1-1-2009

Teachers' Workplace Learning within School Cultures Community in the United States and Lithuania

Elena Jurasaite-O'Keefe
St. John's University, jurasaie@stjohns.edu

Teachers' Workplace Learning within School Cultures Community in the United States and Lithuania

Elena Jurasaite-O'Keefe, St. John's University, USA

Abstract

The **purpose** of this study is to explore teachers' workplace informal professional learning and inform educational researchers, teacher educators, administrators and teachers about ways teachers learn to improve their practice. By questioning how teachers learn on-the-job to be better teachers and how school cultures position them as learners, this work generates hypotheses about relationships between the nature of workplace informal professional learning and its content and contexts.

An ethnographic **design** based upon a grounded theory generates analytic categories from interviews and field notes through comparison of learning environments in three contrasting schools in two countries—Lithuania and the United States. Discourse analysis is employed to understand how teachers learned through interaction with students, colleagues, and administrators.

The **findings** illuminate six facets of school culture that provide or fail to provide opportunities for informal teacher learning: architectural features of a school building; school mission statements; classroom environments; organizational arrangements; school traditions, and teachers' professional relationships.

The **limitations** of this study derive from its focus on school cultures as learning organizations that produces detailed thick descriptions, which are culturally specific and may not necessarily be transferable to other schools.

The **implications** underline that teachers and teacher educators could enhance teachers' professional learning by contributing to building and sustaining the opportunities necessary to maintain professional growth at teachers' work places.

The **value** of the study is in 1) defining specific cultural features in schools that create or fail to create opportunities for teachers to learn informally; 2) showing how teachers use these opportunities for their learning; 3) calling for re-evaluation of professional development systems to include informal learning as an important path for professional growth.

Key words: teacher professional development, informal workplace learning, school culture, discourse analysis, learning opportunities.

Paper type: research paper

Introduction

Current educational policies put significant pressure on elementary school teachers to modify their practices in many areas simultaneously. These changes require professional development to focus on a wide variety of subject areas (with their unique epistemologies), instructional practices, and teaching resources (Elmore, 2000). To do so, elementary teachers have to employ their knowledge and skills more effectively and to develop approaches necessary for teaching in ever-changing contexts. If the reforms are to succeed, teachers need various opportunities for learning and continuous professional growth. Within the context of school, such professional growth to a large extent occurs through workplace formal and informal learning.

Research on teachers' formal in-service professional development experiences has shown that their impact on teachers' practice is limited (e.g., Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991; Lieberman, 1996; Richardson, 2003). At the same time, researchers argue that "the most powerful forms of teacher development are fostered most directly and powerfully by conditions unlikely to be found outside the school" (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 150; Bradley et al. 1994). These findings call for a major re-appraisal of professional learning systems (Knight, 2002b) that include spontaneous informal workplace learning (Jurasaite-Harbison, 2008).

A socio-cultural perspective adopted in this study, conceives teacher learning as a social practice that is situated and intrinsically personified. Teachers as agents learn through interactions, constructing their knowledge rather that acquiring it. In addition, following Bourdieu (1990; 1992), learning is understood as cultural and relational in which the distinction between formal and informal learning becomes untenable (Hodkinson, Biesta, and James, 2004, Billett, 2002). Opposing views that regard informal learning as inferior (which includes most of the literature) limit our understanding of the complexity of learning. A few scholars attest to the superiority of informal learning, claiming that it matters even more than formal situations (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Engstrom, 1991). In this article, a distinction between formal and informal workplace learning is made for analytical reasons in regard to learning contexts and with understanding that a combination of both formal and informal contexts makes professional learning effective and meaningful.

This article focuses on examination of "conditions in schools that enable teachers to learn throughout their careers" (Eisner, 2000, p. 349). In addition, it investigates teachers' perceptions of these conditions as learning environments and ways teachers position themselves as learners in informal school settings. Proposition that professional knowledge develops not only in the mind of an individual but is inherent to the contexts within which the individual interacts—cultural, physical, social, historical, and personal (Yinger and Hendricks-Lee, 1993)—steers this investigation into teachers' learning.

Definitions of workplace informal learning

This study conceptualizes professional learning as 'an orchestration' of different kinds of knowledge that develop in and through interaction with others, texts and environments (Leont'ev, 1981/1974). Patterns of interactions reveal cultural webs of meanings (Anderson-Levitt, 2002) that position teachers as learners in their workplace

(Rozenholtz, 1989) in culturally specific ways. Such patterns appear in teachers' interactions with school administrators, colleagues, parents and the researcher, as well as in their co-planning sessions, lunches, coffee breaks and other instances of everyday life in the schools. In addition, teacher learning is viewed as continuous development and growth, which involves teachers' investigation of their practice. This approach positions teachers as agents of learning who exercise freedom of what, how and when to learn (Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex, 2005).

Useful representations have focused on schools' cultures (Erickson, 1987; Firestone and Louis, 1999; Prosser, 1999) as learning contexts. Acknowledging John Seely Brown's and his colleagues' contributed the study of situated cognition (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989), Phil Hodkinson and Martin Bloomer (2000) argued from a socio-cultural perspective for the importance of social conditions or the situatedness of learning. However, these and other researchers within this tradition focused on relationships between institutional culture and students' learning (Hallinger and Leithwood, 1998), not teachers' learning.

