Greek PE teachers learning through professional dialogue

Kyriaki Makopoulou & Kathleen Armour

Loughborough University, UK

This paper reports findings from a research study undertaken on PE teachers’ career-long professional learning in Greece. The aim of this study is to build upon recent Physical Education Continuing Professional Development (PE-CPD) research by seeking to articulate the nature and quality of PE-CPD provision in Greece and explore the spectrum of teachers’ professional learning experiences in contexts that contain both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ attributes of learning (Colley et al., 2003). Drawing on situated perspectives on learning, the paper illustrates how 11 Greek PE teachers view professional learning through dialogue with colleagues and explores their beliefs on the impact of this learning upon their practice.

The research design is based on situative approaches to learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Peressini et al., 2004; Wenger, 1998). Situated perspectives hold that all learning and knowing is ‘situated’, by definition, in specific contexts and situations. Research from a situated perspective involves the examination of social systems that are recognised as much more complex and comprehensive than the behaviourist and cognitivist processes of individual learners (Greeno et al., 1998). Indeed, from the tenets of this theoretical perspective, it is almost impossible to study the complex processes of human learning independently of the broader social and cultural systems in which they occur. In relation to this study, the socio-cultural settings were understood as encompassing a number of dimensions, including the teachers who are learners in the system; the schools within which teachers work and learn; the governmental policies and decision-making structures that affect the nature of teachers’ work and their learning opportunities— both formal and informal; the range of the professional development activities teachers experience; and the role of the professional developers in supporting effective teacher learning (Borko, 2004; Joyce. 1980). In this framework, the research was conducted in four overlapping phases and a range of predominantly qualitative methods were employed. The phases include: in-depth individual case studies with PE teachers; construction and dissemination of an open-ended profile questionnaire for a wider number of PE teachers in the area; individual interviews with key CPD stakeholders at both policy and practice levels; and critical analysis of policy documents. This paper draws mainly upon data gathered from in-depth case studies with 11 PE teachers from 8 different schools in Athens. The case studies were undertaken by making short, repeated and intensive visits to the schools and largely relied on individual interviews, observations of PE lessons to form the foundations for a post-observational interview, and informal observations within the schools and particularly of the teachers working within their schools and interacting with colleagues. This structure was beneficial for three reasons: to build-in time to manage and begin analysing the amounts of data generated from each visit; to build upon and seek deeper insights from the findings of previous interviews; and to chart teachers’ learning over a period of time. Furthermore, follow-up visits were important since the research participants had the opportunity to revise and review a draft of initial findings from previous interviews and thus ensure that the researcher’s interpretations of the data were supported. A constructivist revision of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) was used to analyse the data. This approach challenges the suggestion that data analysis is a purely inductive process where data are ‘discovered’; rather it assumes that what the researchers observe, understand, and report is influenced by their previous experiences/ knowledge and fundamental explicit and implicit assumptions about the phenomenon under study.

All research participants commented that opportunities for dialogue with other teachers, both planned and unintentional, represent an important element of their career-long learning experiences. Opportunities for professional dialogue were considered important because they afford teachers the opportunity to have access to different perspectives and views; they tend to stay grounded in and relevant to teachers’ school practices and are tailored to their professional learning needs. Furthermore, for the majority of these teachers, the very process of identifying, articulating, and communicating to colleagues their thoughts and experiences constituted a powerful learning opportunity. It was believed that even disagreements led to meaningful learning.

Almost all research participants believed that they could learn from colleagues through spontaneous dialogue that occurred in various contexts including CPD activities, schools, festivals etc. Although it seems that opportunities for discussion amongst colleagues are limited during CPD events, teachers reported talking with colleagues informally (after the end the event) with the aim to clarify understanding and share ideas for future changes in practice. Teachers also deliberately sought support from colleagues when they encountered a specific challenge in, or aimed to renew, their practice. All teachers mentioned having friends-colleagues in other schools who were invaluable in sharing skills and ideas. Two teachers in one of the schools described their learning as encompassing elements of collaboration in collectively developing and negotiating goals for pupil learning and sharing effective professional practice through informal dialogue. Both teachers were deeply familiar with and mutually respected the knowledge and capabilities of the other. This was viewed as an important factor in ensuring that all interactions occurred in a non-threatening learning environment. There was no evidence in other schools of similar learning activities, and most of the teachers reported insufficient school structures and cultures that inhibit, rather than foster, teachers learn together. Some of the work-based barriers included ineffective programming, loose professional relations with colleagues (i.e. supply teachers), and lack of a learning ethos for teachers in schools.
In this framework, our findings suggest that professional dialogue was undertaken voluntarily, initiated and directed by the teachers themselves and driven by their personal desire to improve and sustain the provision of meaningful PE learning experiences to their pupils. At the same time, although some of these teachers were satisfied with the nature and content of their current interactions with colleagues, others were more sceptical about their experiences. They acknowledged that although all interactions hold promise for professional learning, the majority of them lacked sufficient depth on issues that concerned them. For example, conversations could be narrow, practical and rarely innovative, sporadic and unsystematic; and did not involve genuine collaborative learning activities. As a result, although potentially useful in supporting teachers to add general ideas to their existing repertoires, they did not afford opportunities for teachers to fundamentally re-consider their practices or challenge prevailing assumptions about teaching and learning.

In terms of opportunities for genuine collaboration, all research participants implied that teacher learning through professional dialogue occurs at two levels. At the first level, teachers converse and learn something new. The ways in which teachers described this process varied. Some teachers' examples illustrated a 'passing on' or 'transmission' of existing expertise and knowledge from one teacher to another. Some other teachers implied a metaphor of interactive learning where meanings and knowledge were negotiated amongst the individuals involved. At a second level, teachers need to engage in the process of 'adapting', 'transferring', and 'applying' this new knowledge into their own practice and school contexts. This activity was viewed as a highly individualistic process, where individual teachers optimistically constructed personal knowledge and understanding drawing upon a combination of their current perspectives and elements of the new learning. Therefore, when teachers shared knowledge they neither engaged in the co-construction of its practical application nor supported each other in-context. This seems to be influenced by contextual constraints and teachers' lack of similar CPD experiences. Nonetheless, it appears to affect the degree to which changes in practice- and beliefs- will occur.

The majority of research participants in the study argued in favour of both structured and spontaneous opportunities for professional dialogue with colleagues. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that teachers need support and guidance to engage in productive collaborative learning within and beyond their schools. A number of fundamental questions regarding the nature, content, context and impact of 'professional dialogue' upon teacher development remain unanswered.

References


