

The value of informal workplace learning for police education teachers' professional development

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Received 8 April 2021
Revised 2 December 2021
Accepted 20 March 2022

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to explore Swedish police education teachers' informal workplace learning and its perceived value for their professional development. Two categories of teachers, police teachers and university teachers, with different professional knowledge and experience, work together at the police education unit.

Design/methodology/approach – The method used was in-depth interviews with teachers working at a Swedish police education unit.

Findings – Informal workplace learning was perceived by both teacher groups to be of great value for gaining knowledge about the local practice and for their professional development. Their learning emerged in discussions, observations and practically oriented activities in their daily work. Four conclusions: firstly, the teachers' informal workplace learning was socially and practice-oriented and learning emerged in a collaborative, reciprocal and active process. Secondly, the embodied nature of the learning is evident in the teachers' joint activities in the teaching practice. Thirdly, it takes time and active involvement in the local practice to become a professional teacher in this kind of education. Fourthly, an educational structure where academic knowledge and experience can be integrated with police knowledge and experience constitutes an important basis for teachers' professional development in police education and training.

Originality/value – The study's focus on police education and the professional development of teachers in this specific practice contributes to increased knowledge of the social, practice-oriented and embodied nature of informal workplace learning.

Keywords Informal workplace learning, Teacher professional development, Police education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article deals with police teachers (PTs) in Sweden and their professional development through informal workplace learning, i.e. the kind of learning that emerges in the teachers' daily activities at work (Bednall *et al.*, 2014). The study is inspired by a practice theoretical framework where learning is considered to be located in ongoing interactions between individuals and the social practices they encounter (Billett, 2011). This implies that learning is emerging in practice rather than being acquired (Boud and Rooney, 2018).



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The literature shows that informal workplace learning has been extensively studied in several professional practices (Billett, 2004; Jeong *et al.*, 2018; Manuti *et al.*, 2015), but also that studies from additional professional practices are needed to broaden the knowledge of this research field (Grant Wofford *et al.*, 2013). In previous research, informal learning at work has been attributed to great importance for professional development and learning of professional skills. (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016). However, it seems that this research has mainly been focused on selected aspects, such as conditions for informal learning and/or informal learning activities (Jeong *et al.*, 2018) and, to a lesser extent, on learning outcomes. A likely reason why there is a lack of studies on the latter aspect is that this kind of learning is complex and difficult to measure (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016). Given these identified gaps in the previous research, this study, with its focus on a type of workplace that, according to our literature review, has not been previously researched, and its aim to study the elusive phenomenon of learning outcomes through analysis of teachers' perceptions of the value of informal learning, should be seen as an attempt to contribute to the research on informal workplace learning.

Police education in Sweden consists of a two-and-a-half-year commissioned programme provided by five different universities. In the studied police education unit, the set-up of which is similar to that of other Swedish university units that provide basic police training, the teaching is carried out by UTs and PTs. UTs teach theoretical subjects such as law and social and behavioural sciences, but they usually lack knowledge of police practice. The PTs teach courses in crime investigation and practical police subjects, such as car driving, weapons use and tactical training, communication skills and conflict management. There are also integrated teaching teams made up of both categories of teachers at the unit. PTs are usually recruited from local police authorities and used on fixed-term contracts. They can be described as coming from a police instructor tradition, and they usually lack formal pedagogical education and teaching experience. However, when they are used at the unit, they are required to attend an internal teacher training course focused on the didactic and pedagogical aspects of teaching in higher education. Police officers and UTs are both referred to as "teachers" in this unit to emphasise the joint teaching responsibility of all teachers. Overall, the studied police education unit can be seen as a melting pot where the two teacher categories contribute different experiences, knowledge and skills.

The findings of the study derive from in-depth interviews of teachers working at the police education unit. The open and exploratory interview questions focused on the teachers' daily activities at work and how their engagement in these activities was perceived to have contributed to their professional development as teachers.

Against this brief background and the identified gaps in previous research, the overarching aim of this study is to explore the teacher's informal workplace learning and its perceived value for their professional development.

Police education as an arena for professionalisation

Like many other professions, the police profession has come to involve ever more varied and complex tasks in recent years, and as a result, the demands for professionalisation have increased in both police organisations (Filstad *et al.*, 2020) and police education and training (Bergman and Karp, 2020). A succession of education reforms has been implemented, and in many countries, police education has been integrated into university systems as units or departments with the aim of promoting increased professionalisation of police organisations (Bjorgo and Damen, 2020). This development is based on the assumption that police officers working in a rapidly changing and complex society need to supplement their police professional skills and that higher education focusing on theoretical knowledge can

contribute to the development of a reflective and critical approach (Bringsrud Fekjaer *et al.*, 2014).

