Title	Teacher learning within the school context: An ecological perspective
Author(s)	Le Van Canh and Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh
Source	*Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 2*(1), 52-67
Published by	Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Copyright © 2012 The Authors

This is an Open Access paper distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Citation: Le, V. C., & Nguyen, T. T. M. (2012). Teacher learning within the school context: An ecological perspective. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 2*(1), 52-67. Retrieved from http://ejournal.upi.edu/index.php/IJAL/article/view/73

This document was archived with permission from the copyright owner.

TEACHER LEARNING WITHIN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Le Van Canh
University of Languages and International Studies
Vietnam National University, Hanoi
email: levancanhvnu@gmail.com

Nguyen Thi Thuy Minh
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
email: thithuyminh.nguyen@nie.edu.sg

Abstract: Central to teacher professional development is teacher learning, which is situated in a classroom, a school, or an informal social setting. Using an ecological framework which incorporates a wide range of influences at multiple levels, including intrapersonal, interpersonal/ cultural, institutional, and physical environment, this research sets out to explore the influence of the school context on teachers' engagement in informal learning activities. Data are collected through semi-structured open-ended interviews with six EFL teachers working in different upper secondary schools in Vietnam in an attempt to uncover what types of informal learning activities these teachers engage in and how the school context affects their engagement. Findings show multiple work-based factors that influence teacher learning in the school. The study provides evidence to teacher educators about the relationship between school context and teachers' degree of engagement in informal learning.

Keywords: ecological framework, professional development, informal learning, personal characteristics, teacher learning

Abstrak: Penting bagi perkembangan profesi guru adalah pembelajaran guru, yang disituasikan di sebuah kelas, sekolah, atau seting sosial nonformal. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja ekologi yang menggabungkan sejumlah besar pengaruh pada berbagai tingkatan, termasuk interpribadi, antarpribadi/budaya, institusi, dan lingkungan fisik, penelitian ini berusaha untuk menyelidiki pengaruh konteks sekolah terhadap keterlibatan guru dalam kegiatan belajar nonformal. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi terstruktur dan terbuka-tertutup dengan enam guru Bahasa Inggris untuk Penutur Asing yang bekerja di beberapa sekolah menengah di Vietnam sebagai usaha untuk menemukan jenis-jenis kegiatan belajar nonformal yang dilakukan oleh para guru ini dan bagaimana konteks sekolah mempengaruhi keterlibatan mereka dalam kegiatan tersebut. Temuan menunjukkan berbagai faktor berbasis pekerjaan yang mempengaruhi pembelajaran guru di sekolah. Kajian ini memberikan bukti bagi pendidik guru akan adanya hubungan antara konteks sekolah dengan tingkat keterlibatan guru dalam pembelajaran nonformal.

Kata kunci: kerangka kerja ekologis, perkembangan profesi, pembelajaran nonformal, karakteristik pribadi, pembelajaran guru

As traditional approaches to formal teacher professional development such as attending training courses, conferences, reading professional journals, and attending graduate courses have proved to be "antithetical to what research findings indicate as promoting effective learning" (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999, p.192), a conducive working context which encourages teachers' informal learning has been considered a must for teachers to acquire new teaching competences (Hargreaves, 1997; Moor & Shaw, 2000; Redtallick, 1999; Scribner, 1999). Informal learning is characterised as being "implicit, unintended, opportunistic and unstructured" (Eraut, 2004, p. 254), including on-the-job activities such as peer learning, individual inquiry, and experiential learning (Scribner, 1999, p. 248). These activities are initiated by people in the workplace in an attempt to develop their professional knowledge and skills (Lohman, 2000). Lohman and Woolf (2001, p. 144) have found that teachers engage in the following types of informal learning activities:

- knowledge exchanging, in which teachers share and reflect on others' practice and experiences;
- experimenting, in which teachers actively experiment with new ideas and techniques; and
- environmental scanning, in which teachers independently scan and gather information from sources outside the school.

