Teaching as collective work: What are the needs of novice teachers?

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Abstract

The introduction of new pedagogical methods and techniques requires more collaboration within educational communities in order to share professional support and to bring individual practices into line with collective purposes. Collective work is considered an essential mechanism for deepening novice teachers' content knowledge and developing their teaching abilities. It is indeed a challenge for novice teachers to ensure their teaching is relevant to the students and their learning contexts and responds to their needs. This research studies the collective work among the novice teachers so as to identify the dimensions, modes and functions of collective work. In addition, this research aims to explore the difference between the need for assistance and resources and the actual need gained in their teaching. A total sample of 405 novice teachers was selected from three states in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. This study employs the quantitative method to collect data from novice teachers during their induction year. The findings showed that 88.9 percent and 65.7 percent of the novice teachers respectively indicated the collective work in their schools was arranged vertically and horizontally. However, only 25.4 percent of the respondents indicated the collective activities in their schools were voluntary, and 74.6 percent stated that they were compulsory. Modes of collective work implemented in most of the schools are collaboration and co-action rather than distributed cooperation. The functions of collective work applied are more on argumentative function and dilative function than integrative function. According to the results of t-test analysis, there is a significant difference between novice teachers' required need level and actual need level in collective work.

Keywords: Collective work; actual needs; required needs; novice teachers.

1. Introduction

Teachers are important and they make a difference. The quality of teaching is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools. “Sharing good practice” is one of those phrases that have slipped into everyday language of school leadership. Grangeat and Gary (2008) addressed teaching as collective work. The majority of the literature on teaching and teacher education focuses either on teachers as autonomous individuals (Lortie, 1975), on abstract concepts related to topic areas or pedagogical techniques, or teacher identities (Grangeat & Gray, 2007). Little is known about the everyday interactions of teachers within work situations, and yet the collective aspects of teachers’ work are becoming increasingly important to concepts of teaching professionalism in areas such as interagency working, co-teaching and work across topic areas.

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Researchers like Clement and Vandengerghe (2000) argue that teachers' work involves collective processes which underpin both their professional development as individuals and their potential efficiencies as team members even though teachers may have some autonomy in choosing methods and procedures. To address this issue, two existing models of collective work: (i) the didactic professional model derived from ergonomic psychology (Samurcay & Delsart, 1994; Rogalski, 2004), and (ii) the work process knowledge model (Boreham, Samurcay, & Fischer, 2002) are proposed. Although both models are based on industries studies, Grangeat and Gray (2007, 2008) argue that they are potentially applicable to the study on teaching as a collective work. In fact, they have applied these two models in their two major projects, Early Professional Learning Project (EPL) and Professional Skills Teachers in activities Educational Partnership and Cooperation (O2cpe).

This paper presents the need analysis on novice teachers in the northern part of Malaysia related to their collective work. Teachers' collective work is a basis for developing novice teachers' competencies in ways which recognize the situated and collective aspects of competence related to the changing of learning practices. In addition, this paper also represents novice teachers' collective work according to Grangeat and Gary's model (2007). Novice teachers' collective work can be understood in three ways or the dimensions of collective work in the school situation, the modes through which the novice teachers connect their actions, and the functions of their cooperative activity.

2. Background of the study

What is the meaning of collective work in this study? Teachers usually work in organizations such as schools which are inherently collective. Within these collective situations, however, teachers have patterns of interaction which depend upon the geography and politics of the school, their individual characteristics, the changing needs of students, and even the culture. Work is collective when interactions result in shared representations of actions, usually some common goals and agreed sets of practices. Entrenched patterns of interaction or isolation often prevent collective work from developing in an optimal manner.

2.1. Dimensions of collective work

There are two dimensions underpinning the school of collective work. It can be arranged vertically, involving delegation of work to one or many agents, or horizontally, when agents share tasks within the same hierarchical level. Collective activities may be voluntary or compulsory, may involve informal hierarchies, may cross departmental boundaries, and thus may involve both dimensions. For instance, novice teachers and their mentors work vertically on the supervision and assessment of practice improvement as well as horizontally to share teaching within departments. While mentoring often aims to create a horizontal relationship in which both parties have an equal stake in the dialogue, there are often problems caused by the intrusion of vertical roles. Thus, novice teachers may be reluctant to discuss difficulties with someone holding supervisory and mentoring responsibilities simultaneously.