Given the increasing demands for professionalisation in police education, PTs' assignments and professional approaches have been increasingly discussed in recent years (Basham, 2014; Shipton, 2019). For example, it has been held that PTs' lack of teacher training is a problem and that the instructor role, with its roots in behavioural and militaristic training models, continues to make its mark on police education and training. PTs' professional development through increased integration of theory and practice is therefore highlighted as being necessary to develop police education towards a more understanding and communication-oriented and student-centred pedagogical teaching practice (Paterson, 2011).

Informal workplace learning

Changes in working life are accelerating in step with the development of digital technologies, an ever-greater production of knowledge, increasing internationalisation, globalisation and competition, as well as changes in the organisation of work. To deal with these changes, educational institutions need to create conditions for development and ensure that continuous learning takes place at the individual, group and organisational levels. Given these increased demands in working life, interest in workplace learning has increased, and it now constitutes an extensive research field that includes studies on individual learning, group learning and organisational learning (Lecat *et al.*, 2018; Tynjälä, 2008).

Many definitions and descriptions of the concept of workplace learning can be found in the literature, which, to varying degrees, emphasise its informal and formal dimensions and its unintentional and intentional nature. Examples of definitions are “the multiple ways through which employees learn in organizations” (Jacobs and Park, 2009, p. 134):

Relations and dynamics among individual actors and collectives [...] interconnections of humans and their actions with rules, tools and texts, cultural, and material environments [...] embedded in everyday practices, action and conversations (Fenwick, 2008, p. 19)

And learning “at work by participating in various working practices, collaborating with colleagues and clients and meeting new challenges” (Tynjälä, 2008, p. 150). Informal workplace learning is described as initiated by the learners themselves, alone or together with others, to learn some aspect of the professional practice (Jeong *et al.*, 2018).

To define informal learning, it is useful to contrast it to formal learning, which is defined as being undertaken intentionally to develop specific knowledge and competences (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016; Eraut, 2004). Formal learning is often described as structured, planned, goal-oriented and instructor-led (Marsick and Watkins, 2001) and can be exemplified by formal educational initiatives enabling career development or increasing employees' knowledge and skills in relation to changes in work tasks, competence requirements and working methods (Billett, 2011, 2004). Not least, these educational efforts seem to increase when work processes and methods are digitalised (Tynjälä, 2013).

In comparison to formal learning at work, informal workplace learning is considered to be more holistically oriented and connected to knowledge, skills and attitudes used at work (Eraut, 2004). Boud *et al.* (2009, p. 333) state that “it is important to distinguish between formal interventions that are part of an implemented staff development strategy and everyday learning that goes on in the workplace”. It is also argued that neither informal nor formal learning should be seen as subordinate to the other but rather regarded as important and cooperating parts along a continuum of learning that takes place in working life (Boud

et al., 2009). However, the literature generally concludes that most workplace learning takes place through informal activities (Manuti *et al.*, 2015; Eraut, 2004).

Further, Boud and Hager (2012) and Boud and Rooney (2018) argue for the importance of abandoning the acquisition and transfer metaphors for learning as these point to a pre-specified and standardised content to be learnt, often associated with formal education systems. Instead, informal learning should be seen as a part of the day-to-day work occurring when challenges arise, and colleagues or experts try to solve the problem at hand. One way to avoid the transfer and acquisition metaphors is to focus attention on informal workplace learning in daily work by directing the research lens to how things are done collectively in a local practice (Boud and Rooney, 2018). To understand such a practice, it is necessary to study how activities are arranged by analysing the material “set-up”, what people do, i.e. their “doings”, how they talk to each other, i.e. their “sayings” and how they influence each other through these sayings and doings (Ahn and Nyström, 2020). Thus, in practice, motives are created for how things are done there, through both stated and informal “rules” (Hopwood, 2016). Seen from such a perspective, informal workplace learning involves a need for participants to develop a “practical understanding” of their local practice.