The concept of opportunities for learning (Tuyay, Jennings, and Dixon, 1995), though borrowed from research on classroom discourses and elaborated to include its understanding "as a socially signaled and recognized phenomenon that is context-, content-, time-, and participant-dependent" (Rex, 2006, p. 15), illuminates cultural and contextual aspect of workplace learning. In this study, it is used to examine the array of opportunities that are available for teachers as they construct and re-construct their roles as learners through relationships with colleagues, students, administration and environments.

To view how teacher learning occurs spontaneously in informal contexts, researchers highlight the importance of informal learning in general (Becher, 1999; Eraut, 2000) and teacher learning in particular (Day, 1999; Helsby and Knight, 1997). Their research accounts for a dimension of professional growth that occurs in settings that are not specifically designed for learning. Together with these authors, this study argues that informal learning develops from multiple sources and in multiple contexts through interaction within communities of practice (Knight, 2002a).

Methodology

To investigate how teachers' informal learning relates to school cultures, I used discourse analysis and interactional ethnography (Green & Dixon, 1993). From linguistic anthropology (Hymes, 1972), I applied an emic perspective. That view allowed me to examine how teachers in different schools perceived learning and themselves as learners. I also took on a participant-observer perspective to analyze how school cultures create opportunities for teachers' everyday professional growth.

In addition, I employed comparative analysis of Lithuanian and the United States school cultures to characterize contexts and teachers' perspectives on informal learning by focusing on anthropological elements such as descriptions of community, buildings and classrooms, schools' philosophy, traditions, and general population of schools. I did this by presenting ethnographic accounts of three schools, weaving together the researcher's—participant-observer's perspective and the teachers' voices as they shared their learning experiences and their interpretations in the interviews.

Having worked as a teacher educator in both countries, I developed an insider's view of the two countries' professional learning cultures. I hypothesize that features of informal learning could be better illuminated through their comparison in settings that were culturally different due to their histories and socio-economic background. Recently, these countries have become more culturally similar due to globalizing trends in social and educational values and practices. Nevertheless, both countries' diverse multicultural social structures complicated the process of cultural investigation. Through this research design, I also explored similarities and differences among schools' ethnic contexts for teachers' informal learning.

I selected three schools with high standing in their ethnic communities: one American school with an excellent reputation for serving its community, and a Russian and a Lithuanian school both with an outstanding academic status in Lithuania. The schools in Lithuania with different languages of instruction made it possible to compare ethnically different schools within a single nation. Within each case, in addition to the above mentioned traditional elements of school culture, I applied MacGilchrist's et al. (1995) a framework that highlighted interrelated dimensions of school culture: *Opportunities for learning*, which are provided by *professional relationships* and *organizational arrangements*. While the traditional anthropological categories described the context, these dimensions highlighted interactional processes within each school.

To deepen analysis within each of the MacGilchrist et al. categories, I employed additional complementary constructs. Professional relationships were understood through the concept of "knowledge-creating schools" (Hargreaves, 1999). From the teachers' perspective, I explored how the process of knowledge creation was reflected in their professional relationships. I looked for ways in which "tinkering", "knowledge transfer", "research of practice", and "facilitation by middle managers" (Hargreaves, 1999) provided useful pathways for understanding teachers' learning processes within their schools' organizational arrangements.

To examine organizational arrangements, I observed ways in which school principals set the overall "tone", "pattern", and "attitude" for teacher learning (Law, 1999), as well as how they organized and stimulated collaborative learning. By examining how school cultures constructed opportunities for professional learning and how teachers used these opportunities, I employed the concept of opportunities as "a socially signaled and recognized phenomenon that is context-, content-, time-, and participant-dependent" (Rex et al., 2006, p. 15). I analyzed knowledge creation by observing the range of interactional spaces, the cultural norms, and "the roles and relationships … [among] actions, talk, and texts" (Rex et al, 2006, p. 17). In these ways, I made teachers' informal learning opportunities in school settings visible for systematic examination.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participant observations were conducted at three elementary schools in the United States Midwest and a Russian and a Lithuanian school in a large city in Lithuania. Seventy eight hours of interview data with eleven elementary teachers were collected, as well as observations and interviews with educational officials served as a primary data to compose individual teachers' cases. Moreover, the analysis of national educational

policies served as a background for comprising three major cases that defined learning cultures on the institutional level.

I employed methods of case study, discourse analysis, statistical and ethnographic tools to analyze how teachers learned in their workplace; how school cultures related to informal learning and created opportunities for teachers to learn informally in their workplace; and how teachers constructed their professional identities as learners in their workplace. Systematic exploration of these questions aimed at informing teacher educators and administrators about ways of helping teachers to become critical and reflective professionals who continuously improve their practice through formal and informal learning.

Findings

The patterns that emerged from the examination of teacher learning as a cultural practice suggested possibilities of cultural factors' influence. On the national level, informal learning in both countries was not regarded as part of teachers' professional development. On the institutional level, all school cultures, as contexts for informal teacher learning, contained elements of learning organizations that created opportunities and stimulated such learning. However, the richness of informal learning opportunities at schools seemed to depend upon leadership principles, teachers' individual stances and professional relationships in the building.

