

Teacher learning within multiple collaborative settings in primary school

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PAPER PRESENTATION

Teacher learning within multiple collaborative settings in primary schools

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During the last two decades there has been a growing awareness of the potentially strong role of teacher collaboration in relation to teacher learning. When teachers collaborate with their colleagues, learning can take place in different formal and informal settings. Because most studies focus on teacher learning in one collaborative setting, often related to a specific innovation in a school, little is known about how teachers learn within regular multiple collaborative settings in schools. Moreover, while theoretical 'ideals' of teacher learning are abundant in the literature, relatively little is known about what teacher learning actually looks like in everyday work. The aim of this exploratory study was to obtain more detailed understanding of teacher learning in collaboration with colleagues at primary schools during everyday work. In this study teacher learning was investigated within multiple existing collaborative settings, taking into account both the undertaken activities by teachers and learning outcomes. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two teachers and one school leaders within seven primary schools. Analysis of the qualitative data showed that teacher learning does take place within different collaborative settings in schools however, with different degrees of intensity and outcomes across these various settings. Thus, depending of the collaborative setting more or less different activities and learning outcomes were reported by teachers and school leaders.

Rationale and theoretical framework

During the last two decades there has been a growing awareness of the potentially strong role of teacher collaboration in relation to teacher learning (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Westheimer, 2008). Collaboration with colleagues is seen as a powerful learning environment, which stimulates the professional development of teachers, the innovative development of schools as well as student learning and also characterises professional learning communities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Westheimer, 2008). When teachers collaborate with their colleagues, learning can take place in different settings which may vary from formal settings like team meetings to informal settings like hallway encounters (Little, 1990, 2003). Because most studies focus on teacher learning in one collaborative setting, often related to a specific innovation in a school, little is known about how teachers learn within regular multiple collaborative settings in schools (Orland-Barak & Tillema, 2006). Moreover, while theoretical 'ideals' of teacher learning are abundant in the literature, relatively little is known about what teacher learning actually looks like in everyday work (Borko, 2004; Little, 2003). In this study teacher learning is defined as a process of conscious and unconscious undertaken activities by teachers in collaboration with colleagues, which lead to change in cognition and/or behaviour at the individual and/or group level (Meirink, 2007). However, what teachers actually do in collaborative settings and what undertaken activities lead to learning is quite unclear, especially in the context of primary education. Thus, to better understand teacher learning in this project, it is studied within regular multiple collaborative settings, taking into account both the undertaken activities by teachers and learning outcomes.

The aim of this (exploratory) study was to obtain more detailed understanding of teacher learning in collaboration with colleagues at primary schools during everyday work. Accordingly, the following three research questions were formulated:

- 1) In what settings at the workplace do primary teachers and school leaders report that teachers learn in collaboration with each other?
- 2) What learning activities are reported to be undertaken by primary teachers in these settings?
- 3) What are the reported individual and group learning outcomes as a result of collaboration in these settings?

Method To obtain insight into teachers' and school leaders' perceptions of teacher learning in collaboration with colleagues in schools, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two teachers and one school leader within seven primary education schools (21 interviews in total). The data analysis was conducted in different steps. First, the transcribed interviews were analysed based on meaningful fragments. Second, the meaningful fragments were placed in a within case matrix to understand the relation between collaborative settings and the undertaken activities and learning outcomes. Third, data of these matrices was analysed in more detail with key-concepts from the literature and categories emerging from the data. Fourth, a frequency analysis was conducted for each case. Frequencies for each collaborative setting were determined with respect to activities and learning outcomes as reported by the respondents. Finally, a cross-case analysis was carried out across cases (schools). In the cross-case analysis the result of the cases were combined and summarised in overview matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and conclusions

The reported collaborative settings could be categorised based on the persons involved, the aim and frequency of the setting, in: group of schools, school team, part of a team, working group, class, informal and collegial support. The categories identified in our study for activities could be categorised in terms of categories distinguished by Little (1990). For the categories; story telling and scanning, aid and assistance, and sharing singular activities were identified and for the category joint work compound series of activities were identified. Individual as well group learning outcomes could be categorised. However, the subcategories of the learning outcomes at the individual and group level were not equivalent. In literature activities and learning outcomes are assumed to be strongly related with each other. However, the respondents in our study usually connected learning outcomes to collaborative settings rather than activities. Depending of the collaborative setting more or less different activities and learning outcomes were reported. It seems that there is a correlation between the sum and amount of different reported activities and the reported learning outcomes however, from this study this cannot be directly inferred. Besides, the results seem to confirm that the dependency between teachers correlates with learning outcomes (Little, 1990). In the presentation the categories and conclusions will be discussed in more detail.

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