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Communities of University Teachers as a basis for professional development

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Summary

This study was conducted to explore Ethiopian university teachers' experiences with their induction programme and determine how university teacher learning in Ethiopia can be enhanced in line with contemporary trends through participation in a teacher community. In Chapter 1, the contextual and conceptual background of the study was provided. In the last decade, Ethiopia has experienced massive expansion in the higher education sector. Through the upgrading of former training institutes and colleges and the establishment of new universities, there are now 31 public universities in the country. Student enrolment in 2010 was nearly seven times that of 2002. Having only two universities until 1999, the expansion of higher education in Ethiopia was an essential measure. This massive expansion, however, has brought with it a number of challenges; one of the main challenges finding academic staff with adequate teaching knowledge, skills and experience (Fisher & Swindells, 1998; Saint, 2004; World Bank, 2003).

There is no systematic mechanism in place to help teachers improve their teaching, except a short induction programme offered to novice university teachers on a voluntary basis. This programme was made possible after the establishment of academic development and resource centres (ADRCs) in 2005. In the Western world, professional development of university teachers has been an issue since the 1970s. Since then, staff development strategies have changed continuously. There has been a shift from training-focused strategies to more collaborative, on-going learning-oriented approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Laksov, et al., 2008). Governments require universities to implement some form of staff development to enhance quality of teaching (Gosling, 2009).

In this research, four interrelated studies were conducted. The first (reported in Chapter 2) focused on examining the experiences of induction programme participants and exploring their wishes for professional development. The results indicated that induction programme participants acquired valuable insights about the new career, developed confidence to teach and appreciated the access to experienced facilitators. However, there were concerns about the highly conceptual approach of the induction, lack of practical tips, insufficient attention to disciplinary variations, shortage of time and transfer challenges due to contextual factors and limited learning. The induction focused on orienting teachers in relation to the concepts of good teaching, but did not address how those concepts could be transferred into practice in a specific (disciplinary) context. Thus, participants showed their desire for continuous learn-

ing from experiences. This outcome led to the establishment of a community of university teachers (CoUT) in which female university teachers of Bahir Dar University volunteered to participate.

Three studies were conducted in the context of the CoUT. One of these (reported in Chapter 3) examined the development of a group of female university teachers as a community of practice. The results indicated that the early phase of the development of the community is the most challenging. In this phase, it was found that although using a specific group identity, starting from teachers' own problems and setting a group goal are important conditions for initiating a teacher community, in reality, commitment to the domain, development of a shared identity and an interactional repertoire that facilitates interaction are rarely experienced. In the early phase, members of the CoUT did not realize the relevance of being in their community. Properly utilizing experiences that made such relevance visible and maintaining flexibility in shaping the initial domain(s) promoted the development of the community. By giving participants the chance to define a problem they wanted to tackle (a decision-making role) and shaping the domain based on their specific needs, it was possible to create intrinsic motivation in members to continue to participate in the community. Having an insightful facilitator with the time, commitment and skills to guide the group was also a basic condition for cultivating the CoUT.

The study reported in Chapter 4, conducted in the context of the CoUT, examined teacher learning and strategies. The results indicated changes in teachers' perceptions related to different teaching issues, as well as changes in the knowledge, skills and practice of teaching. Teachers reported alterations in their views on teaching, for example, from seeing oneself as a lecturer to adopting a facilitator role. Teachers were also able to construct knowledge about the 'how' aspect of teaching concepts, for example, 'how and in what situation' a certain method is used. The changes in perception and knowledge were also accompanied by some form of modification in the teaching practices.

The study also indicated how participation in the teacher community positively influenced female teachers' interaction with colleagues; through such interaction, they received emotional support and developed collaboration and social skills. Thus, female teachers' experiences of isolation were reduced. Especially in a context like Ethiopia, where women are minorities in the university context and voiceless when it comes to talking about themselves, the CoUT had an added relevance in reducing social isolation. The CoUT also gave female teachers opportunities to speak freely in English, which led to increased confidence in terms of communicating in English and better perceived communication skills.

