

A Study of Informal Teacher Learning During the First Three Cycles of AISI

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Pamela is currently a PhD candidate in her third year of studies in Educational Administration and Leadership at the University of Alberta. Her research examines how teachers are learning within their workplace, with a particular emphasis on the mechanisms and tools of a teachers' workplace that facilitate the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and the impact of infrastructure, professional relationships, and practices on teacher learning.

Abstract

This paper presents the conceptual framework and findings from a study that explored teacher informal learning in the context of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI). A qualitative analysis was completed on projects completed during the first three cycles of AISI. Results offer a description of various learning modes in which teachers are participating and the collaborative teacher practices that have been exhibited. This study provides much needed insight into our Alberta professional learning context specific to an historical overview of the informal learning practices of teachers and the role that teacher collaboration is playing in the school improvement process.

Introduction

Workplace learning has come to play a pivotal role in Alberta schools' pursuit of sustained improvement and increased high school completion (Alberta Education, 2012). The workplace learning of teachers is one important factor to improving schools and enhancing student achievement. Informal learning, in particular, has been "under researched" (Eraut, 2004, p. 247) as a form of teacher growth and development.

The purpose of this study described in this paper was to provide insight into this area since, as Williams (2003) contends, "the school as a site of informal learning by teachers, has received relatively little attention" (p. 207). This study offers a novel link between workplace learning and teacher professional development that has been limited in the literature (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2009).

The research question for this study was how have teachers been learning informally over the first three AISI cycles? To address this question, projects completed during the first three cycles of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) were analyzed with the intent to examine and describe various modes of informal learning and collaborative practice in which teachers are participating, thus providing insight into the Alberta professional learning context.

Supporting Literature

Workplace learning is often characterized as either formal or informal. Informal learning is defined as the everyday life learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007) and is intentionally organized, embedded in work processes, and occurs through work activities. Eraut (2004) describes informal learning as providing greater flexibility for learners and, thus, larger capacity for individual agency in a much wider variety of settings. He explains that it is “a complementary partner to learning from experience, which is usually construed more in terms of personal rather than interpersonal learning” (p. 247). Most often, informal learning lacks the confines of boundaries that characterize formal learning.

Informal workplace learning is characterized by a variety of activities, including learning by experimenting, considering one’s own teaching practice, getting ideas from others, or through teaching experience (Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Imants, 2009). It can involve participating in joint work or activities such as peer observations of practice, analyzing student work and student data, learning from a professional community beyond the school, school-based coaching, and mentoring and coaching during induction (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

Informal learning can also consist of activities in which “teachers observe other teachers, are observed by others, and participate in informed and telling debate on the quality and effectiveness of their instruction” (Fullan, 2007, p. 36). Many activities associated with informal learning are collaborative and constructivist; often this collaboration occurs in different types of communities. Levine (2010) identifies these types of groups as an Inquiry Community, a Teacher Professional Community, a Community of Practice, or a Professional Learning Community. Furthermore, collaboration involves teachers volunteering to work together to achieve a common goal and co-constructing relationships, meanings and knowledge, that are based on mutual respect for each others needs, strengths and differences (Ganley, Quintanar, & Loop, 2007; Musanti & Pence, 2010; Piercey, 2010). Through collaborative practices, teachers are able to “establish networks of relationships through which they may reflectively share their practice, revisit beliefs on teaching and learning, and co-construct knowledge” (Musanti & Pence, 2010, p. 74). When teachers are collaborating, there is a shared sense of responsibility for participation, decision-making and outcomes (Piercey, 2010). Rosenholtz (1991) argues that collaboration brings “new ideas, fresh ways of looking at things, and a stock of collective knowledge that is more fruitful than any one person’s working alone” (p. 41).

Collaboration is the primary structure supporting professional communities and one of the key factors in improving schools through improving teaching practice. It is also an effective administrative strategy in focusing staff members on collective goals.