Teacher professional development through informal workplace learning

In the literature, professional development is described as something that happens within a person and which is always connected to the learning of a specific practice. It emerges when working with others and with material objects in practical and situated activities such as problem-solving (Johnsson and Boud, 2010). Learning is thus an embodied and social activity that includes communication with others (sayings and doings) and which develops an understanding of the local practice, i.e. how things are done in the workplace and how the practice is arranged. In this view, practice is not simply a background or static context for actions but rather a site (place) where learning, knowing and actions emerge in mutual interactions with other people and material objects (Ahn and Nyström, 2020; Hopwood, 2016). Thus, being a professional at work implies that one needs to know both the specific subject matter and how things are done and arranged at the workplace.

Teachers’ professional development through informal workplace learning is defined in several ways in the literature. For example, Hoekstra *et al.* (2009) describe it as “Learning in the workplace where systematic support of learning, such as professional development trajectories, is absent” (p. 663) and Richter *et al.* (2011) as learning which does not follow a specified curriculum and is not restricted to certain environments (p. 117).

Studies on teachers’ professional development seem to focus largely on teachers’ involvement in individual and collective learning activities, such as practicing and testing and interacting and discussing with others (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016). Another example of collective learning activities is teachers’ observations of colleagues, which are reported to give teachers new teaching ideas. These results are similar to those published in Gerken *et al.* (2016) studies on higher education, where it is shown that social informal learning activities such as participation in networks, collaborations and dialogues constitute an important basis for staff professionalisation.

As mentioned earlier, identifying teachers’ informal learning is a challenging task due to its unconscious and invisible nature. However, several studies focus on teachers’ professional development through informal learning in terms of learning outcomes, which, according to Kyndt *et al.* (2016), can be divided into the main categories *subject knowledge*, *pedagogical knowledge and skills* and *professional attitudes and identity*. It is shown that teachers, through participation in collective informal learning activities, develop their

pedagogical knowledge and skills, for example, their teaching methods (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2009), their pedagogical teaching skills (Kang and Cheng, 2014) and their instrumental and administrative skills (Van Eekelen *et al.*, 2006). Other studies have shown that teachers' informal learning affects their professional attitudes and identity, resulting, for example, in increased self-confidence (Verberg *et al.*, 2013), better awareness of their own and their students' behaviour (Hoekstra and Korthagen, 2011), new perspectives on the educational goals and the PT's role in teaching (Bergman *et al.*, 2018) and a deeper understanding of unwritten rules and power relations at work (Christensen, 2013).

Methods and materials

The qualitative approach of this study was chosen with a view to obtaining in-depth knowledge of the teachers' workplace learning at the unit and, consequently, the teachers' comprehensive descriptions of their informal workplace learning and their perceptions of its value for their professional development were very significant for finding answers to the study's research questions.

The materials used

To capture the teachers' descriptions and perceptions, in-depth interviews were conducted with the teachers at their workplaces. The interviews were part of a larger data collection, which also included logbooks. This study is part of a larger project, where a previous focus was on the conditions for the teachers' informal workplace learning and the informal learning activities that emerged (Sjöberg and Holmgren, 2021). Thus, the interview material on which this article is based should be seen as a part of the teachers' overall narratives dealing with the conditions for their involvement in informal learning activities, the motives (triggers) behind their engagement, and their interaction with human and material resources at work.

Participants

The interviewees were teachers working at the studied police education unit. Two criteria were chosen for the selection of interview participants:

- (1) An adequate level of teaching experience; the respondents should have at least one semester of teaching experience and at least 30% of their teaching had to be located in the police education unit.
- (2) A distribution of teachers regarding age, gender and teacher category that was as close as possible to the actual distribution at the unit.

The teaching staff at the unit comprised some 60 teachers, 40 of whom were PTs and 20 UTs. Forty-five teachers met the first criterion, and the age, gender, teacher category and teaching experience distribution. Twenty-three teachers accepted to participate in the study, of whom 14 were PTs and nine UTs (13 men and 10 women). This distribution was deemed to be satisfactory, as it mirrored the actual distribution of teachers at the police education unit. Their ages ranged between 31 and 62 years, with the majority being between 36 and 50 years old, and their teaching experience varied from 1 to 18 semesters. Five were quite new teachers, five were experienced teachers and the remaining thirteen had been teaching at the unit for a couple of years. As a group, the UTs were more experienced than the PT, and most of them were used on fixed-term contracts lasting a few years.

