



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT



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ISSN: 2226-6348

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i1/10949>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARPED/v1-i1/10949

Received: 12 January 2012, **Revised:** 18 February 2012, **Accepted:** 15 March 2012

Published Online: 27 March 2012

In-Text Citation: (Nawab, 2012)

To Cite this Article: Nawab, A. (2012). The Informal Learning Approaches of Teachers in a Secondary School in Pakistan. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 1(1), 274–282.

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Vol. 1(1) 2012, Pg. 274 - 282

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The Informal Learning Approaches of Teachers in a Secondary School in Pakistan

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Abstract

The advocates of informal learning believe that learning is not always necessarily planned rather it could also happen informally in the workplace. Does informal learning equally happen in every context and setting? Using a qualitative approach, this study explores the nature of teachers' informal learning in a secondary school in rural Pakistan. Data were generated through interviews and observations. The study finds that though limited in nature, there are some informal learning activities which the teachers are engaged in. Most of the informal learning happens through observations of the practices of senior colleagues. Moreover, the teachers also learn from the experimentation through implementing externally acquired ideas and strategies in their classroom. Similarly, media has also been a source of informal learning for teachers in this context. The study concludes that the school has to enhance its links with external sources to create internal informal learning opportunities for teachers.

Keywords: Informal Learning, Developing Context, Private Schools

Introduction

There is a growing pressure on schools to deliver high quality education to cope with the challenges of rapidly changing trends in society. This pressure presents novel challenges for the teachers. Compared with the past, the students of today are greater in number and more varied in their social, emotional and learning backgrounds (Lohman, 2000). Meeting the needs and interests of diverse student population is not an easy job and teachers need to have both the required content and pedagogical skills that they are able to change and improve to meet the demands of modern schooling.

Although formal training provides teachers with the opportunities of professional growth, on one hand, they have been found to display remoteness from contextual realities (Borko, 2004) and on the other hand, they are occasional while a teacher needs ongoing development to keep abreast with the changing needs of the teaching profession. Therefore, teacher development

should be continuous as well as involving informal component (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). The importance of informal learning is even greater in a context in which teachers have little exposure to external professional development courses. How the concept of informal learning looks like in practice, especially in developing context, is a new and unexplored area. This paper explores the nature of teachers' informal learning in a private school in rural Pakistan.

Informal Learning

The informal learning perspective of teacher development is supported by the social views of learning that emphasize on learning as a social practice, distributed over mind, body and culturally organized setting (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is specific to every context and individual and, as Brown and Duguid (1991) believe, "Like a magpie with a nest, learning is built out of the materials to hand and in relation to the structuring resources of local conditions" (p. 48). This view perceives teacher learning as a social practice, situated in the context and initiated by the individuals (Jurasaite-Harbison, 2009) and resulting in the development of their professional knowledge and skills (Lohman, 2000). Such learning is not supported by any training institution. It does not have any predefined structured curriculum, rather, the learners decide what to learn and how to learn (Levenberg & Caspi, 2010; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Livingstone (2000) defines informal learning as:

any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. The basic terms of informal learning are determined by the individuals and groups that choose to engage in it. Informal learning is undertaken on one's own, either individually or collectively, without either externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorized instructor. (p.2)

Thus, informal learning activities are "unplanned, incidental, unassessed and uncontrolled by a teacher, and take place in everyday life" (Hodkinson, p.114). Such learning can either be deliberately encouraged by an organization, happen despite an environment that is not highly favorable to learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990) or not happen at all, even though environment is conducive to learning (Gola, 2009).

Informal learning can derive from experience, incidental learning, self-directed learning, reflexive learning and tacit knowledge (Gola, 2009). Examples include learning through observing, undertaking trial-and-error experiments, and reading magazines, conversing with others, participating in groups, composing stories or reflecting on a day's events (Cross, 2007). Informal learning also takes place through daily interactions such as participating in group activities, working alongside others, tackling challenging tasks and dealing with clients (Eraut, 2004). Compared with formal training, practitioners gain knowledge more frequently from informal activities (Berg & Chyung, 2008). "learning to teach is mostly influenced by informal sources, especially the experience of teaching itself" (Feiman-Nemser, 1983, p.167). Therefore, informal learning is an important path to professional growth of teachers (Jurasaite-Harbison, 2009).

