

A Case for Teachers' Workplace Learning: the role of school leadership

*Chirure Nabututu Hellen**

Moi University -Eldoret

Email: hellenchirure@yahoo.com

Abstract

Although teachers' workplace learning has been acknowledged as a significant component of school improvement, very little is known about how the school leadership influences this learning. This paper is the outcomes of a qualitative case study on workplace learning in one public secondary school in Kenya, and focuses on the influence of the school leadership. A qualitative research approach was used and data was collected using interviews, observations and document analysis. The research participants were the head teacher and five other teachers with varying responsibilities as well as work experience. The study established that the school leadership had had a significant influence on teacher workplace learning, which has implications on the role of the school leaders, particularly the head teachers in creating and sustaining an environment that would encourage ongoing teacher learning in the school. For teacher professional development providers and trainers, the findings also imply a need to increase awareness among the school leaders on the important role they play in facilitating teachers' workplace learning.

Introduction

Schools have become increasingly aware of the need to be effective due to the pressures of accountability from the government, parents as well as other stakeholders. The school leader is one of the most important factors of effective schools. Research literature as well as effective

leadership literature (Retallick, 2009; Dalin et. al, 1994; Sammons et al, 1995; Pashiardis, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2001) show that good leadership is important in initiating and maintaining school improvement.

Building capacity is undoubtedly a major component of school improvement initiatives. One way of building capacity is through encouraging and facilitating workplace learning, which has become increasingly critical as the expectations on both teachers and students to improve school quality and effectiveness continue to rise. Studies (Khamis & Jawed, 2006; Flecknoe, 2005) acknowledge the significance of teacher workplace learning in school improvement (SI) and recommend that the way forward for SI should be to build capacity in the workplace that exposes teachers to learn new ways of being professionals. Another study by Rowden & Shamsuddin (cited in Kraussa & Guat, 2008) established that the extent of workplace learning occurring in an organization is strongly related to employee job satisfaction which in turn determines effectiveness. From these views, the significance of teachers' workplace learning for school effectiveness and improvement cannot therefore be over emphasized.

Although teachers' workplace learning has been acknowledged as a significant component of school improvement, and despite many scholars recognizing school leadership as a dominant influence on the success of improvement initiatives in schools (Deal & Peterson, 1998; Fullan, 2001a, 2001b; Nemsar, 1983) very little is known about how school leaders in different contexts influence teachers' workplace learning. Previous studies on the influence of leadership on workplace learning have been in a developed world context and focused on the influence of school leadership on new teacher learning. For example, Flores (2004)) studied the impact of school cultures and leadership on new teacher learning in the workplace in Portugal. Flores' study found that encouraging, supportive and informative leadership was a crucial feature in the workplace learning of beginning teachers. There is, however, little known about how the school leader may influence teachers' workplace learning of continuing teachers. Moreover, very few studies have been done on this subject in the East African context and in Kenya in particular. This study therefore sought to fill these identified gaps and explored how the head teacher of a particular rural public secondary school in Kenya had influenced the teachers' workplace learning.

The Content of Teachers' Workplace Learning

Literature reveals many different things that teachers can learn in the workplace. Feiman-Nemser (2001) identifies the importance of sustained professional learning opportunities based on her research and literature. She has developed a framework of teacher learning based on a set of Central Tasks of Learning to Teach (CTLT). The central tasks she identifies are based on what practicing teachers need to know, care about, and be able to do while on the job in order to promote substantial learning for all students. These tasks involve the gaining of knowledge of students, curriculum and school context, designing responsive instructional programs, creating a classroom learning community and the development of a professional identity. Others include: to extend and deepen subject matter knowledge for teaching, extend and refine repertoire in curriculum, instruction and assessment, strengthen skills and dispositions to study and improve teaching, expand responsibilities and develop leadership skills. Studies on on-job learning for beginning teachers (Khamis, 2000; McCormack & Thomas, 2003) identified almost similar tasks.