The analysis focuses upon six facets of school culture that provided opportunities for informal teacher learning:

- architectural features of a school building that provided or fail to provide spaces for teacher informal learning;
- school mission that reflected philosophy and collective values of the school community;
- classrooms that represented both the administrations' and individual teachers' approaches to professional learning;
- organizational arrangements that featured different opportunities for teacher learning;
- traditions that extended contexts for informal learning; and
- professional relationships that provided or fail to provide opportunities to learn from each other.

Due to the limited space, in this article I illustrate how architectural features contribute to creation of opportunities for teachers' informal learning. I chose to focus on this category of analysis because it vividly shows how discourse analysis reveals teachers' perspective upon the spaces for learning. Further, I provide a summary of findings for the other five facets.

The American School Building Instills Separation

The building is two stories with lower elementary classrooms situated on the first floor and upper elementary on the second. Upon entering the building, everyone reports to the office (a common rule in all American schools). When I arrived to meet the principal and the teachers, two attentive and smiling assistants were ready at the front

desk to answer any questions. After several visits, they made me feel part of the school team, letting me know if the teachers I was working with were in the building and where I could find them and asking me about my day, my work and family. Often, I would find the principal in this area talking with the assistants or teachers and making himself available to visitors. The atmosphere of the school was friendly, inviting and casual. The walls of the hallways by the classrooms were decorated with students' artwork and projects; by the office, a calendar, photographs and stories from the recent events occupied a big space on the wall representing the work of the Parent-Teachers Association.

However, the architecture of the winged two-story building did not seem to encourage interactions between the teachers. Several teachers noted that it was more difficult here than in their former one-story buildings to get to know their colleagues and find out what they did in their classrooms. For example, Kristi expressed difficulty in getting to know her colleagues from other wings and other floors:

> K: We started doing *Morning Minglers* on Fridays, where teachers have breakfast **in their rooms[1]** and have other teachers come. That's more of a **relationship building thing and a get-to-know-you thing** because we are a fairly new building. Last year, we were also busy moving our classrooms over here and getting to know people that actually you are next to that we did not branch out into the building very much. We **did not have too much social time** to get to know people **on other floors** and **other wings** in the building. So, this year we are working more on that. (03/10/05)

Further on, she continued highlighting benefits of *Morning Minglers* for learning what other teachers did and talking with colleagues because there were not many other opportunities for interaction:

> K: It's **an opportunity to go to other classrooms and see what's hanging on the wall and what they are doing and also talk to some teachers that you don't have other opportunity to talk**. I think especially **with this building being two floors, it's difficult**. You know, **the lounge is upstairs**, and to be honest, **I often don't get up there.** During my lunch, I sit down here just because by the time you take it upstairs, there is no time for eating and we are often working during lunchtime. (03/10/05)

She pointed out that as the teachers' lounge was on the second floor, she could hardly find time to go and have lunch there. In the next interview, Kristi expanded on her idea that this building was separating teachers:

> K: So I'd like to get to know people a little bit better. It's a little **bit difficult in this building** as well because being in the upstairs and the downstairs, there are people that I don't see daily, and **I don't even know whether they are here today or** not because I just don't see them. **They are upstairs, and I am downstairs.** Whereas in the building that I came from, it was an older building, smaller, everybody was on one floor. But you pass by people's rooms on your way to the copy room, or you pass by people's rooms [going] different places.

---

[1] Here and further on in bold, I highlight phrases that are key to the meaning of the excerpt.

Just the proximity of the classrooms – everything **that makes it a little bit more difficult**. I feel good about this year that as a staff, we've been **planning more things to get to know each other**. (03/16/05)

However, I noticed some teachers interacting more often than others in the hallways and the administrative office. For instance, John, similar to Kristi, seemed to go out of his classroom only to visit his grade level colleagues, but even then, his colleagues would rather come to his classroom. Thus, his socializing was limited to chatting with his grade level colleagues in his classroom. By contrast, I saw Bob outside his classroom on many occasions interacting with teachers beyond his grade level as well as with students. It seems like this architectural inconvenience could have restricted some but not others from getting to know their colleagues and learning about what they did in their classrooms.

The Russian School Building Hardly Offers Any Places for Informal Learning

The sixty-year-old, four-story school building is situated on the corner of two very busy industrial streets. A security man dressed in black questioned every visitor. On my first day at the school, he attentively checked my camera bags and the tripod case. The next time, he recognized me extending friendly greetings and comments about weather. Between class periods, he did not allow students outside the main entrance. The hallways were usually empty and silent during class hours. Only janitors talked to each other by the teachers' lounge. When the bell rang announcing the end of the class period, the hallways were flooded with students and teachers trying to make their way to their next destinations. The school felt overpopulated. One of the participating teachers Marija noticed that the school was overcrowded due to the educational policies in the country:

M: **There are less and less children in the Russian schools**. Our **school is packed**[2]. That's why we don't have any spare classrooms. But our teachers don't have enough hours to keep full positions. That's a problem. (01/24/2005)

The teachers admitted that they had no time for interactions with collegues. Nadia, for example, mentioned that they "exchanged a couple of words" when they took students to the yard during the long break or encountered colleagues in the cafeteria:

N: When we take kids **outside**, we can **exchange a couple of words** like, "What page are you on in Math?" On your own, you can fall behind. But in a bigger sense, **we don't have any time** (for interaction- E.J-H) (…) **Interaction is scarce.** Sometimes we make a little circle and **talk in the cafeteria**. Our department meetings are every three months. If there is anything urgent, we stay after school. (1/20/2005)

Marija also emphasized the brevity of her interactions with colleagues in the building:

M: My interactions with colleagues either from other schools or from this one are **momentary**—how do you deal with kids? What are you doing in your classroom now? (01/26/2005)

During specials, the teachers usually sat in the back of the class and checked students' workbooks. The teachers' lounge seemed to be more popular with middle and

---

[2] About 1000 students in the building constructed to accommodate 600 students.

high school teachers[3], although it was not the best place for interactions because that was the space where they prepared for their classes. Elementary teachers rarely stopped by: they would come to check their schedule or make copies.