Method

Qualitative data from project summaries of the first three cycles of AISI, as found on the Alberta Education (2011) website, were analysed using a coding process as described by Creswell (2008). The data were organized into 39 codes based on a literature review of informal learning and collaboration. Next, the codes were aggregated into seven themes: collaboration, visiting, sharing, meeting, learning community, teacher learning/growth, and coaching/mentoring. Summaries from cycle were searched in a similar manner: a theme word was identified, the project was read, relevant data was extracted for the theme, and the project was further analyzed for the other six coded themes.

Results

Collaboration

All selected AISI project summaries identified collaboration as an important characteristic of workplace learning. Some schools or districts chose to focus on building or establishing a collaborative culture or climate over the course of the three-year cycle. Others integrated collaboration as a strategy to help teachers improve instruction or examine pedagogy. A majority of schools and districts indicated that collaboration was an essential process to facilitate teachers sharing ideas, best practices, knowledge, and expertise. Collaboration was frequently described as colleagues in similar grades, subjects, or themes sharing within or among the school site. Collaboration was also seen to promote professional thinking, discussion, and planning. Frequently, examples were provided of teachers working together to plan units or to create a variety of classroom resources such as common unit exams or assessment strategies.

Collaboration was also described with an element of reflection during which teachers worked together to create a mutually understood plan for attending to and meeting students' diverse needs. This process was often job-embedded, sometimes occurring during joint preparation time. One school affirmed that, "well established learning that improved teaching practices are positively related to increased collaboration" (Alberta Education, 2011a, p. 4). Some schools used a collaborative leadership model in which administrators would work side-by-side with teachers to make school-based decisions. Other collaborative activities that were identified in project summaries included teachers analyzing student work and data, marking exams together, participating in study groups, and action research to "synthesize and share their learning, evaluate teaching and learning effectiveness, and plan for the next step" (Alberta Education, 2011b, p. 3).

Visiting

The most frequent references of visiting made in project summaries were categorized as *inter-visitation* and *intra-visitation*. In inter-visitation, teachers from one school would visit other schools and observe a variety of teachers and classrooms. This was done as a specific subject match during which math teachers, as one example, would observe other math teachers; more broadly, math teachers would observe other subjects being taught. During intra-visitation, teachers would visit classrooms within their school, observing colleagues using a particular instructional strategy or visiting within their department to observe colleagues' classrooms.

Some schools brought in experts to lead a lesson or, conversely, to observe a teacher's lesson and provide feedback. One school district commented that "time to observe each other teaching was... important to improve [teacher] practice" (Alberta Education, 2011c, p. 5).

Sharing

In many AISI project summaries, workplace learning was portrayed as professional sharing. Teachers would share with each other their successes and challenges; in some cases, this included student teachers. Teachers would also share pedagogies, new or effective instructional strategies, and best practices. After reflecting on their experiences, teachers would share insights. For example, after attending a variety of workshops, teachers were asked to reflect upon and share their learnings "in order to facilitate increased awareness and application of new skills" (Alberta Education, 2011d, p. 8). Sharing materials, resources, expertise or knowledge was also evident in many AISI projects.

Meetings

The most common method of facilitating sharing or collaboration was through meetings, either in small groups such as departments, grades or subject-levels, or in large groups such as staff meetings. These meetings were referred to as collaborative sessions during which teachers planned together and shared ideas. The frequency of meetings varied from occasionally---such as once every four months---to quite regularly at weekly meetings.

Learning Community

During the first cycle of AISI, professional learning communities were in the process of being built. In the third cycle, this depiction was referenced with less frequency. Professional learning communities were often described as being embedded in the school, collaborative in nature, providing powerful learning environments to teachers, creating a space where teachers could examine their practice, and linked to increasing student achievement and school improvement. One project summary defined their development of a learning community as "the formation and growth of collaborative professional learning communities focused on improving student achievement through differentiated instruction has provided job-embedded and meaningful professional development for all staff" (Alberta Education, 2011e, p. 5).