The methods used

To answer the research questions as thoroughly and in as nuanced a way as possible, interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data collection method, as these would provide the respondents with ample opportunity to reflect on their learning at work. The interview questions were open-ended, which meant that the teachers were given plenty of room to reflect on them and share their narratives without being interrupted by a lot of follow-up questions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). In the interviews, the teachers were asked to reflect on their own learning in their daily activities, what they did to learn more as teachers and the value of their learning in the workplace for their development as teachers. The interviews, which lasted between 55 and 90 min, were conducted at the police education unit and were recorded with a sound recorder.

However, this interview method also has limitations that must be considered. Despite having been given extensive and clear information about the study, respondents may have had different understandings of the concept of informal workplace learning, which may have affected their answers. Similarly, they may have made different assessments of when and how learning occurred and the value of this learning for their professional development.

How we worked with the material

After transcribing and overall reading the interviews, the analytical work began. The transcribed interviews were coded and categorised in several steps. Initially, each statement was marked with a provisional code and linked to an emerging category. One example of such a code was “understanding the police work”. In a second step, a more aggregated analysis revealed a number of codes with similar contents, which meant that several of them could be merged. One example of this was the merging of the codes “Understanding of the police practice” and “Structure of the university” into the category “Sharing of professional practice experiences”. The analysis continued until saturation had been achieved, i.e. until no new categories could be identified (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Finally, a theoretically informed analysis was applied to deepen the understanding of informal learning in the local work practice. With a view to enriching the analysis, the social aspects and arrangements of the local practice and the embodied nature of the learning were included. More precisely, this meant analysing how things were done at the workplace by using a set of concepts that included practical arrangements, or “set-ups”, stated and unspoken “rules” of the local practice, the “sayings” and “doings” of the teachers’ and the teachers’ overall practical understanding of the practice (Ahn and Nyström, 2020; Hopwood, 2016). By using these concepts, our analysis of the teachers’ work practice at the unit could be further deepened.

Findings

Two themes were identified in the analysis of the interviews. Firstly, the teachers’ involvement in informal learning activities at work and, secondly, their perceptions of the value of their informal learning at work for their professional development as teachers.

Teachers’ involvement in informal learning activities at work

Three categories were identified in the teachers’ descriptions of their involvement in informal learning activities at work: *Sharing of professional practice experiences*, *Observing, discussing and sharing pedagogical examples* and *Testing of methods*.

Sharing of professional practice experiences

At the group level, the two teacher categories seem to be heavily involved in experience exchanges that can contribute to their development as teachers. The driving force behind their commitment seems to be a desire to broaden and deepen their teaching knowledge and skills through the integration of police and academic knowledge. The different experiences of the two professional groups thus become an important asset where the UTs, in addition to their specific subject knowledge, have teaching experience and knowledge of the university organisation, and the PTs have experience and in-depth knowledge of police work. The interviews reveal that the sharing of knowledge and experience in everyday interactions is perceived as valuable by both categories of teachers. They describe how they gradually become more professional teachers as their ability to improve the teaching content, their teaching approach and their administrative skills increase through informal face-to-face and email conversations and through participation in joint teaching activities. A UT states that:

[. . .] through their (police teachers') experience of police work, I learn things I didn't know before. So, it's really useful to get an insight into how they think. What is relevant and what is irrelevant, and so on (UT1).

This quote, which illustrates the need felt by the UTs to place their subject within the police practice, shows the value of cross-practice exchanges for their professional development.

Another aspect within this category is the teachers' need to be familiar with the structure and arrangement of police education. For example, their need for a practical understanding of how the learning outcomes of courses must align to specific goals and course contents was a recurring topic in the teaching teams, often initiated by less experienced teachers. Many of the respondents describe how informal collegial conversations about university practice have greatly contributed to their professional development regarding administrative knowledge and skills.

Observing, discussing teaching and sharing pedagogical experiences

The second category shows that in socially oriented activities such as observations of colleagues in joint teaching, discussions about teaching during breaks at work and the sharing of pedagogical experiences at informal meetings, the teachers informally learn how to be a professional teachers at the police education unit. Observing each other's teaching, followed by joint reflections, gives them examples of different approaches and methods, which seems to give rise to increased self-reflection on their own approaches and how they can develop as teachers. For example, most of the PT claim that they, through conversations and support from the UTs have learnt to focus more on the course goals and aims and adapt their teaching to the student group instead of controlling the teaching structure in detail. A PT described his learning in terms of a better understanding that "[. . .] it is each teacher's responsibility to ensure that the students reach the learning goals by adapting his or her teaching methods" (PT6). Similarly, the UTs see their sharing of pedagogical experiences as being very important for their professional development, as this process provides them with tips on methods and teaching approaches that have been tried and evaluated by their colleagues. Finally, the vast majority of teachers state that socially oriented informal learning activities are very common in their day-to-day work, contributing to continuous and joint reflection, learning and increased scope for them to develop as professional teachers. The following quote is from a PT:

[. . .] we talk after the lesson and then you realise that the lesson worked really well as a result of some changes we had made to the original lesson plan (PT5).