Eraut (2002) adds that teachers also learn to share information, seek help, experiment with innovative actions and seek feedback at the workplace, while Hoekstra et al. (2007) point out that in daily classroom life, teachers choose how to act and decide what to do, that is, they exercise judgments. In other words, teacher learning can be interpreted as 'growing capacity to make appropriate judgments in changing, and often unique circumstances that occur in many workplaces' (Beckett & Hager, 2000, p. 302). On his part, Norberg (2000) maintains that the development of critical consciousness should be part of teacher preparation, in all contexts. All these seem to concur in one way or another with Schon's (1983) assertion that practicing teachers learn to adjust and modify practice in response to actions, reactions, interactions and activities in the classroom, and in anticipation of approaching situations.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (2002) report which in addition recommends that professional development should be school based and job embedded appears to concur with Putnam and Borko (2000) and Reimer-Villegas (2008). It identifies some of the things that teachers need to learn as, firstly, a deeper and broader knowledge of content because teachers who do not know content well cannot teach well. Secondly, it considers knowledge about the teaching and learning process

vital, i.e. creating and maintaining appropriate, orderly teaching and learning environments. Lastly, the report recommends that knowledge of pedagogy of particular subjects, for example, the ways of presenting the ideas of specific disciplines, the most potent illustrations, what hinders or facilitates learning of particular concepts and ways of addressing misconceptions, is imperative

On the other hand, Eraut (2004) argues that teachers acquire cultural knowledge informally at the workplace through participation in social activities, much of which is often taken for granted. He adds that they also acquire knowledge of people and situations, know-how in the form of skills and practices and attitudes. A summary of what teachers learn informally at the workplace according to Eraut, Maillender, Miller, Steadman, Ali, Blackman & Furner (2004) is as in Table1(Appendix A).

The preceding review reveals that what teachers can learn at the workplace is almost unlimited. However, the question of whether all school contexts afford the teachers working in them all this learning remains unanswered.

Organizational and Leadership Structures and Teacher Learning

Murphy & Alexander (2007) point out that the organizational characteristics of schools affect the conditions of teaching and learning. Similarly, the prevalent leadership culture in schools is believed to have a great influence on TL within the school because “teachers seem to need a strong leadership to examine the teaching and learning in their schools”. (Bezzinna, 2005, p. 166). Experts on school restructuring call for transformational leadership, in which school leaders foster a collaborative and professional culture, facilitate teacher development, and help teachers to solve problems (Green & Etheridge, 2001) as it provides a conducive environment for TL to take place. This is contrary to a school leadership that is embedded in “transactional leadership based on power, top down decision making, and having rewards controlled by the leader (Leithwood, 1992). This does not provide a supportive environment for effective TL and may lead to reluctance by teachers to “advance” and violate egalitarianism norms (Little, 1995). This view is supported by the Institute for Educational Leadership report (2001) which states that the traditional top-down leadership structures often work against teachers’ opportunities

to learn. Similarly, hierarchical, instead of horizontal, relationships with peers, where for example, teacher leaders exercise authority instead of working collaboratively in learning and decision-making endeavors, does not augur well for effective TL (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Cooper, 1993). Principally, the American Federation of Teachers (2002) guidelines recommend that the very organization of a school should promote and provide for continual and purposeful reflection on teaching and learning.

Given that schools have different organizational structures and leadership approaches, it was important to study how these influence the learning of teachers in the workplace. In view of this, this study hence aimed to look at, among others, how the organizational and leadership structures of a particular public secondary may have influenced its teachers' learning.

The study

The study sought to find out the influence of the school leadership on teachers workplace learning. Since the study sought to understand the influence of the school leadership on teachers' workplace learning in a particular secondary school by highlighting how the leadership hindered or supported this learning, the study lent itself to the qualitative approach, more specifically to a case study design. the qualitative approach was considered suitable because first, the nature of the variables under study, that is, the influence of school leadership and the learning of teachers in the workplace are not easily quantified (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Secondly, I intended to study the phenomenon in its natural settings and according to Creswell (2007) and Bogdan & Biklen (2007), qualitative approach is the best suited for soliciting participants' stories from a natural setting.

The research site was a rural public secondary school. The study school is located in a rural setting, about 50 kilometers from the nearest major town which also serves as the district head quarters, and five kilometers from the main tarmac road and a similar number of kilometers from the nearest other secondary school. It is a public co-educational day secondary school, started 29 years ago as a community school and later handed over to the government.

The target group of participants of the study was teachers in a rural public secondary school in Kenya. Bearing in mind the target group

and the proposed research site, purposive selection of the study school was done to get a school that was a public secondary school located in a rural setting. The head teacher was sampled and five teachers, the deputy head teacher, one heads of department; one long serving teacher, who had worked for 23 years, (22 of which were in the study school).Also sampled was one beginning teacher [2 years experience] and two teachers from among those who had served longest in the school; who, however, participated in his capacity as a teacher and one other teacher who had served in the school for ten years.