The school cafeteria seemed to be the place where teachers went to have a cup of tea and talk. Whenever I visited, I encountered secondary teachers along with a few elementary teachers there. There, we talked about the system of education in the US, educational policies in Lithuania, and teachers' best practices. For example, Marija's comment about spending her time during specials (when other teachers taught her students) was consistent with what other teachers said:

> M: During specials, I usually **try to check workbooks**. Sometimes, **I go to the cafeteria** to have some tea and chat. (…) **I see the same teachers there** [Teachers from different grade levels had specials at the same time, and would come to the cafeteria to chat]**.** That is OK because many problems are similar among grades. (1/20/2005)

I did not notice teachers interacting anywhere else except for the cafeteria. Hallways seem to belong to administrators. In addition to janitors, they were the only people seen walking down the hallways during class time, stopping by some classrooms to talk with teachers or to make announcements. It seemed that it was not the architecture of the building but the stance of administration that limited teachers' interactions.

The Lithuanian School Building Reflects the Students' and Teachers' Feeling of Ownership

The four-story building was built in the 1970s on the slope of one of the picturesque hills that surround the downtown area (medieval part) of the city, and within four blocks from the Russian school. All elementary classrooms were situated on the third floor, taking up the whole floor and sharing it only with the principal's and vice principals' offices, the teachers' lounge, the library and the technology center. Because of the school's popularity in the community, the building was overpopulated. According to the next stage of national school reform, the school was going to be divided into the basic school that would incorporate elementary and middle levels, and the high school. The elementary teachers expressed concerns about the possibility of being split. For example, Sigute voiced these worries, emphasizing that elementary teachers comprised a tightly knit team:

> S: We are **worried** about the school's destiny: it is going to be split in two. There are eighty teachers in the schools, and only twelve elementary teachers. **We would like to keep our team**. (…) We are going to have more than enough students. **During the first three days** [of the enrollment], **more students than we can accept have signed up already**. (…) **We are like a separate team—all together.** (1/12/2005)

The City Department decided that in 2007 the school would be physically reorganized into two: the elementary and middle school departments would stay in this building, while the high school would move out. The elementary teachers seemed to be pleased with this decision. They were to stay as one team.

---

[3] This school is a secondary school, which serves students from age 7 up to 18.

The building seemed to be full of life. The entrance hall, the staircases and the hallways were decorated with students' artwork, photos and projects representing different events (e.g., field trips, sports competitions). On the third floor, one wall always hosted different art projects by elementary students. Decorating this wall seemed to encourage interactions between teachers. Sigute, for example, commented about the way they collectively came up with ideas for these exhibits:

> S: These exhibitions, for instance: Now, we have "Trees." **I would not even say whose idea it is**: **one word from one teacher, another from the other one**—and we have it! (05/16/2005)

Everything in the school seemed to say, "It belongs to us." Students, parents and teachers felt at home there. In the interviews, the teachers explicitly talked about school being their home. Daina, for example, explained why she felt at home there:

> D: **The school for me is home**.
> E: The first, the second?
> D: All, because, you know, I am dreaming [here]. I am not rushing out of here, I stay longer. It feels so good here (…) because here there are many things**: what we make with children, and what I brought from home**. **Here, I feel at home.** (05/13/2005)

In addition, the teachers talked about their school with pride and affection. Similar to Daina, Ramute expressed her warm feelings about the school, calling it her "second home." She also hypothesized an important reason for the school's appeal to children, parents and teachers—its authenticity:

> R: **School for me is the second home**. **I feel very well here**. We have our own classroom, and **we create our homes**. (…) **Our school is very stylish. And you can feel that it is not a put on show, but authentic.** (…) The majority of kids come from all over the city. That means that parents bring their children here **for some reason**. Another thing that we differ in is that we try to **make kids feel free here**, that they feel as though they are in a second home. We have a young team. That has an influence. **Our school is good, very good!** (01/27/2005)

To sum up, the building reflected the students' and the teachers' feelings of belonging and ownership, which was visible in the interior decoration and noticeable in the teachers' reports of relations between all the members of the school community. Created by students, teachers and parents (personal communication with parents), the physical environment reflected affection toward the school that the community expressed through creative projects.

In sum, buildings and classrooms were perceived and used differently in each school. The Lithuanian and the Russian schools occupied old school buildings, which accommodated students from the first to the twelfth grades. In both schools, elementary classrooms were situated on one floor, allowing teachers to stop by their colleagues' classrooms and even have a cup of coffee together during recess (the Lithuanian school). On the contrary, in the newly-built wing-shaped American elementary school, classrooms occupied two floors. According to the teachers' comments, such structure created difficulties for communication with colleagues. In addition, a traditional view of classrooms as unique, personal spaces did not seem to encourage colleagues to visit each other informally.