Teacher learning is a kind of adult learning, which is self-directed, goal-oriented, and activity-oriented (Houle 1961 as cited in Scribner 1999, p. 246). Therefore, it is motivated by an array of intra-psychological and interpsychological factors. Eraut, Alderton, Cole & Skenker (2000) have pointed out that work-based informal learning is affected by three inter-related factors: challenge, support and confidence. Later, Eraut (2004) elaborated on this inter-relatedness and stated:

> [I]f there is neither a challenge nor sufficient support to encourage a person to seek out or respond to a challenge, then confidence declines and with it the motivation to learn. (p. 269)

Taking the community-of-practice perspective, Lave and Wenger (1991) have explained inter-relatedness as professionals trying to establish their identities by actively participating in the community of practice of which they belong so that they can become legitimate members of that community during the process of sharing expertise and ownership. Furthermore, as their identities become better established, they become more active participants.

The influence of school context on teacher learning to teach has interested researchers for a few decades (e.g. Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989; Johnson, 1990), but knowledge about those influences remains limited (Smylie, 1988). One of the emerging guidelines for teacher development states that school communities should foster shared learning among teachers. Scribner (1999) has described the influences of teacher work context on teacher learning by developing a model of three inter-related conceptual categories: context, learning activities, and motivation to engage in learning. In his multiple-site case study, in which he interviewed 45 American high school teachers and 7 school administrators, the findings showed that teachers' learning was influenced by the school context (i.e. school leadership, scheduling, and school policies for professional development). However, the study was conducted on good teachers in an urban context of America, and because of this limitation, he raised the need of researching "the relationship between professional learning and a variety of work contexts" (Scribner, 1999, p. 262).

Conversely, there is empirical evidence of inhibitors of teachers' engagement in informal learning activities that are embedded in the school culture. For example, Lohman (2000) has listed four such inhibitors and these are: lack of time for learning; lack of proximity to learning resources; lack of meaningful rewards for learning; and limited decision-making power.

Another study conducted by Lohman (2006) indicates that the degree of teachers' engagement in informal learning activities depend on collegial availability and support as well as organizational climate for learning, and is inhibited by time constraints, inaccessibility to colleagues' work areas, and budget constraints. At the same time, the study reveals that personal characteristics such as initiative, self-efficacy, love of learning, interest in the profession, commitment to professional development, a nurturing personality, and an outgoing personality do affect teachers' engagement in informal learning activities. In a recent study conducted by Saito, Tsukui & Tanaka (2008) on primary school in-service teachers in a province of northern Vietnam, it was found that teacher learning was inhibited by a number of factors related to the school culture. These include the fast pace of the lesson, teachers' evaluative attitudes, and limited collaboration among teachers. This study focused on primary school teachers who were involved in a teacher development project funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and therefore, the question of teachers' engagement in informal learning activities in various Vietnamese upper secondary schools remains unaddressed.

In an attempt to narrow the afore-mentioned gap in research, this study focused on upper secondary school teachers who were working in a variety of contexts (urban, rural, and mountainous), as well as different types of schools (such as elite schools versus ordinary schools) in Vietnam to elicit their views of the impact of school culture on their engagement in informal learning activities. The study was conducted in a Vietnamese context in which teacher development focuses on raising the quality of English language teaching at the secondary school level towards the goal of improving students' communicative competence in English. Measures taken to promote this end include a greater emphasis on teachers' in-service workshops for the successful implementation of a new student-centered curriculum and mandated peer observation. Given the limited research on teacher learning in Vietnam, attempts to uncover the issue should be both inviting and informative.

The questions guiding this study are: 1) What types of informal learning activities do Vietnamese EFL upper-secondary school teachers rely on for professional development and how do they engage in those learning activities? and 2) What factors of the school context affect the degree of their engagement in informal learning activities?

METHOD

The present study employed the method and procedures of grounded theory to explore the influence of the school context on teachers' informal learning from an emic – or insider's – perspective. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews with a view to capturing phenomena in teachers' own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Six secondary school teachers, five female and one male, who were teaching in the upper secondary schools located in various geographical areas, the urban, the rural, and the mountainous, were interviewed. Hoa and Hai (pseudonyms) were teachers of elite schools – a kind of a specializing school for academically advanced students. Both schools were located in the urban area. San, Tan, Mai and Nam (pseudonyms) were teaching respectively in a disadvantaged highland, mountainous, coastal and rural area.

