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01. Continuing Professional Development: Learning for Individuals,
Leaders, and Organisations

Paper

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Transfer of Knowledge from Group Work to Individual Level in a Professional Learning Context

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That educational systems the world over recognise the importance of the teacher is often evident by the resources spent on teacher capacity building. The issues have frequently been about building an effective model and mechanism that would develop and enhance the teachers' capacity and provide avenues for professional development.

In this study we investigate whether knowledge acquired in a collaboration context, is perceived by the individual group member as transferable into his or hers day-to-day school development work.

The study at hand is conducted within a regional collaboration project between four municipalities and a university in Sweden. The four municipalities agreed on a number of priority professional research areas, where they merge, and to use each other as critical friends in the development work. During the meetings of the collaboration project, participants from different levels and areas in the education sector in respective municipality, act as critical friends to one another in groups in order to drive the projects within the professional research areas forward. Researchers from the university provide the participants guidance in research skills and methods in order to strengthen the scientific base for professional development work in preschools and schools.

A general assumption is that by working in groups, the group members are involved in collaboration which can assist them in a number of ways; e.g. generate strategies (Author, 2009) as well as better problem solving and learning outcomes than individual work (Barron, 2000; McConnell, 2000; 2005). Even so, group work is supported by research as beneficial for problem solving, development of critical thinking and communication skills (McConnell, 2000; 2005) we are interested in whether knowledge acquired and utilized within group work in one context is transferable into another context, although similar. This leads us to an important concept in the social constructivist theory, namely transfer or transfer of knowledge. The concept focuses on how and if an individual uses and transmits his or her ideas about a phenomenon from one context to another (Mayer, 2002; Salomon & Perkins, 1989; Spiro, Collins, Thota & Feltovich, 2003). On this basis, this study concerns participants' perception of utilization of research methodology in group work in relation to their perception of their utilization of research methodology in their own practice. According to

Hasselhorn and Mähler (2000), it is possible to distinguish between specific and non-specific transfer. Specific transfer involves the transfer of special factual knowledge while non-specific transmission refers to the transfer of overall principles or strategies to new contexts.

The authors also distinguish between positive and negative transmission depending on whether transmission is facilitated or is inhibited, as well as on proximal and distal transfer depending on whether the situation requires a higher or lower transfer need (Hasselhorn and Mähler, 2000; Author, 2012). When we learn something that is repeated relatively often and thus automated, a "low-road" transmission can occur. In the case of high-road transmission, it requires more abstract thinking to transfer ideas or concepts from one situation to another (Salomon and Perkins, 1989). A further distinction can be made between horizontal and vertical transmission (Schönborg & Bögeholtz, 2009). Horizontal transfer is defined as the ability to transfer performances between different contexts but at the same level of organization. Vertical transmission, on the other hand, aims at the ability to transfer performances between different organizational levels.

Following the theoretical assumptions outlined above, the question we ask in this study is "How is transfer of knowledge from group work to own practice perceived by participants participating in a project on strengthening organizational development on a scientific basis?"

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used In order to answer the research question regarding how the participants in the project, described above, perceived whether the knowledge acquired in groups in a professional training context could be utilized into their own school context, a questionnaire containing 19 questions was handed out to the participants, each question with a Likert scale. The questionnaires were distributed to the 57 participants that were present at the final meeting of the project cycle's first year, and manually collected. This counts for about 65-70 percent of the total number of participants in the project. The questionnaire contains questions concerning the respondent's own perception regarding: the individual's relation to development work in their daily work, the individual's knowledge progress regarding research skills, the process of the group work, and the collaboration model. The latter referring to the model of host versus critical friends in project work. The questionnaires were analyzed with SPSS factor analysis in order to detect potential underlying variables. The participants of the project were divided into 12 groups, four groups per school-level. Each group comprised of a host from respectively municipality. The municipality took responsibility for the formulation of the professional research question, and the remaining members of the group, which all came from other municipalities, acted as critical friends in order to develop and process the research question.

Conclusions. Although a generalisation of the study's results may be considered doubtful, it is important and relevant to critically discuss the findings in a broader perspective. As earlier studies show similarities between issues of transfer of knowledge (Argote, Ingram, Levine, Moreland, 2000; Spiro, Collins, Thota & Feltovich, 2003) it is reasonable to suggest that the findings in this paper also relates to a broader, international perspective. Based on the factor analysis a strong negative relationship was found between the individual's perception of the group's increased use of research methodology and their own increased ability to use research methodology in their own practice. Additionally, there was also a negative relationship between the individual's perception of the research question's domination in group discussions and their opportunity to reflect on their own practice. This may imply that the participant's own learning, relating to their own practice, has been put back while working with development issues not pertinent to their own context. This concerns the concept of knowledge transfer, which has previously been addressed; that knowledge relating to one context cannot automatically assumed being transferred into another context. The results display a clear contradiction between the group's and the individual's utilization and development of

research methodology relating to respective professional research question. This pinpoints an incongruity between group learning and development regarding research skills and the individual's perception of the relevance of these skills in his or her own practice. The results raise an important question; how should capacity building be organized in order to enable individuals to transfer knowledge and skills development from one context to another? This question is pertinent in all training contexts, in continuing professional development as well as in teacher education, in a European as well as in a global context as the introduction highlights.

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