This quote exemplifies an informal learning process where the teachers' "sayings and doings" contribute to a practical understanding of the local practice, which can then be applied in professional teaching assessments and development proposals.

Testing of teaching methods

The third category can be considered to be an extension of the learning activity "Sharing pedagogical experiences" and refers to the teachers trying out suggested teaching methods in their own classes. The teachers incorporate the new methods into their teaching and then assess how they work in their own teaching. The circle is then closed by the teachers sharing their experiences with other colleagues. One such example is described in detail by a UT (UT3), who tried a new way of conducting a literature seminar:

She said (respondent is referring to the teacher who came up with the idea): I have an idea; shall we try this? In this method, you split the seminar group in two, a variant of the 'fishbowl method'. Then one group discusses the topic and the other one listens and writes feedback comments on the discussion. When they have discussed a question and received the feedback, it's the next group's turn.

This quote is a concrete example of the importance of informal workplace learning for teachers' professional development and how it is made visible through active measures that can improve teaching. In this case, it is about how teachers' sharing of experiences via their own trials, evaluations and adjustments can lead to the development of their teaching.

Overall, the analysis shows that there seems to be a constant desire among the teachers in the study to develop as teachers and to improve their teaching and that these development processes are largely linked to the informal learning activities taking place at the police education unit. The following quote from a UT (UT4) confirms this conclusion and summarises the vast majority of the PTs' and UTs' descriptions of the value of informal workplace learning: "I would say that, through informal learning, my whole view of my role as a teacher has changed". It is clear that as a result of these ongoing processes, the teaching is gradually changing direction from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach as the teachers develop an integrated and practical understanding of the police practice and the university practice.

Value of informal learning activities for professional development

The second theme is about the teachers' perceptions of their involvement in informal learning activities and their value for their professional development. The following three categories emerged in the analysis of the interview material: *learning of the local practice rules, deeper understanding of teaching and students' learning and personal development*.

Learning of the local practice rules

More than half of the teachers describe their involvement in informal learning activities as important for their learning of informal and formal rules and requirements at work. These rules and requirements concern, for example, the documentation of courses, lesson contents and teaching, but also a number of more elusive issues related to the local practice. One example related to formal rules was the requirement that lesson plans should be documented and archived, a requirement that everyone seemed to believe all teaching teams abided by. However, in ongoing conversations with other colleagues, a PT (PT12) realised that this requirement was not observed in his teaching team. The PT believed that this could be due to the instructor tradition in the police profession, where personal knowledge of the police practice was seen as enough to ensure that the "right" content and "right" methods

were used in the teaching. However, the finding that teachers may rely to a great extent on their closest colleagues as sources of information also points to the possible disadvantages of informal learning being the main component in teacher development.

Many informal and unspoken issues also emerged in teachers' narratives. One such example was the importance of correct and updated teaching content in relation to police practice. The methods and tools used in the police education practice need to correspond to those used in the police practice and adapt to any changes taking place there. This was not a stated rule in the workplace, but being updated on the subject through continuous contact with the police authority was perceived as personal responsibility and an important part of their professional development as teachers:

And it is so very important to actually keep up to date on what is happening in the police authority. Because the legislation and instructions (related to the subject – author comment) change so much and we are, for example, now allowed to do new things that we did not get to just a few years ago (PT1).