2.2. Modes of collective work

Three modes of connection orientate the collective work. The first mode, collaboration, occurs when agents share tasks and goals (e.g. in a large department such as mathematics where the overall workload has to be subdivided). Conversely, within the co-action mode actors aim for achieving different goals in the short or middle term, but they work together in the same space or with shared support (e.g. sports, drama or chemistry teachers share specialized facilities but they teach different classes or curricular stages). Between these two extremes collective work may take the form of distributed cooperation where the short-term goals of each actor are different but contribute to a shared purpose (e.g. in running an open day or publishing a school newspaper teachers form de facto teams working on specific projects in which individual skills are added to a whole). These three modes orientate the micro-collective formed by mentors and novice teachers: they may work towards shared goals (e.g. helping novice teachers to
achieve specific teaching strategies); they may act together with separate short-term goals (e.g. novice teachers observe the mentor when teaching, then they reverse the roles); unfortunately, they may also share the same room without having a common goal.

2.3. Functions of collective work

Three functions are fulfilled by collective work. The argumentative function concerns situations where the task requires more than one agent to complete it (e.g. in connection with the behavior management of students, where action has to be taken by senior colleagues or specialists like counselor). The question of how to cope with this function is not trivial, especially for novice teachers who operate within a collective situation but may not be aware of its structures. Thus, the following function could strengthen and enlarge the system of representation and action which is created between agents.

The integrative function involves different kinds of agents within a collective project (e.g. in the current policy environment teachers are increasingly engaging with social workers, healthcare providers and other agencies outside the world of teaching). When a school project involves other professionals and partners, teachers have to be able to understand how these actors view their objectives and relate to the students involved. As Murray (2007) argued, the process of countering insularity in teacher education in order to create a shared operative model amongst the actors may not be explicit.

A third function is necessary. The dilative function mediates between individual agents and the group. This function might be stimulated through specific meetings or workshops where everyday interactions about work can be challenged. Extracurricular activities such as school trips, sports or drama productions also provide such interational opportunities. This function often fails because the participants do not explicitly focus on developing shared understandings. In the case of meetings between mentors and novice teachers, this difficulty is increased. Thus, the dilative function could be enhanced by the development of a collegial culture in which participants are equally valued and development of listening, therefore learning is encouraged.

3. Statement of the problem

The introduction of new pedagogical methods and techniques, such as inquiry-based science education, requires more collaboration within educational communities in order to share professional support and to bring individual practices into line with collective purposes. Nevertheless, the current focus on improving teaching practice for individual teachers could obscure the role of collective activity in enabling competent practice within schools. This study does not address changes in teacher education policy, but if teacher educators are aware of the importance of collective work and have conceptual framework for discussing it, then novice teachers might be better prepared for the interactional problems and possibilities inherent in complex situations such as teaching.

Within existing Malaysian education systems, novice teachers enter the teaching profession with a collective environment. For example, while there may be flexibility within curricular guidelines, teachers usually work with predetermined topics, available resources and the skills, knowledge and expectations of students, parents and colleagues. Deviations, innovations or problem situations often require additional resources and negotiations with colleagues. Thus, teacher collective work mediates between teacher as autonomous agents and teaching as a structural feature of society. The researcher's intention is to explore the ways in which teachers, and specifically novice teachers, adapt to these situations. In the real world of teaching the different modes and functions of collective work overlap. The crucial issue of teachers and teacher educators is to increase awareness of what happens within teachers' collective work, while school leaders and managers need to ensure that the various modes and functions are allowed to flourish.

Collective work is considered an essential mechanism for deepening novice teachers' content knowledge and developing their teaching abilities. It is a cornerstone of systematic reform efforts designed to increase novice teacher capacity to change his/her teaching practice (Smith & O'Day, 1991). Teaching and education should not be seen only as a technical exercise within a classroom, but every teacher should make efforts to reach out to all
students in the community as part of their responsibility as adults and citizens. Furthermore, there is evidence from all over the world that many students do not reach their full potential because they find learning 'boring'. It is indeed a challenge for novice teachers to ensure that the work that is being done in the classroom is relevant to the students and their learning contexts and responds to their particular needs.

