service professional development suggests that effective program designs are characterized by situated learning in the workplace, collective and collaborative learning within a team of teachers, and the involvement of teachers in the goals, content, and

design of learning activities (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010; Kennedy, 1998; Knapp, 2003; Little, 2006). Such characteristics are in contrast with the characteristics of many traditional qualification courses, which are often characterized by off-site activities (e.g., lectures and workshops), individual subscriptions, and fixed curricula.

Nevertheless, in policies on teacher quality and career requirements, qualification courses are considered important tools for teacher development and improving student outcomes. Such courses are thought to contribute to Master's-level teachers assuming leadership roles within their schools (Blackwell & Diez, 1998). Teachers themselves also consider formal qualification courses to be effective professional development activities, as shown by the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2009).

As there appears to be tension between the design criteria for effective in-service professional development activities and the actual design of many Master's programs, there is sufficient cause

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to investigate the actual impact of Master's programs. Qualification courses, such as Master's programs, are expected to have a strong impact on teachers in terms of their professional learning. However, the main goal of such programs is that they lead to changes in teacher behavior in the classroom and in the wider school environment. Studies on the actual impact of Master's programs must also address their contributions to improvement within the school. Therefore, studies must also determine how these programs contribute to the transfer of learning to the workplace (De Rijdt, Stes, Van der Vleuten, & Dochy, 2012). In this paper, we consider the impact of a post-initial Master's program that is focused on the development of teacher leadership by analyzing the extent in which leadership competences are used at the workplace and the conditions within the school that influence this during and after an in-service Master's program.

In research into 'transfer of learning' to the workplace, transfer is usually rather traditionally defined as the effective and continuing workplace application of the knowledge, skills, and conceptions gained during professional development programs (De Rijdt et al., 2012). In this paper, we build on this body of research, since it has identified important elements in organizations that enhance or hamper the use in the workplace of competences learned in courses or programs outside the workplace. However, we adopt a different notion of transfer than is implied in this research. We do not conceptualize 'transfer' as carrying over discrete entities of knowledge and skills to a new situation, but rather as a process of boundary crossing between activity systems which involves a reinterpretation of the work situation and an adaptation of the competences learned in – in this case – the Master's program (e.g. Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). From this perspective, 'application' or 'transfer' of competences implies an active process of adapting the learned competences for use in the work situation, thereby changing the work situation as well.

1.2. Developing non-positional teacher leadership

In their review of teacher leadership research, York-Barr and Duke (2004) define teacher leadership as 'the process by which teachers, individually and collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement' (pp. 287–288). This influence can be exercised through distributed leadership, based on formal positions or roles in the organizational hierarchy of the school (MacBeath, 2005), or through non-formal or shared leadership, recognizing the potential of all teachers to exercise leadership as part of their role as teachers (Frost, 2012; Kessels, 2012; Lambert, 2002). In a review of recent literature on teacher leadership, Poekert (2012) concludes that studies on teacher leadership are more focused on defining the concept than on how teacher leadership is developed, is exercised, and impacts teaching and learning. Moreover, these studies mainly focus on the role of the principal and less on the teacher's role in teacher leadership. The literature mainly describes schools in which teacher leadership is evident and established, whereas few studies have considered schools that are only beginning to recognize teacher leadership or are engaged in a process in which teachers are encouraged to develop their leadership competences (Muijs & Harris, 2006). Few studies look at schools in which the frames of reference that are taken for granted are transformed and new habits of thinking are developed (Ross et al., 2011).

1.3. Transfer of learning and boundary crossing

A Master's program focused on teacher leadership aims to support and strengthen the development of leadership qualities

such that the participants are able to exert their leadership through initiating new developments, supporting decisions through the use of inquiry-based information, and influencing and inspiring their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school community. Such an exertion of leadership requires the transfer of qualities developed in the Master's program to daily practice in the school environment. To understand the transfer process, we must consider theories on adult learning that state that 'a full understanding of adult learning must be a complex one which, rather than seeing learning principally as an individual, cognitive phenomenon, takes into account the interrelationship of many factors in the learning situation, while placing the learner's contexts, purposes and practices at the centre' (Tusting & Barton, 2003, p.7). Thus, the metaphor of transfer has been criticized as being too simple, based on replicative conceptions of learning, and as being disconnected from complex contextual factors that influence the dynamics of the transition between the activity systems involved (Engeström, 2001). In the case of a master program for teachers these are: the university (the learning context) and the school (the work context). Boundary crossing must take place between these two activity systems (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009) while the transition between learning context and work context must be understood as dynamic and complex (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström, 2003). The two contexts influence each other and both contribute to the learning process of the participant, who acts as the bridge between the two settings (Beach, 1999).

This perspective implies that creating favorable conditions for effective application of newly developed leadership competences in schools is the responsibility of not only the program designers at the university but also of the key stakeholders in the school.

Theories on transfer that have been developed in the context of the human resource development sector can help to understand the dynamics of leadership learning for teachers. In addition to program design factors—such as objectives, methods, and opportunities for practice—and learner characteristics—such as ability, skills, personality and motivation to apply the learned competences and skills in their daily work, recent studies on the transfer of learning have emphasized contextual factors which are related to the work environment as important elements that have an impact on the transfer of learning (Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010). Work environment factors are characteristics of the workplace that influence the extent to which the organizational context invites and supports learners to use their learned competences and skills. Such factors recognize certain entrenched values, beliefs, and assumptions at the workplace that can prevent effective transfer (Bunch, 2007). Arthur, Bennett, Edens, and Bell (2003) emphasize 'environmental favorability' as 'the extent to which the work environment is supportive of the application of new skills and behaviors learned or acquired' (p. 242).

1.4. Organizational transfer climate and teacher leadership

Successful transfer requires an organizational context that effectively supports transfer (Hatala & Fleming, 2007; Lim & Morris, 2006; Rouiller & Goldstein, 1993). This context is referred to as the organizational transfer climate: the social support structure for learning that exists within an organization (Cheng & Ho, 2001; Hatala & Fleming, 2007). The literature on organizational transfer climate identifies a number of elements in the work environment that are considered predictive factors for the transfer of learning in the workplace. Burke and Hutchins (2007) emphasize the importance of alignment between the aims of the learning program and the strategic direction and human resource policies of the organization. Broad and Newstrom (1992) suggest a partnership between learners, program supervisors, and work supervisors to facilitate

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