Classroom spaces seemed to play different roles in these three schools. In the American school, teachers decorated their classrooms, expressing their personalities. They enjoyed full administrative support in providing them with necessary equipment and supplies. The teachers talked about their classrooms with pride, as being close to their ideal work spaces. They seemed to place value on creating spaces that reflected their unique identities. In contrast, common spaces in the school (e.g., hallways, offices, the teachers' lounge and reception) seemed to be insignificant for education and learning. This stance reduced teachers' informal learning environments to their own and, possibly, their closest neighbors' classrooms, though some teachers used the whole school environment to interact with colleagues and learn.

For different reasons, the Russian school's classrooms also seemed to be the most important spaces for the teachers—their 'shelters' from direct administrative supervision. The yard and the cafeteria appeared to be the only other places where they could interact, at least briefly, while supervising students during recess. Apparently, the administration was not supportive of teachers' informal interactions and provided neither opportunities nor spaces for informal learning.

On the contrary, the Lithuanian school did not seem to have strict borders between classroom learning spaces and other school areas—all spaces seemed to reflect students' and teachers' creativity and initiative. The teachers seemed to feel free and welcome to visit other classrooms, stop by and talk in the hallways or discuss new ideas in the workroom and the teachers' lounge. The teachers were proud of their classrooms— they represented the realization of their imaginations and resourcefulness in current projects and, as such, were intriguing to colleagues. Thus, some physical environments, for one reason or another seemed to restrict informal learning opportunities while others were more likely to expand learning spaces and encourage informal interactions between teachers.

The School Mission

The different approaches to formulating and publicizing their school missions seemed to send clear messages about these schools' priorities and directions for development. The socially safe business-like approach of the American and Lithuanian schools reflected in their omission of mission statements on their web pages. Instead, the American school reported student academic achievement results as if responding to current NCLB test-driven educational policies. The Lithuanian school "translated" its mission into specific goals, which included both academic and social targets tied to the current needs of the society.

By contrast, the Russian school, by posting its mission on the web and replicating it in the main hallway, and by highlighting Lithuanian State holidays, seemed to argue for its value and valid place in the Lithuanian educational community. National educational policies seemed to put this school in a defensive position. Concern for its steep decline in social status from one of the best schools in the city to an unnecessary institution with an uncertain future was evident in ways the school publicly presented itself.

The three schools' differing approaches to showcasing (or not) their mission statements corresponded to each countries' different histories. The American socio-political condition appears relatively stable when juxtaposed with the upheaval in

Lithuania's political and social landscape and the resulting shift in social stature for the Russian population inside Lithuania.

Traditions

School traditions play a special role in creating informal learning environments: they reflect the ways in which school communities shape and re-shape their shared beliefs and engage in professional learning over time. Communalism, which was cultivated in Lithuania during the fifty years of the Soviet regime, continued to reflect in ways teachers engaged in traditional events. Both the Lithuanian and Russian schools cherished their old traditions (e.g., coffee time, the Teachers' Day celebration in the Lithuanian school and celebration of the state holidays in the Russian school). However, the Russian school seemed to express nostalgic feelings toward its history (on the web site), which went back to its 'golden years' during the Soviet times, when the school was highly regarded by educational authorities. At the same time, forced to fight for survival, the school focused on fulfilling state requirements by creating all-school traditional events (e.g., celebrating the colors of the Lithuanian flag), which provided new contexts for teachers' interactions and learning. Meanwhile, possibly distracted, overworked and over-controlled, the Russian teachers did not seem to rely upon their team traditions (e.g., celebrations of birthdays) as opportunities for informal learning.

The Lithuanian teachers also seemed to display a communal approach in observing school traditions. They did not separate all-school traditions (e.g., end-of-the-school-year celebration) and their team's social customs (e.g., coffee time)—the teachers recognized creative exchanges of ideas as opportunities for playfulness and good humor as they participated both in professional and social events. Even though Russian teachers' all-school traditions were imposed and the Lithuanian schools' were not, the events fostered teachers' creativity and encouraged formal and informal interactions in both.

Conversely, the American school, open only for a few years, was experimenting with different traditions that were mainly targeted at enhancing students' achievements (e.g., the Reading Month). Teachers, fairly new to each other, seemed to separate the social from the professional, probably because they were still in the early stages of developing a professional school culture. As a result, they did not recognize social events as opportunities for their professional growth—they reported avoiding professional conversations during such events. Still, they looked forward to visiting other classrooms to observe what their colleagues were doing (e.g., during *Morning Minglers*). It seems that social traditions provided them with occasions to visit other classrooms in the school, which was rarely possible otherwise.

These different ways teachers related to their schools' traditions (created, initiated, participated, avoided or withdrew) either created informal learning opportunities or discouraged them. In Lithuania, teachers' strong orientation to maintaining and developing school traditions provided teachers with opportunities for interactions with each other. By contrast, American teachers had yet to build a social professional community that moved them beyond individual views of learning opportunities. There is sufficient evidence to posit that preparation for traditional school events created occasions for informal learning in all participating schools. However, such

interactions occurred in different tonal environments—stressful in the Russian school, appreciative and creative in the Lithuanian school, and relaxed and collegial in the American school.

