INFLUENCING TEACHER ENGAGEMENT IN INFORMAL INTERACTION LEADING TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: A THEORETICAL MODEL

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Abstract

The relationship between collegial interaction in the workplace and professional learning is well established in the literature, particularly in relation to formalised teacher professional learning and learning in an organisational context. While acknowledging that formalised learning projects and activities are valuable, practising teachers consider the professional learning emerging through informal interaction to be one of the most important sources of learning, contributing significantly to changes in teaching practice. Very little research has been conducted into this informal aspect of a teacher's professional learning and it is unclear how it can be supported in schools. This study explores the informal interaction that results in professional learning and seeks to understand what influences teachers to engage in this interaction.

A qualitative methodology, utilising narrative elicitation methods, enables the voices of the participating teachers to be heard. The approach to grounded theory suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) provides a level of flexibility and is used as the methodological foundation for this study. The data was gathered during three initial workshops, with participants invited to participate in an additional two workshops during the analysis phase, ensuring an authentic reflection of the experiences collected. Seven interrelated factors are identified during the analysis: relationships; emotions; communication; cognition; leadership; teams; and school structure. Complexity theories are drawn on to make sense of the data and inform the emerging theoretical model. The model illustrates the interconnections between these factors and the complexity of engaging in informal interaction that leads to professional learning. The model sets out the dynamic interplay of the factors continually influencing each other.

The findings offer new insights into the complex nature of informal interaction between colleagues in the workplace leading to professional learning. Each of the factors identified in the study has a significant influence on collegial interaction however, due to the continually changing nature of people and environments, it is difficult to determine the influence of a specific factor on any interaction. This study argues that the influences on informal interaction should not be considered as a group of independent factors; instead they should to be considered as interdependent factors in a constant state of change acknowledging that the engagement in, and outcomes from, any interaction cannot be predicted or controlled but can be influenced.

While the focus of this study is informal interaction in a school context, the findings can be considered more broadly. They are able to inform future research into effective models for formal professional learning for teachers and make a contribution to the body of knowledge focussing on workplace learning in an organisational context.

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Trish Milne was my initial primary supervisor whose caring advice and guidance enabled me to synthesis my thinking and narrow the scope of the research to a ‘doable’ study. When Trish retired Monica Kennedy assumed the role of primary supervisor. Her unflagging enthusiasm and energy has been inspiring. Our conversations by phone or in person often proved to be the reinvigorating tonic I needed, particularly during times of frustration.

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Finally, thankyou to family and friends who have asked “how is it all going?” rather than “when will you be finished?”

Forward

My interest in teacher professional learning stems from my career in education which began as a classroom teacher before moving into an office based position as a professional learning officer with a focus on the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT) into classroom practice. During my time in the office I was privileged to be a member of a small team who would engage in deep conversations about teacher professional learning, often through challenging long held beliefs and values, which would lead to our own professional learning. It was an incredibly stimulating and supportive environment and one of the best experiences of my career for personal and professional growth.

We usually worked with small groups of teachers such as teaching teams in primary schools or groups of teachers from the same faculty or collaborating on a project in secondary schools, either in their school or an area within our building. During the sessions with the teachers they would talk about their professional learning experiences throughout their career, both positive and negative, and I noted that all of the teachers valued the informal interaction with their colleagues for professional learning. In light of the comments by the various teachers I reflected on my own experience as a teacher in different schools and in the office and wondered what it was that enabled or encouraged people to engage in the conversations they considered were a professional learning experience.

About this time my husband, who worked for a non-educational organisation, was becoming more involved with knowledge management and shared many of his books and articles with me. The synergy between the informal interaction leading to learning in a school setting that I was interested in, and the material related informal workplace learning in the organisational learning and knowledge management areas, became apparent and piqued my curiosity even more. This was the start of my research journey.

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