Deeper understanding of teaching and students' learning

Our findings show that increased pedagogical knowledge and skills are highly valued by the teachers and seen as a significant part of their professional development, especially among the PTs. By developing their knowledge and skills of teaching methods and tools, they gradually expand their teaching repertoire. For example, a PT (PT10) described his increased pedagogical knowledge in the following way: “[...] with more educational tools, my knowledge of how I can vary my teaching increases, which in turn increases my opportunities to achieve the programme goals and objectives”. Most of the teachers also described the value of gradually developing their understanding of the students' learning and how this knowledge could be used to improve their teaching arrangements. Examples of their expanded knowledge were new ways of establishing good relations between teacher and students, developing a positive learning climate and creating better conditions for students to be more active in their own learning. For example, a PT described how she, as a result of informal conversations with colleagues, increasingly used students as resources in her teaching and how this gave them more opportunities to influence the lesson arrangements. One realises more and more that there are a hundred different solutions to a particular (police) situation. My way of dealing with it is not the only right one. Now I have encouraged my students to be more involved in the teaching by offering and discussing different suggestions and giving feedback to each other. I have used this approach more and more in my teaching (PT9). Another example was knowledge of ways to support the students to develop an independent and critical understanding of police work, such as being aware of the difference between professional experience and prejudices and stereotypes and the extent to which police work is evidence-based. One quote that exemplifies the learning-centred questions that many teachers were gradually able to formulate was:

RQ1. So, how do we teach them in the best possible way and support their learning? Is this a good teaching approach?

There are many ways to teach, but how do we reach all students? (PT 5). As a result of the teachers' professional development, they also discussed their teaching in terms of new teaching approaches, using concepts such as “flipped classroom” and changed lesson arrangements with fewer traditional and teacher-centred lectures and more interactive teaching. In addition, as police education involves a lot of exercises and scenario training, many teachers also described how their increased understanding of teaching and learning contributed to new ways of organising exercises, where learning, rather than assessment, was the primary focus.

Personal development

In this final category, it is shown that the teachers, through their engagement in informal learning activities, develop self-confidence in the classroom, on the training grounds and in the administrative duties related to teaching. This personal development is exemplified by a PT in the following manner:

I have learnt a lot in this informal way in my first year as a teacher. When I began to teach, the courses were new to me, but I got a lot of support from my teacher colleagues, especially from one specific experienced teacher. It meant so much to my self-confidence at work (PT8).

This quote exemplifies a common perception among most teachers that, with the support of their colleagues, they will gradually develop a sense of self-confidence and a professional approach to their teaching work, which means that they can reflect on personal development opportunities and the development of their teaching role. The personal development over time as teachers was also emerging in the narratives. One PT describes his transformation process from instructor to teacher like this:

[...] so I now understand that I was an inadequate teacher when I first started working here. I told my students: "This is what you should do", really with a focus on myself. If they were unable to cope with a task, it was my fault, and I would instruct them exactly how to do it. But I have now realised, based on what my colleagues have taught me, that there are other ways that are better and more effective. I have changed completely; when I started working here, I was an instructor, but I have gradually become a teacher, with a greater focus on the students and whether they really learn or not (PT11).

It also emerges from the interviews that the teachers' involvement in informal learning activities contributes to their feeling updated regarding their subject and the arrangement of the education practice. In the interviews, many respondents pointed out the value of informal dialogues with colleagues and how they made them feel more secure at work, knowing what tasks to do and how to do them. As one teacher put it: "[...] getting other people's views on different work-related matters increases one's understanding of how one can develop oneself or improve the teaching content" (PT4). This quote shows the value of the collaborative aspect of working together in the police education unit. Taken together, the teacher's descriptions of their personal development as becoming increasingly confident, updated and secure in their work show that the embodied aspect of learning is an important part of their professional development.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to increase the understanding of police education teachers' informal workplace learning and its perceived value for their professional development. The contribution of the study can thus be regarded as an attempt to supplement previous research carried out in other professional fields (Grant Wofford *et al.*, 2013) and in the elusive area of learning outcomes from informal workplace learning (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016).

Overall, it is shown in this study that the teachers at the unit believe that their informal workplace learning is of great value for their professional development.

The theoretically informed analysis of their informal learning activities, i.e. "how thing was done" in their local practice, reveals a constant emergence of knowledge (Hopwood, 2016) that contributes to the teachers gradually developing a practical understanding of the police education practice, their professional assignment (Bergman *et al.*, 2018) and their teaching (Kang and Cheng, 2014). The overall impression is that most teachers experience that the different professional knowledge and experiences of the two teacher categories constitute a valuable asset in their professional development and that several teachers'

positive attitude towards exchanges of knowledge and experience seems to create a ripple effect that enables both less experienced teachers and more experienced ones to develop as teachers over time. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the informal learning of both teacher categories is relational, practice-oriented and embodied and emerges when they are “doing” the practice together (Ahn and Nyström, 2020) through their “sayings and doings”, their talking to each other, their observations of each other when working together in their teaching teams as well as across teacher category boundaries. This is in line with the central theoretical aspects of informal workplace learning put forward in the literature (Fenwick, 2008; Tynjälä, 2008). The analysis shows that knowledge about the organisation and arrangement (“set-up”) of the educational practice (Ahn and Nyström, 2020), as well as the implementation of the teaching, were particularly important parts of the teachers’ informal knowledge sharing, which formed the basis of their professional development as teachers (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016).