Coaching/Mentoring

The coaching and mentoring theme was portrayed in project summaries as one teacher working with another to co-create teaching and planning strategies. Coaching and mentoring was also described as a teacher leader or administrator supporting colleagues, or a more experienced teacher working with a new teacher in a content area. A collegial peer-coaching model was implemented in one project where the teachers collaborated together in an inquiry process. This peer coaching "provided staff with an opportunity to receive feedback on their teaching from colleagues in a supportive environment...to make changes to their instructional practice and to measure progress towards their own individual learning goals" (Alberta Education, 2011g, pp. 5-6).

Teaching and Learning

The teacher learning and growth theme appeared with least frequency. Teacher learning, when referenced, was characterized as resulting from collaboration, having significant impact on student learning, and correlating with best practice. A few project summaries contained the comment that AISIS professional learning communities “ha[ve] become the primary avenue for teacher learning and growth” (Alberta Education, 2011f, p. 6).

Discussion

One surprising discovery in the analysis of the AISI project summaries was the extent and frequency to which certain themes overlapped. I was also surprised that teacher learning and growth was the most infrequent code used. Teacher learning and growth was infrequently reference, an inconsistency since teacher learning is an important component cited in school reform literature and one that has been positively correlated to an increase in student achievement (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2007). One explanation for this may be that project summaries were outlining the professional development activities of teachers rather than a description of the teacher learning that was occurring.

Data and analysis and findings appear to support the practice of using collaboration as a school reform strategy as opposed to one used to enhance teacher learning. Collaboration has been rationalized as a strategy or initiative with the result that a focus on teacher learning has been minimized. An additional change over the past three cycles of AISI appears to be a shift from individual, school based projects to district-focused projects (McQuarrie & McRae, 2010). This shift magnifies the general and broad improvement strategies being applied to all schools rather than those meeting the distinct needs of teacher cohorts. This practice may explain the lack of emphasis on teacher learning and growth that was identified in the project summaries.

Descriptions provided in the seven codes of AISI projects were consistent with those presented in the literature review on informal learning and collaboration. Collaboration was found to be characterized by activities between teachers to meet, share expertise, and engage in professional dialogues in a professional learning community (Fullan, 2007; Hoekstra et al., 2009). Informal activities involved teachers visiting each other’s classrooms with elements of peer coaching or mentoring. This reinforces the informal activities described by Wei et al. (2009) and further supports their claim that teacher professional development needs to be “a situated approach to teacher learning which grounds professional development in teachers’ own practices” (p. 6).

Limitations

There are several limitations to the findings of this study. First, focusing on AISI project summary reports as a tertiary source of data restricted a holistic picture of the context of school and district work in this area. As three-year summaries, some reports were detailed while many were limited in their description of collaboration or the professional development activities in which teachers participated. In this regard, Silverman (2000) argues that, “every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (p. 825). Furthermore, narrowing the data analysis to seven codes “deflected attention away from uncategorized activities” (Silverman, 2000, p. 825). Although the coding categories were powerful in informing findings, other data was---by definition---excluded. Data analysis in this study described informal learning as written in AISI summary projects and findings do not provide comments or assumptions relating to the context or everyday operation of a school nor the social dynamics at play (Silverman, 2000).

A second limitation to this study surrounds authorship of the summary reports. Those written from the perspective of an administrator may differ from those written by a teacher or members of a professional learning community. It is also important to realize that these reports were submitted to the Alberta Government, the sole funding body for this initiative. A powerful dynamic comes into play when schools report specific information relating to AISI goal achievement. Perhaps information may have been left out of reports that were generated for specific purposes and written from a limited perspective.

Conclusion

Data analysis of AISI summary reports provided several characteristics of informal workplace learning. This information is pertinent as enriches understanding of various modes of informal learning within Alberta schools over a ten-year span. Further research is required about *what* and *how* teachers are learning within their collaborative activities and professional communities; indeed, Levine and Marcus (2007) suggest that this area “remains something of a black box” (p. 118). This was evident in the lack of reference to teacher learning and growth within the AISI documents. However, findings of this study demonstrate that teachers are being encouraged to use informal learning activities within their workplace and those are accorded value. As one school reported, “staff involvement and collaboration does work and makes a fundamental difference to the success of any improvement initiative” (Alberta Education, 2011h, p. 8).

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