Teachers’ engagement in professional learning: Exploring motivational profiles

Joost Jansen in de Wal a,⁎, Perry J. den Brok b, Janneke G. Hooijer a, Rob L. Martens a, Antoine van den Beemt a

a Welten Institute: Research Centre for Learning, Teaching and Technology, Open University, P.O. Box 2960, 6401 DL Heerlen, The Netherlands
b Eindhoven School of Education, Eindhoven University, P.O. Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Abstract

This study investigated to what extent secondary school teachers are motivated to work on their professional learning. To this end, profiles of motivational dimensions from self-determination theory were explored in a sample of 2360 teachers by means of latent profile analysis. The motivational dimensions included external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the study investigated to what extent teachers’ profile membership was related to their autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction, and engagement in professional development. Four profiles were distinguished in the sample and were labelled ‘extremely autonomous’, ‘moderately motivated’, ‘highly autonomous’, and ‘externally regulated’. Profile membership could be predicted by autonomy satisfaction and relatedness satisfaction, but not by competence satisfaction. Moreover, teachers having profiles that had higher manifestations of identified regulation and intrinsic motivation engaged more in professional development activities. Results show the application of self-determination theory in the field of teacher learning and provide insight into what may be done to motivate teachers for professional learning.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Society today requires professionals to constantly adapt their knowledge and skills to the ever-changing environment they act in. This also holds for the professionals that work in school environments as teachers. Teachers are expected to deal with changing pupil populations, expanding knowledge fields, new responsibilities, and higher social expectations of schools (OECD, 2005). According to Guskey (2002, p. 381) “policy makers increasingly recognize that schools can be no better than the teachers and administrators who work within them”. To ensure an effort towards the best possible education for their students, teachers are thus required to invest time in continuous professional learning. We define teacher professional learning (TPL) in accordance with Hoyle and John (1995) as the process by which teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that will improve the service they provide to their students.

TPL inevitably involves teachers being engaged in learning activities, both formal and informal. Learning activities are considered formal when they involve prescribed learning frameworks, organized events, teacher presence, the award of credit, or an external specification of outcomes (Eraut, 2000). Informal learning is typically not highly structured and the control of the learning lies with the learner. This study focuses on deliberative informal learning (i.e. learning for which time is specifically set aside), even though much informal learning is unintentional or implicit (Eraut, 2000; Tynjälä, 2008). Informal learning has been shown to affect teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and (intentions for) practices (Bakkesnes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010).

Kwakman (2003) found that teachers do not always make full use of the possibilities for learning provided by their environment. She suggested that this finding could be explained by schools not fulfilling the required conditions that stimulate teachers to engage in TPL. Another possibly related explanation is that teachers are not motivated enough or experience a non-optimal type of motivation to ensure continuous TPL (cf. Gagné & Deci, 2005). However, empirical evidence for these explanations is lacking.

In this study, therefore, the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their environment, their motivation, and their engagement in TPL is investigated. Specifically, we take the widely employed self-determination theory as a theoretical starting point to investigate to what extent secondary school teachers are motivated to engage in TPL. To explore the quality and strength of teachers’ motivation, we seek to identify profiles of the motivational dimensions of self-determination theory that teachers have in relation to TPL. These profiles are then related to the three basic psychological needs that, according to self-determination theory, need to be fulfilled by the environment to ensure high quality motivation. Finally, the motivational profiles are related to teachers’ engagement in TPL.