Organizational Arrangements

The schools differed in their organizational arrangements for informal learning. The principal of the American school created additional opportunities for informal interactions by organizing the schedule so that the teachers of the same grade level had common preparation time. The same-grade-level teachers used this opportunity to learn from each other. In addition, the principal supported and encouraged teachers' participation in workshops and conferences. However, the teachers did not report any events in which the principal or a head teacher would lead professional development activities for the colleagues—both positions seemed to include only administrative responsibilities.

On the contrary, in both schools in Lithuania, the vice principals of elementary education and the leaders of the elementary methods committee (the research participants Marija and Ramute) were directly responsible for organizing their teachers' professional development. The Russian school administration enacted top-to-bottom management of teaching quality to prevent the school from a possible closure. Neither the principal nor middle managers provided support for formal professional development or valued informal interactions between teachers.

Different from both the American and the Russian schools, where teachers either had plenty of time scheduled for their interactions (the American school) or needed to use their personal time after school for interactions (the Russian school), the Lithuanian school teachers found time to coordinate their ideas and actions in ways that were satisfying for their professional growth and enjoyable on the personal level. The administration of the Lithuanian school found creative and quick ways for informing teachers about any possibilities for professional development outside the school. In addition, they maintained an atmosphere of trust and appreciation that encouraged and empowered the teachers to develop a tight-knit professional community with high professional standards.

In sum, administrative arrangements in the schools reflected different leadership approaches and, thus, provided different opportunities for teachers' professional growth ranging from close supervision and evaluation (the Russian school), to accommodating teachers' professional needs (the American school), to empowering teachers take responsibility for their work quality and professional growth (the Lithuanian school).

Professional Relationships

Different professional relationships in the schools created or failed to create favorable contexts for teachers' informal learning. The knowledge-creating elements of tinkering, transfer of knowledge, research of practice, and facilitation by middle managers illuminated relationships that were reflected in distinct learning patterns that occurred in the schools (Hargreaves, 1999).

Professional relationships in the American school seemed to be friendly but not yet collegial. Isolation, inherent to the profession (Lortie, 2002), enhanced by architectural and cultural factors, prevented some teachers from sharing their professional experiences and dilemmas. In addition, tinkering, research of practice and facilitation by middle managers seemed to be overshadowed by one single element—simple transfer or borrowing of knowledge (Hargreaves, 1999). Nevertheless, some teachers in this school engaged in co-tinkering while co-planning and observing their grade-level colleagues' practices—picking up and transferring newly developed understandings into their practice. However, that practice did not occur on a regular basis; teachers' reports seemed to imply that not all the teachers in the building used these opportunities for learning. Limitations in learning opportunities were also reflected in a single grade-level teachers' participation in curriculum development and piloting. Though the principal provided teachers with support and opportunities for informal learning, they seemed to use these opportunities in different ways: some teachers extended their learning beyond the borders of the school; others took advantage of the school's organizational arrangements and initiated collaborative learning between teachers of different grades; and others confined their learning to collaboration only with their grade level teachers.

In the Russian school, a different pattern emerged. Professional relationships seemed to be influenced by stresses from the outside (possibility of losing the job) and inside (pressure from the administration and parents). In order to provide jobs for all the teachers, the administration reduced their teaching loads and, thus, salaries. Nevertheless, the teachers engaged in individual tinkering. However, due to the limited opportunities for interactions, they rarely engaged in knowledge transfer. In addition, they did not participate in research of their practice. A formal internal audit process at the time of the study focused on evaluation of teacher performance; it did not include teachers in the process by providing them with tools and time for reflection and experimentation with their practice. Though fiscal conditions, national educational policies and administrative style in this school did not seem to favor informal learning, the teachers appeared highly motivated to use any opportunities for growing professionally, thereby surviving in the profession to which they passionately adhered.

The Lithuanian teachers seemed to engage in all four steps of knowledge-creating schools. Reflecting on their professional relationships, teachers in the Lithuanian schools defined their close relationships to the profession, as did their Russian counterparts. However, in comparison to the teachers from the Russian school, who talked about their fanaticism, these teachers defined their devotion to the profession differently—as coming from their nation's traditions of caring. These teachers practiced tinkering by playing and experimenting with new ideas individually; they engaged in knowledge transfer through observations in their colleagues' classrooms and participation in formal professional development events, following up by exchanging ideas. They engaged in research of their practice through hosting student-teachers, who fostered their reflections and collaborated with the University faculty; their middle managers encouraged teachers' professional growth by providing information about workshops, courses and projects, by organizing school-based professional development to meet immediate teachers' needs and by providing opportunities for informal learning.

In sum, the school cultures created different opportunities for the teachers' informal learning. In addition, the teachers as agents of learning used these opportunities

differently. In the US school, the participating teachers being new to the building were actively looking for ways of constructing relationships with each other. For example, they organized Morning Minglers, breakfasts on Fridays each time hosted by a different teacher. The teachers in this school took advantage of the organizational arrangements that the principal provided. The principal played a leading role to offer multiple opportunities for teachers' informal learning by, for example, scheduling common planning and preparation hours for the same grade level teachers and encouraging and supporting professional interactions with colleagues from other schools and universities. However, the teachers seemed to use these opportunities in different ways: some teachers extended their learning opportunities beyond the boarders of the school; others took advantage of the school's organizational arrangements and initiated collaborative learning between teachers of different grades; and others confined their professional learning to collaboration only with their grade level teachers.