The last study (reported in Chapter 5) focused on how community-based reflection on peer observation experiences influence teacher learning. The results showed the importance of CoUT-based discussion in promoting deep reflection that created links between and among outer levels (like teacher behaviour, the environment in which teaching takes place) as opposed to inner levels (like teacher beliefs, identity and mission). The CoUT created a social forum in which concrete observational experiences (relatively easily observable outer levels like what the teacher did in the class) were examined, elaborated on and interpreted from different perspectives, allowing each CoUT member to bring together her unique experiences, views and assumptions. This kind of interaction exposed participants' different teaching-learning strategies, enabled feedback provision and promoted deeper reflection that addressed issues related to teacher beliefs, identity and mission. In doing so, deep learning was facilitated, reflective skills were developed and participants were positively motivated to improve their practice. Overall, this confirmed the findings in the literature on the value of using critical reflection in communities of practice. Ultimately, the results showed that if we want teachers to learn a lot from peer observations, it is crucial to encourage them to become involved in community-based reflection. At the same time, it is important to wait until the group reaches the mature phase, in which members develop adequate mutual trust that enables critical reflection on both strengths and aspects that need to be improved.

In Chapter 6, the conclusions related to the four empirical studies and the implications and limitations of the project as a whole were discussed. The first study led to the conclusion that short induction programmes are not sufficient when it comes to influencing the teaching practices of novice university teachers. Two implications were drawn from this. First, induction programmes need to be expanded, integrating theoretical orientation with opportunities to practice concepts and reflect on experiences. Second, if we want to improve the practices of university teachers who have no prior preparation or experience as a teacher, other strategies that can promote on-going learning opportunities need to be devised in order to develop the teaching skills of teachers.

The conclusion drawn from the second study was that developing a community of teachers is a demanding task. It requires an initial shared identity that allows people to come together and create the group; a shared goal that addresses members prior preferences; a facilitator with adequate time, commitment and skill to go through all the ups and downs of creating the group; a key incident that can make the relevance of being in the community visible to members; and flexibility that allows members to shape the shared domain in a way that fits their immediate priorities.

From the third study, it was concluded that participation in teacher communities creates different learning opportunities that lead to different learning outcomes. Learning from stories, active involvement in discussions, peer feedback and individual reflection were all promoted through participation in the community. The teachers experienced changes in their perceptions, knowledge, skills and practices. Teacher socialization was enhanced, thereby encouraging members to share and solve social and academic problems. Furthermore, teachers had ample opportunities to talk freely in English, which gave them the confidence to use the language for communication purposes. All of these aspects enhanced the development of a collegial culture to promote on-going learning.

The fourth study showed that the mature phase of a teacher community is an ideal context in which to undertake peer observation-based discussion. This kind of discussion and reflection promotes deep learning by creating a rich social context which provides different tools (experiences, assumptions, views) to create links between observable aspects (what the teacher does, the type of teaching environment, etc.) and inner aspects (teacher beliefs, teacher professional identity and teacher mission). The interaction among members of a teacher community was found to promote deeper reflection that highlights the influence of the inner levels on the outer levels.

This study had limitations in terms of its size, the characteristics of the participants and the researcher's role. Specifically, only one teacher community was studied. Furthermore, the participants were female university teachers who were struggling to be successful in an extremely male-dominated environment. Finally, the researcher was both the initiator and facilitator of the teacher community and the data collector, which may have influenced the results. These aspects have to be taken into consideration in trying to generalize the results.

In relation to these limitations, suggestions for future research were indicated. It is important to conduct large-scale studies on the development of teacher communities and learning within teacher communities in different contexts, different arrangements (initiated by external parties or by teachers themselves) and different group compositions (male groups, mixed groups or department- or discipline-specific groups).