Empirical studies on informal learning have identified a number of factors that influence the informal learning in the workplace. The existence of leadership committed to learning and availability of resources and time have been found to facilitate informal learning (Ellinger, 2005). Similarly, teachers' perceptions about learning have significant influence in shaping the conditions for informal learning (Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard & Imants, 2009). Some studies argue that the younger employees engage in more informal learning activities (Tikkanen, 2002) while others claim that the tendency towards informal learning increases with age (Berg & Chyung, 2008). A lack of rewards and limited access to school decision making have been found to be inhibitors to informal learning at the workplace (Lohman, 2000).

Still, there may not be a clear difference between formal and informal learning as what is informal for someone may be formal for another (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2003). For this study the concept of informal learning is taken to be learning that is "self-determined, unplanned, deliberate or conversely unconscious, emotional and random" (Gola, 2009, p.344).

Research Approach

Since informal learning is managed primarily by the learner, has a non-structured curriculum, and does not end with summative evaluation, there is no way to assess it other than by tracing the perceptions of learners (Levenberg & Caspi, 2010). In order to reveal the perceptions of teachers, and validate their perceptions through in-depth analysis of their practices as well as the context, a qualitative case study approach was used. This approach enables researchers to better understand the behaviour and experiences of the participants as well as the factors influencing their actions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The researcher was interested in studying a private school in order to obtain insights about the informal learning practices of teachers working in the private sector, as the researcher works mostly with the private schools for school improvement and teachers' professional growth. A secondary school was selected because in primary schools, there are limited teachers and the workload of teachers may not allow them to exploit various informal learning activities. Of 31 secondary private schools in the district, five schools were considered on the basis of their accessibility, location and the time available to the researcher. One school was selected because of the willingness of the school headteacher and the teaching staff.

The principal and six randomly-selected teachers were taken as the research participants. Semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis were used to generate data. The interviews employed guided questions to obtain deeper insights into the topic (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). The principal was interviewed individually while the teachers were interviewed in a group. Various aspects of the life of the school, such as teaching practices, interactions, routines and relationships were observed to get further data about the teachers' informal learning. Some relevant documents such as teachers' reflections, meeting minutes, records of sharing and in-house sessions were also analysed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and read again and again to identify themes and patterns. In addition to the interviews, field notes

were maintained to record the data derived from observation and document analysis. The findings that emerged are presented below.

Results

The results of the study are presented under the four major themes relating to the teachers' informal learning in the workplace that emerged from the analysis of data collected from the studied school: learning as a process of socialisation, learning from seniors and colleagues, learning from media and learning from experimenting.

Learning as a Process of Socialisation

The school values the importance of teachers' professionalism. The principal believes that school is like a tent and teachers are the pillars and misbalance of any pillar will affect the function of the tent. In order to provide effective induction and develop new teachers professionally, they pass through a process of socialisation in this school. The principal reported:

While selecting teachers, first we make them observe senior teachers. A teacher candidate observes the lesson, notes down the points and then s/he is asked to teach following the method of senior teachers and the senior teachers observe them and decide whether the new candidate is appropriate or not.

The vice principal believes that a teacher candidate might be well qualified having the required degrees in teaching but every trained teacher is not necessarily a good teacher. Some teachers do not prove to be effective despite their qualifications. Thus, the school seeks to develop the teachers according to what it regards as good teaching. A model lesson given by a senior teacher is used to make new teachers adopt those teaching strategies that are dominant and acceptable in this school. For another one or two month, delegated senior teachers observe the newly-inducted teachers, giving constant feedback for improvement until the new teachers adjust to the teaching techniques of this school.

This process provides opportunities for new teachers to learn the techniques of the senior teachers. Some new teachers believe that the techniques of the senior teachers are the same as the techniques to which they are accustomed. Such teachers are mostly those who have had both pre-service teaching qualifications and updated knowledge about teaching acquired through various in-service courses. Those teachers who believe that these techniques are totally different from their previous experiences are usually those with weak professional backgrounds as they have not had any exposure to in-service professional development opportunities.