4. Research objectives

The following are the main objectives of this study:
(a) To identify the dimensions, modes and functions of novice teachers' collective work.
(b) To identify the needs required by novice teachers in their collective work.
(c) To identify the actual needs gained by novice teachers in their collective work.
(d) To differentiate between the required needs and the actual needs gained by novice teachers in their collective work.

5. Methodology

This research is a survey using a structured self-administered mailed questionnaire to novice teachers in Kedah, Perak and Penang which are located in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It utilizes quantitative research methodology involving a sample of 405 novice teachers. The questionnaires were mailed to 500 novice teachers and the return rate was 81 percent of the total number of questionnaires distributed. A purposive sampling was employed. The questionnaire consists of 40 items including 6 items of demographic information, 25 items related to the level of actual needs and required needs, and 9 items regarding collective work dimensions, modes and functions.

6. Discussion

The study revealed that most of the novice teachers are female teachers (72.8%) between 21 and 25 years old (50.4%). The majority is of Malay ethnicity, and they are from national secondary schools; 360 (88.9%) novice teachers indicate that the collective work in their school involves delegation of work, it is arranged vertically, namely top-down, whereas 264 (65.2%) of them indicate that the collective work in their school is arranged horizontally when school leaders and teachers share tasks within the same hierarchical level. Most of them find that collective activities in their school are compulsory (74.6%) rather than voluntary (25.4%).

The highest percentage of novice teachers (82.5%) indicate the mode of collective work is co-action, followed by 82% indicating that it is collaborative, and only 61.7 percent consider that the mode of collective work is distributed cooperation mode. This finding shows that the most frequent mode of collective work applied in their schools is co-action, which means the teachers work together in the same space or with the shared support but teach different classes or curricular stages. Besides, most of the schools also implement collaboration mode when all teachers share tasks and goals and the overall workload has to be subdivided. The only mode of collective work which is not so popular is distributed cooperation, where the short-term goals of each teacher are different but contribute to a shared purpose.

Among the three functions of collective work, argumentative function which concerns situations where the task requires more than one teacher to complete is the most popular function in their school (92.6%). This is followed by dilative function (90.6%). Dilative function mediates between individual agents and the group. However, integrative function (82.6%) which involves different kinds of agents within a collective project is comparatively low-functioning in most of the schools.

The levels of both required needs (mean = 3.88) and the actual needs (mean = 3.34) are high. This result indicates that novice teachers need to observe other teachers teaching and receiving support from colleagues when they encounter obstacles. Furthermore, novice teachers need their colleagues to help them to learn more about the expectations in classroom and school, informal policies and guidelines that are part of the school culture, culturally
relevant teaching strategies, the best practice in teaching and learning process, families of their students and school community. In addition, colleagues are able to help them to become more reflective, skilled, instructional problem solvers and better decision makers. Besides, colleagues are able to help them to become effective instructors in a few ways, such as diagnosis of their own needs, meaningful feedback and collaborative goal setting. On top of that, colleagues can help them to acquire effective planning, teaching and assessment to student learning. Other than that, novice teachers need input from their colleagues into their professional development plan for future growth, developing interpersonal and relationship building skills and balancing their own work and life responsibilities with learning to teach. Finally, colleagues can help them learn more about the district and school level information that would be helpful to play their professional roles as well as the meet expectations at the school-wide level.

Findings from t-test analysis show that there is a significant difference between the required needs level and the actual needs level of the novice teachers at the significant level as 0.01. This results show that novice teachers required need level for assistance and resources (mean = 3.88) is higher than the actual needs level that they gained (mean = 3.34).

7. Conclusion

This study seeks to develop an understanding of novice teachers' collective work since it will contribute to enhancing novice teachers' competencies and practices. Collective work is often viewed as something that happens in the normal course of events and that has the potential to transfer and to create knowledge based on local requirement (Grangeat and Gray, 2008). The point for educators is to make this explicit rather than to leave it to chance. To conclude, it is obvious that novice teachers in this study are not getting adequate involvement in collective work and the required needs for assistance are less than the actual needs level. Senior teachers should be aware of the complexities of collective work and should work with novice teachers in schools to increase their awareness of the collective work of teaching. The challenges of difficult school conditions cannot be met by teachers working in isolation, but require collective action and creation of shared operative model for their resolution.

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