The school culture in the Russian school in Lithuania seemed to be influenced by stresses from the outside (possibility of losing the job) and inside (pressure from the administration and parents). There was almost no place and time for teachers' informal interactions. It seemed that it was not the building but the stance of administration that limited teachers' interactions. Though the situation in this school did not seem favorable for teachers' informal learning, the teachers seemed to be highly motivated to use any opportunities for their professional growth such as, for example, chat in the cafeteria while supervising their students' lunch.

The Lithuanian school culture, created during the recent exuberance of Lithuanian independence, aspired toward high professional standards and provided ample opportunities for learning and professional growth as well as collegial support. The culture displayed organizational features characteristic of a family model. Teachers were expected to develop and help their colleagues develop through collaboration with each other. These collaborative contexts empowered teachers to make decisions, including what, when and how they learned. This highly professional but exclusive culture was intolerant of professionals who did not display dedication and motivation for improvement, accepting only teachers with highly dedicated and creative approaches to learning.

Teachers in the Lithuanian school, with its established institutional history and accompanying reputation, were encouraged by the socio-political conditions of independence to affirm their current ways of learning collaboratively and to strive to increase that learning. Conversely, the same national socio-political conditions led teachers in the Russian school, with an even longer history and better reputation, to switch their focus from learning to surviving. In the American socio-political culture, including the *No Child Left Behind* initiative and accompanying suspicion of teachers' competence, teachers focused on satisfying requirements rather than building a collaborative culture for their personal and shared professional growth. These three cultures illustrate complex relationships between broader social environments, organizational development and teachers' efforts to grow professionally within complicated contexts.

To conclude, these three schools reflected essential differences in the ways teachers related to and formed their school cultures. These differences were tied to the ways in which their school cultures created opportunities for their informal learning,

which in turn appeared to be closely related to the historical and social contexts in the countries. These three cultures illustrate complex relationships between broader social environments, organizational development and teachers' efforts to grow professionally within complicated contexts.

Discussion

To discuss what this socio-cultural approach reveals about informal learning and how this methodology helps to realize certain aspects of informal learning, I first summarize main findings that this methodology made visible. Further on, I focus on dilemmas and issues that this methodology produced.

In this research, I have compared three contrasting school cultures (Lithuanian, Russian in Lithuania, and suburban American) in two countries—Lithuania and the United States—to describe how their educational systems perceived and provided opportunities for workplace informal teacher learning. I also compared how teachers in these cultures used these opportunities for their professional growth. In the larger study[4], I did so by focusing on three levels of the educational system: individual, institutional and national. Such cultural model demonstrated that as sub-cultures, each level embodied its own characteristics within a complex cultural web of interrelationship. Each level provided a unique view of the larger culture and its relationship with teacher informal learning. Each level also provided a different angle for the analysis of informal learning, contributing specific features and shaping a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon.

A socio-cultural approach revealed that informal learning appeared to be culturally-bounded and contextually-specific. By comparatively analyzing Lithuanian and the United States' teachers' discourse within teachers' and participant-observer's reconstructed environments, the study argued that such elements of school culture as school mission, buildings' structure and atmosphere, classrooms' environments, organizational arrangements, traditions, and professional relationships defined informal learning contexts. The contexts described in terms of these categories reflected different opportunities for and ways of engaging in informal learning in the studied schools. Generated categories that represented facets of school culture enabled comparative analysis, which illuminated differences in ways teachers related to workplace informal learning opportunities and engaged in professional learning. Discourse analysis enabled to make teacher learning visible.

In this article, I provided an ethnographic description of the three schools. However, I posit that school cultures continuously change by participants' engagement in reexamining and adjusting their beliefs, knowledge and behaviors in response to social processes. Therefore, I describe school cultures using Anderson-Levitt's (2002) perspective on culture as an interactive web of meanings, which includes tacit and explicit knowledge, values and attitudes, propositions and theories, knowledge-in-practice and embodied knowledge. School cultures become visible through the webs of meanings that are explicit in utterances or implicit in conversational moves. These meanings interweave in different ways and to different degrees in different schools. To

---

[4] This article reports the findings mainly on the institutional level of analysis.

capture and define how the cultures of the three schools create, reinforce, and reflect teachers' professional learning, I described schools within their social contexts.

Though this method makes relationships between teachers as agents of learning and school cultures as learning contexts visible, it does not allow for any generalizations because it focuses upon cultural and contextual specificity of informal workplace learning. It highlights uniqueness of learning opportunities and distinctiveness of a learner's agency rather than major commonalities and tendencies.

Another issue that this approach poses is identification of meanings assigned to the concept of learning by participants and the researcher as a participant-observer. In other words, who meant what by learning? Though learning experiences and processes described in the study represent emic perspective, the teachers in the final interviews indicated that only in the process of our interaction they came to realize how much they were learning every day in their workplace. Their comments suggested that at the beginning of the study their understanding of learning did not include experiences that I defined as informal workplace learning. Having started with differing understandings, the teachers and I moved toward similar understanding of informal learning by the end of the study.