The teachers believe that during this process of socialisation, they learn a lot as they study the teaching techniques of senior teachers and senior teachers observe their lessons and provide them with useful feedback to further improve their teaching. In this way, the process of socialisation provides the teachers with opportunities for informal learning and for improving their practices in the workplace.

Learning from Seniors and Colleagues

New arrivals learn from senior teachers through a wide range of other sorts of interactions. Some of the teachers interviewed reported sharing issues openly with seniors. Whenever, they face new issue in the classroom, they consult the seniors to find solutions. The principal reported, "Teachers ask me if they have some classroom issues and I respond to them either individually or discuss the issue at break time". The teachers at this school come together at break time and this time is referred to as *tamiri kam ka period* (period of constructive tasks). The teachers discuss various teaching techniques and classroom-related issues. Some report that they implement the ideas discussed at the break time in their classrooms and constantly seek to improve their practices on the basis of these constructive discussions. Similarly, the academic advisor conducts various in-house sessions according to the needs and interest of the teachers and the latter report learning practical ideas from such sessions.

The teachers also learn from each other through the sharing of ideas. Some have access to external in-service courses conducted by various non-governmental organisations. The teachers report that they share ideas from these courses with their colleagues. One novice teacher revealed that he had learnt the concept of effective classroom management from a teacher who had attended an external course:

I was unable to manage the class as a new teacher in this school. The class was noisy while I had been instructed by the management not to punish students. Rehmat made me realize that I have to engage the students in some meaningful and interesting activities so that there will not be any disturbance from students. When I engaged them in different activities, the class was so managed.

The senior teachers also stated that they learnt from the new teachers, who had impressive teaching ideas and updated knowledge. "We just depend upon our experience while the junior teachers are active in taking help from various sources to improve their teaching", a senior teacher commented. One junior teacher said that "When a senior teacher told me that he had learnt the idea of using teaching aids from me, it was very encouraging for me". In this way, even senior teachers learn from juniors or less-experienced colleagues.

Learning from Media

Though the studied school is located in a remote and mountainous region of Pakistan, for the last ten years, it has had access to television and the internet. Some of the teachers report that they learn a lot from these sources. Various virtual and distance learning institutions such as Virtual University and Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) telecast educational programmes and the teachers believe that they get useful ideas from them. The academic coordinator reports that teachers bring various ideas from the internet to the school and because knowledge from internet is considered up-to-date, there is some enthusiasm for using ideas and strategies from it.

Learning from Experiment

Some of the teachers reported learning from experimentation. One good opportunity for experimentation is to look for the applicability of externally-acquired ideas. A teacher reports:

Whatever idea we get from such [external] courses, we experiment with them in our school. Some are not fully practical such as mobilizing and preserving teaching aids. We do collect and use resources but in our school there is no space to preserve them. So we cannot use a teaching aid for long time as we cannot maintain them due to lack of space.

The teachers adopt those strategies that are practical, keeping in mind the contextual realities. Sometimes, they initiate something themselves. The teachers stated that they think of various strategies and experiment with them in their classrooms. A teachers reported that she had learnt the idea of using flash card to teach word meanings. According to the teacher when she used this idea, it was really meaningful to teach vocabulary. In this way, the teachers learn through experimentation of newly acquired idea in their classrooms.

Some of the teachers are doing various professional development courses through distance learning institutions, such as AIOU. The teachers acquire various ideas and strategies from these courses: as one commented, "Last year, I was doing CT (Certificate in Teaching) course from AIOU where I studied a book on evaluation. I implemented the ideas about evaluation and they were very effective".

Conclusion

The most common form of informal learning in this school is observation of seniors at the time of induction. However, the extent to which the teaching practices of seniors are effective is a concern. If the practices of seniors are not informed by the latest research, there is a possibility that the traditional ways of teaching will be transmitted to the newly inducted teachers. It would be interesting to further explore the teaching practices of the senior teachers whom the newly-inducted teachers observe and imitate.

Most of the teachers who were involved in experimenting new ideas were usually those who had attended external in-service courses. These teachers not only improve their own practices through implementing the newly acquired ideas but also share them with other teachers being source of informal learning for them. It suggests that informal learning activities could be increased if the teachers are given opportunity to be connected to external sources. It would be useful to determine how teachers learn informally in a school in which they do not have access to external sources.

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