Interview was used as the primary data collection method and observation and document analysis as secondary methods. The rationale for using multiple forms of data collection was to establish credibility and validity in the findings of the study through triangulation. This is backed by Hendricks (2006) who affirms that “looking at multiple forms of data when answering research questions helps the researcher fill in the gaps that would occur if one data source was used” (p.72).

The Findings and discussion

The school leadership was found to have facilitated teacher learning to some extent. For example, the school leadership supported and facilitated teachers to attend external workshops and seminars organized by the district education office and/or other education stakeholders such as publishers, despite the limited school resources. The head teacher stated in the interview that he ensured that the teachers are supported to attend external workshops and seminars, whenever they were organized. This was corroborated by the teachers interviewed. For example, one teacher said “most workshops we have had are not internal, but every time the school sponsors us. We go out for one two; three days then we come to inform the rest” (T5 interview).

Further, since not all teachers could attend the external seminars, the head teacher said he ensured that those who attended disseminated what they learnt to the rest of the teachers. This was corroborated by the teacher interviews and by documentary evidence in several staff meeting minutes, showing that teachers who attended seminars often gave reports during staff meetings or were required to prepare written reports. The head teacher himself, perhaps acting as a role model, also reported back

whenever he attended heads meetings if there were any issues of relevance to the teachers as indicated in documents (Staff Meeting Minutes).

Further, support of the school administration for teacher learning is perhaps captured best in one teacher's words:

T: ...one good thing about the schools' administration is that from all the schools I have been, I would like to say that I find that this school is very open to ideas... at least they listen to your side and give a feedback and then all of you can make a decision pertaining to all the ideas that have been put on the table. That has enabled me to grow very much. I didn't find that in many other schools (*T1, interview 1*).

These findings show that the school leadership was a facilitating factor in the learning of teachers in the workplace. This perhaps indicates that the school leadership appreciated the need for teacher to continue to learn. It also perhaps indicates the school leadership's understanding of need to support teachers to learn in the workplace. Several studies (Clement & Vandenberghe, 2001; Fernandez, 2000; Moore, 2000), report that the leadership of the principal is crucial to support the professional development in schools. Fernandez (2000) identifies certain characteristics that are common to all supportive principals as including, among these: visibility, modeling, support and high expectations. The principal in this case portrayed these characteristics to some extent. These findings mirror findings of a study on the impact of school cultures on and leadership on new teacher learning in the workplace (Flores, 2004) in Portugal, which found that encouraging, supportive and informative leadership, was a crucial feature in the accounts of teachers' positive experiences.

Other findings indicated that there were cordial relations between the school head and the teachers. The presence of cordial interpersonal relations between the school head and the teachers had played a significant role in facilitating teachers' learning from each other in the workplace. According to Glatthorn (1987) good relationships at the workplace can facilitate professional dialogue to discuss professional issues of personal interest, peer supervision, peer coaching, and collaborative action research.

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teacher to continue to learn or the school leadership's understanding of need to support teachers to learn in the workplace.

Implications of the Findings

For School Leaders

The findings have implications on the role of the school leaders, particularly the head teachers in creating and sustaining ongoing teacher learning in the school. As Fernandez (2000) affirms, leadership constitutes one of the overarching influences in fostering a sense of professional community amongst teachers. There is therefore need for the school leadership to be more proactive in creating a working environment that promotes workplace learning. Moore (2000) offers suggestions for school principals to support professional development of teachers, which includes, among others, planning ahead, establishing routine, tapping internal resources and establishing mentoring programmes. These would perhaps help create a workplace that encourages teachers' learning.

Similarly, relationships in the workplace need to be built and sustained. Although individual teachers have a role to play in creating and sustaining these kinds of relationships, the school administration is considered to play a significant role in bringing this about. The implication here is that the school leaders need to focus on and take a leading role in creating and sustaining cordial and collegial interpersonal relationships amongst the teachers, if the teachers are to benefit from learning from one another.

For Teacher Educators

Due to the significant role that workplace learning plays in teacher development, there is need to increase awareness among the teachers, but more importantly amongst the school leaders of how this learning can be encouraged and enhanced. Professional development providers and trainers need to focus on this. The school leaders need to be aware of the important role they have in bringing about meaningful workplace learning. This awareness can be created through professional development workshops for school leaders as well as reading materials. Teachers also need knowledge on the ways of getting the most out of collaboration. This will help maximize on the benefits of for example, collaborative/group/ cooperative teaching.

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