By focusing on the facets of school culture that creates contexts for teacher informal learning as a method of career-long professional development, this study suggests that teachers and teacher educators could enhance their professional learning by contributing to building and sustaining the opportunities necessary to maintain such development at teachers' work places. Through understanding how culture is built from many interrelated elements, participants could construct a community that would support workplace learning by providing stimulating social contexts for teachers' professional change. Re-evaluation of professional development systems is necessary to include informal learning as an important path for professional growth necessary for continual and consistent implementation of educational reforms and to better respond to the needs of ever changing society.

References

Anderson-Levitt, K. M. (2002), Teaching cultures: knowledge for teaching first grade in France and the United States, Hampton Press, Inc., Cresskill, NJ.

Jurasaite-Harbison, (2008). Learning in and from practice: Opportunities and implications for teachers' informal learning in Lithuania and the United States, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex, L. A. (2005), "Taking on a researcher's identity: Teacher learning in and through research participation", Linguistics and Education, Vol.16, pp. 425-454.

Becher, N. (1999), Professional practices: Commitment and capability in a changing environment, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ.

Billett, S. (2002), "Critiquing workplace learning discourses: Participation and continuity at work", Studies in the Education of Adults, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 56-67.

Bourdieu, P. and Passerson, J.-C. (1990), Reproduction in education, society and culture, 2nd ed., Sage, London.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1992), An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Bradley, H., Conner, C. and Southworth, J. (1994), Developing teachers, developing schools, David Press, London.

Brown, J. S., Collins, A. and Duguid, P. (1989), "Situated cognition and the culture of learning", Educational Researcher, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 32-42.

Day, C. (1993), "Reflection: A necessary but not sufficient condition for professional development", British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 83-93.

Eisner, E. (2000), "Those who ignore the past ..." Journal of Curriculum Studies, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 343-357.

Engstrom, Y. (1991), Learning, working and imagining: Twelve studies in activity theory, Orienta-Konsutit Oy, Helsinki.

Erickson, F. (1987), "Conceptions of school culture: An overview", Educational Administration Quarterly, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp. 11-24.

Eraut, M. (2000), "Non-formal learning and tacit knowledge in professional work", British Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 70, pp. 113-136.

Firestone, W. A. and Louis, K. S. (1999), "Schools as cultures", in J. Murphy and K. S. Louis (Eds.), Handbook of research on educational administration, 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 297-322.

Goldenberg, C. and Gallimore, R. (1991), "Changing teaching takes more than a one-shot workshop", Educational Leadership, Vol. 49 No. 3, pp. 69-72.

Green, J. and Dixon, C. (1993), "Introduction to "Talking knowledge into being: Discursive and social practices in classrooms", Linguistics and Education, Vol. 5, pp. 231-239.

Hallinger, P. and Leithwood, K. (1998), "Unseen forces: The impact of social culture on school leadership", Peabody Journal of Education, Vol. 73 No. 2, pp. 126-151.

Hargreaves, D. H. (1999), "The knowledge-creating school", British Journal of Educational Studies, Vol. 47 No. 2, pp. 122-144.

Helsby, G. and Knight, P. (1997), "Continuing professional development and the National Curriculum", in G. Helsby and G. McCulloch (Eds.), Teachers and the National Curriculum, Cassell, London, pp. 127-141.

Hodkinson, P., Biesta, G. and James, D. (2004), "Towards a cultural theory of college-based learning", paper, The Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, Manchester.

Hodkinson, P. and Bloomer, M. (2000), "Stokingham Six Form College: Institutional culture and dispositions to learning", British Journal of Sociology of Education, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp. 187-202.

Hymes, D. H. (1972), "Models of the interaction of language and social life", in J. J. Gumperz and D. H. Hymes (Eds.), Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, pp. 35-71.

Knight, P. T. (2002a), "Learning from schools", Higher Education, Vol. 44, pp. 283-298.

Knight, P. T. (2002b), "A systematic approach to professional development: learning as practice", Teaching and Teacher Education, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 229-241.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991), Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Law, S. (1999), "Leadership for learning; the changing culture of professional development in schools", Journal of Educational Administration, Vol. 37 No. 1, pp. 66-76.

Leont'ev, A. N. (1981/1974), "The Problem of Activity in Psychology", in J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology, M.E. Sharpe Armonk, NY.

Lieberman, A. (1996), "Practices that support teacher development: Transforming conceptions of professional learning", in M. W. McLaughlin and I. Oberman (Eds.), Teacher learning: New policies, new practices, Teacher College Press, New York, pp. 185-201.

Lortie, D. C. (2002/1975), Schoolteacher: a sociological study, 2nd ed., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

MacGilchrist, B., Mortimore, P., Stedman, J. and Beresford, C. R. (1995), Planning matters : the impact of development planning in primary schools, P. Chapman Pub., London.

Prosser, J. (1999), School culture, Paul Chapman, London.

Rex, L. A. (Ed.). (2006), Discourse of opportunity, Hampton Press, Inc.Cresskill, NJ.

Richardson, V. (2003), "The Dilemmas of professional development", Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 85 No. 5, pp. 401-411.

Tuyay, S., Jennings, L., & Dixon, C. (1995), "Classroom discourse and opportunities to learn: An ethnographic study of knowledge construction in a bilingual third grade classroom", Discourse Processes, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 75-110.

Yinger, R. and Hendricks-Lee, M. (1993), "Working knowledge in teaching", in C. Day, J. Calderhead and P. Denicolo (Eds.), Research on teacher thinking: Understanding professional development, Falmer Press, London, pp. 100-123.