A common pattern identified in most of the teachers’ descriptions of their informal learning activities is that they are initially faced with a problem that must be solved immediately or with identified long-term needs for the deeper subject, pedagogical or administrative knowledge. Next, in informal and sometimes spontaneous collegial conversations and joint teaching, knowledge is shared among the teachers via questions and answers, discussions, tips and observations of each other’s teaching. Finally, the shared knowledge is tried out and reshaped in their own teaching practice. This identified pattern in teachers’ informal learning process clearly shows how their active participation in learning activities in the workplace contributes to their professional development as teachers.

The analysis of the value of informal learning for teachers’ professional development shows that they develop knowledge and skills about the organisation and arrangement of educational practice, such as formal and informal “rules” (Christensen, 2013) and teaching and student learning (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2009; Hoekstra and Korthagen, 2011) and to personal development (Verberg *et al.*, 2013).

The analysis of the value of developing knowledge about the local work practice suggests that it can be described as an increased practical understanding of how to deal with different situations and tasks, both in terms of stated and unspoken rules regarding how things are to be done and different approaches to teaching, as well as knowledge of where to find information needed to solve different work-related tasks. This knowledge supports their daily work and can thus, to some extent, be said to be specifically connected to this particular workplace, and it mainly emerges through collegial, informal learning.

In line with previous research, it is shown how the teachers’ engagement in informal learning activities supported the professional development of both teacher categories regarding their subject knowledge (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016) and pedagogical knowledge and skills (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2009; Kang and Cheng, 2014). More specifically, teachers describe their increased understanding of the constructive alignment of learning goals, teaching content and teaching methods as being particularly important in their development of pedagogical knowledge and skills. In addition, as manifested in the interviews, the PTs developed administrative knowledge and insights about the teachers’ responsibilities and obligations, whereas the UTs primarily pointed out the importance of gaining additional knowledge about the police practice, which meant that they could broaden and deepen their teaching content.

The embodied nature of the teachers’ informal learning is also evident in many teachers’ narratives about teaching methods and approaches becoming a part of themselves and their “doings”, as well as in their descriptions of having achieved a sense of security and safety in their teaching. When they describe their “doings” in the teaching practice, they often

mention how they feel when something works well or less well, which can be considered a clear indication that the knowledge has become a part of themselves and their professional practice. The analysis further demonstrates that many teachers, through their engagement in informal learning activities, in the longer term, develop a sense of security and safety as a teacher, which indicates that their informal learning also contributes to personal development (Verberg *et al.*, 2013).

Taken together, the teachers' professional development can be described in terms of expanded pedagogical, subject and administrative knowledge and in-depth knowledge of themselves and their development opportunities Kyndt *et al.* (2016). As a result of this development, the teachers agree that it contributes to a gradually increasing sense of having a greater choice regarding alternative teaching methods, contents and approaches.

The analysis also shows that differences between teachers' perceptions of the value of informal workplace learning cannot be identified on the basis of gender or age. However, the degree of teaching experience seems to influence what they focus on and what they consider to be the most valuable outcomes of their informal learning. The less experienced teachers, many of whom were PTs, tended to focus more on the implementation of teaching, whereas those with longer teaching experience were more interested in learning more about the students' learning.

