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Collaborative Teacher Learning: Struggling Between Individual And Shared Perceptions

Teacher collaboration at the workplace is generally acknowledged as a powerful context for individual professional learning as well as team learning, and assumed to promote school improvement beyond individual classrooms (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grosman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). A great part of teachers’ learning in the everyday school context occurs through collaborative interaction with colleagues who understand the practice and context of the school (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Little, 2002). These collaborations may occur in all kind of settings varying from formal organized meetings to informal chats during lunch (Borko, 2004; Little, 2003). Some moments of collaboration in teachers’ everyday work are, nevertheless, expected to be more powerful for learning than others (Westheimer, 2008). Within a powerful moment, teachers can learn individually through the activities undertaken in collaboration with colleagues and, in addition, groups of teachers can also develop new and shared understandings (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). In the present study, collaborative teacher learning is defined as learning processes consisting of the learning activities that teachers undertake in collaboration with colleagues, which lead to changes in teachers’ individual and/or shared cognitions and/or behaviour (cf. Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2007).

Even though, collaboration is recognized as a powerful context for teacher learning, relatively little is known about what collaborative teacher learning actually looks like (Borko, 2004; Little, 2002). Studies suggest two main reasons for the absence of a comprehensive view on this: (1) the problem of not (sufficiently) taking into account the complexity of collaborative teacher learning, which emerges on the one hand because teachers who collaborate with each other may vary in their learning processes, while on the other hand the learning processes cannot be separated from the context in which they take place; and (2) the difficulty to locate learning in teachers’ collaborations in schools, as it often occurs unplanned and incidentally (Horn & Little, 2010; Westheimer, 2008).

To investigate teacher collaboration and teacher learning within a particular context, two types of studies seem of particular interest. While most studies focus only on observable learning activities (Berings, Poell, & Simons, 2008), within the first type of studies researchers focus on teachers’ observable as well as non-observable learning activities and learning outcomes (e.g., Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010). Within the second type of studies it is interesting that researchers studied interactions between teachers in relation to its learning potential and/or individual and group learning (e.g., Horn & Little, 2010; Shank, 2006). With these two types of studies in mind, the present study aims to contribute to existing theories about teacher learning processes in collaborative contexts at schools by combining the advantages and methods used in these studies. Moreover, as teacher learning in collaboration with colleagues is complicated and actual moments of learning in teachers’ collaborations are difficult to identify, it seemed useful to try to map and include these moments of collaboration, within which teachers learn with and from each other (cf. Horn & Little, 2010). Therefore, in the present study processes of collaborative teacher learning were investigated during moments which the participating teachers perceived as powerful for learning.
In sum, the aim of the present study was to obtain a detailed and diverse picture of collaborative teacher learning. In order to realise this, interactions between teachers and individual as well as group learning processes were investigated during moments of collaboration that the participating teachers perceived as powerful for learning. The formulated research questions were:

1. What are the characteristics of teachers’ perceived powerful moments for learning?
2. What interaction and collaboration processes can be observed during these moments?
3. What individual and group learning processes occur during these moments?

Method

Given the descriptive and exploratory nature of the research questions, an in-depth case study was conducted (Yin, 2003). To select the case (primary school) and its unit of analysis, purposive sampling strategies were used and integrated within the data collection method. In addition, a mixed method and longitudinal approach to collect the data was used. Across a period of eight months four team meetings were observed and videotaped. At the end of each team meeting the teachers involved (14 till 17) were asked to complete a short semi-structured questionnaire about the just finished meeting. Teachers were asked to think the meeting over and to recall the most important learning moments of that meeting and to describe one or two moments that were important for themselves as well as for their colleagues. The aim of the questionnaire was to characterise the most important learning moments that occurred during a team meeting, as well as to compare perceptions of different teachers regarding these moments. It was assumed that the greater the number of teachers who reported the same learning moment, the more likely it was that the learning moment represented powerful collective learning (cf. Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Flanagan, 1954). The learning moments that were reported and shared by most teachers were used as input for the interviews. More specific, to gain a further understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the learning moments, four semi-structured interviews were conducted after each team meeting. Teachers were asked to describe the moment (e.g. what happened, what topic was discussed and, what was your role and that of your colleagues?) and subsequently teachers were invited to explain why that particular moment was important, what they thought, felt and wanted in relation to what happened during that moment, and what outcomes they experienced for themselves, as well as for the group (cf. Meirink et al., 2007). This approach can thus be considered as a combination of the critical incident and stimulated recall technique (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Lyle, 2003; O’Brien, 1993). Data were analysed by a process of reducing data, conducting data matrixes, identifying themes and patterns, as well as drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). For example, based on transcripts of the meetings and the interviews, types of interaction in the team meetings as well as patterns in teachers’ reported learning processes could be distinguished.

Expected Outcomes

From the data, several characteristics of the learning moments emerged. First, teachers’ perceived moments during team meetings as powerful for their learning because of at least three different reasons: (1) they and/or colleagues learned during or from these moments; (2) the moments
contributed to the collective by showing similarities or differences between teachers; and (3) the moments made explicit how their learning was related to the phase of the implementation of the innovation. Second, all participating teachers reported - in the questionnaire as well as in the interviews - complete parts of meetings as powerful learning moments instead of specific details, remarks or incidents, implying that learning moments were mainly perceived from a more holistic perspective rather than from a detailed analytic perspective. Third, teachers agreed to a large degree on the specific moments during a particular team meeting as learning moment. Within the learning moments reported, teachers collaboration could be characterised by two types of collaborative activities, namely: exchange and intervision. Besides the two types of activities, the learning moments could be indicated by the degree of agreement and recognition between teachers with regard to the topic interacted on. The type of activity and the degree of agreement between teachers resulted in four different types of interaction; 1) exchange of successful experiences, 2) exchange of different experiences, 3) intervision and recognition of problem, and 4) intervision and limited recognition of problem. Each of these types showed some variation in teachers’ learning processes that occurred during the interactions. Moreover, teachers’ learning processes varied in terms of observable and non-observable learning activities and learning outcomes. During the presentation the four types of interaction will be discussed as well as related to the identified patterns in teachers’ learning processes.

References


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