In light of the demands made in recent years for increased professionalisation (Basham, 2014; Shipton, 2019) in both police organisations (Filstad *et al.*, 2020) and police education and training (Bergman and Karp, 2020), the results of this study suggest that an organisational structure, where favourable conditions for the integration of police-specific and academic knowledge are provided (Author 2 and Author 1, 2021), benefit teachers' professional development. The study's findings also show clear indications of a ripple effect as more and more teachers seem to be involved in informal learning activities, which contributes to the development of the police education's subject content and teaching arrangements. As shown in this study, a continuous exchange of knowledge between PTs and UTs can contribute to PTs developing their teaching skills (Hoekstra *et al.*, 2009; Kang and Cheng, 2014) and knowledge of academic practice (Van Eekelen *et al.*, 2006) and that UTs can broaden their subject competence through increased knowledge of the police practice (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, it is also very likely that police students who are educated in a knowledge-integrated and development-oriented study environment, as seems to be the case in this study, will have the requisite conditions to develop their preparedness for and understanding of the complexity and challenges of the police profession. As shown in this study, increased student influence on teaching practices and teachers' interest in students' learning seems to be a way to develop a more communication-oriented and student-centred pedagogical teaching practice (Paterson, 2011). In the long run, such a knowledge-integrated and development-oriented path also has the potential to promote the emergence of more reflective and critical approaches (Bringsrud Fekjaer *et al.*, 2014), which can be said to be important characteristics of agile learners and agile practitioners (Rooney *et al.*, 2015). For teachers and students in police education, it is thus a matter of developing abilities through a reciprocal relationship between professional practice and police education, such as identifying opportunities for learning and re-learning, assessing their learning in relation to societal changes and challenging established knowledge and skills both in police education and police practice. In other words, it is about developing a lifelong perspective on learning at the individual and organisational level that can be translated into increased flexibility, readiness for change and collaborative learning in police education and police organisations.

Like previous studies (Jeong *et al.*, 2018; Manuti *et al.*, 2015), this study points to the importance of informal workplace learning for professional development. However, we share the view put forward in the literature (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016; Boud *et al.*, 2009) that both informal and formal workplace learning is important for professional development. But relying solely on informal workplace learning as the main engine for development in organisations, constant reproduction of informal knowledge may, in the long run, result in this knowledge losing its validity in relation to societal demands for adaptation, updated goals and development needs (Kyndt *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we suggest a blend of informal workplace learning activities, including the provision of time and space for teachers to participate in these activities and formal learning activities where the goals and development needs of the organisation can be prioritised (Boud *et al.*, 2009).

The study also contributes to the field by applying a theoretical lens that conceptualises informal workplace learning as an emergent property that is clearly relational in its nature. From such a perspective, and as shown in this study, learning to become a competent teacher at the police education unit involves both learning about the local practice and learning in the practice (Hopwood, 2016). This theorisation demonstrates that “how things are done” in a local practice can be conceptualised as an interaction between the participants’ daily work, their collective sayings and doings and the socio-cultural traditions of that practice, including the organisational set-up and stated and unspoken rules (practical arrangements). A theoretical contribution of this study is that it sheds light on the elusive learning outcomes of informal workplace learning by using a participant perspective on the value of the informal learning activities they engage in (Ahn and Nyström, 2020; Boud and Rooney, 2018). One implication of this study that transcends the findings relating to the local police education practice studied is the importance of creating favourable conditions for informal learning in a workplace by supporting collaboration between different groups and individuals, the “social conditions”, and by understanding the significance of the “time factor” in professional development.

Conclusions

To sum up, four conclusions can be drawn from this study. Firstly, like previous studies in other professional fields, our findings from the police education field show that the teachers’ informal workplace learning and professional development are social and practice-oriented. Their learning emerges in a collaborative, reciprocal and active process where knowledge is not acquired but rather emerges in the course of discussions, observations and practically oriented activities in the daily work (Boud and Rooney, 2018).

Secondly, the embodied nature of learning (Hopwood, 2016) is also evident in the police education teachers’ joint activities in the teaching practice, which over time seem to create a feeling of security and safety and a greater scope for them to develop as teachers.

Thirdly, it takes time and active involvement in the local practice and interconnected practices to become a professional teacher in an education programme where the knowledge content is drawn from several professional fields and is in constant change. The employment of PTs on short-term contracts in the studied police education unit should therefore be discussed in relation to the fact that the development of professional teacher competence must be seen from a longer-term perspective.

Fourthly, it is also evident that the police education unit, with its integrated organisational structure where teachers’ different professional backgrounds constitute an enriching melting pot of knowledge and experiences, provides good opportunities for professional development, but also for the development of the content and teaching of police education subjects. In the long run, it also provides opportunities for the development of a

student-centred pedagogical teaching practice which promotes the emergence of reflective and critical approaches considered necessary in the police profession (Bringsrud Fekjaer *et al.*, 2014).

Based on the findings of this study, and with the aim of broadening the understanding of teachers' informal workplace learning, we propose further research focused on teachers' networking and the specific interactions taking place within different kinds of educational organisations.

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