In an attempt to make the teachers comfortable in expressing themselves elaborately, all the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and audio-recorded. A set of pre-prepared guiding questions was designed to seek teachers' views about the informal learning activities they engaged in and the influence of the school context, including the norms of practice, social trust, collegiality, leadership

and resources that affected their engagement in informal learning activities. Then, the interviews were fully transcribed, and records were read several times in order to identify recurring ideas across transcripts. The coding was grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), rather than following *a priori* themes or categories. To be more specific, we went through the data carefully and identified the concepts which formed categories as they emerged from the data. Then we compared and contrasted cases in order to establish the common patterns across cases as well as the particular of individual cases. Modifications and expansions of categories took place throughout the analytical process until the material was finally arranged in a meaningful way.

The data analysis was guided by the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), which refers to people's interactions with their physical and sociocultural surroundings. This framework incorporates a wide range of influences at multiple levels including intrapersonal (biological, psychological), interpersonal/cultural, institutional, and physical environment. The concept of ecology views the learning environment "as a complex adaptive system," the mind "as the totality of relationships between a developing person and the surrounding world," and learning "as the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment" (van Lier, 1997, p. 783). Ecological approaches are grounded in the postmodern sciences of complexity, chaos and cognitive biology (Larsen-Freeman, 1997), which emphasise a complementary and integral mode of seeing wholes together with parts, and the connections that link separations.

The ecological framework is particularly suited for studying teacher learning at the workplace because this type of learning tends to occur in specific places. We believe that a teacher's learning environment is an ecosystem. It is a complex system of many parts and relationships of both biotic (e.g. the teacher, his or her students, the school principal, etc.) and abiotic components (e.g. the physical setting, the subject of teaching, etc.). This ecological framework views learning as a process of becoming prepared to effectively engage dynamic networks in the world in a goal-directed manner (Hoffmann & Roth, 2005). Studying characteristics of the school context that facilitate or hinder teacher learning, therefore, is a priority.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' Engagement in Informal Learning Activities: What and How?

The interview data show that there were three avenues via which the teachers developed their professional knowledge and skills: collaboration with colleagues (peer learning), individual inquiry, and experiential learning (see Scribner, 1999). However, it must be noted that the extent to which the teachers engaged in each avenue might vary depending on their experience with it and their confidence with its efficacy.

Peer Learning

Some endeavours to promote peer learning among school teachers are the institutionalisation of staff meetings, professional seminars, and peer observation, so that teachers can discuss and solve their emerging pedagogical problems collectively. However, despite this good intention, many teachers did not seem to be interested in those activities because the organization of such learning was not related in a meaningful way to the conflict between a teacher's personal "biography" and current practice (Nicholls, 2000).

In Vietnamese secondary schools, teachers are grouped according to their subjects. Teachers of each subject group are prescribed to meet at least once a month. Many schools even scheduled these meetings on a weekly or bi-monthly basis. Nevertheless, the teachers generally did not find the meetings useful to their professional

growth. One of the reasons for this was that those meetings, instead of being a professional forum as they should have been, turned out to be a place for discussions of house-keeping of administrative issues (such as timetabling, or policies on test or examination administration); and thus, leaving insufficient time for reflective discussions of teaching-related issues. For example, the following comments illustrate the nature of these meetings:

> We do not discuss the syllabus or look at each lesson to flesh out the difficulties that teachers are facing. We are mainly informed of the weekly timetable so that teachers know what to teach and what to do in that particular week, and we are told what the test is going to be about, and when we have to submit our lesson plans for review. We rarely touch on pedagogical issues at the meetings. (Nam)

> There is some discussion of professional concerns but the discussion time is limited (…). Too much time is spent on other activities. Usually, a meeting starts at 1:30 and sometimes might end very late-around 6 pm but we would spend only around one and a half hours at maximum on pedagogical issues. But even so, little is done within those one and a half hours. (San)

It was perhaps for this reason that most teachers felt the meetings only served to fulfil the school requirement rather than fulfil teachers' professional needs. When a staff meeting is used just as an opportunity to discuss personnel and administrative matters, teachers will become disinterested in participating (Birchak et al., 1998). One of the teachers in the following interview excerpt even suggested that she found personal interactions with colleagues a far better alternative formal meeting in terms of fulfilling her professional needs:

> It is difficult to bring forth a real discussion at meetings. Sometimes I read about some interesting (teaching) idea which I would like to discuss with my colleagues but I rarely raise the issue at meetings. I would rather have conversations with colleagues at other times. We would feel much more comfortable that way. And we could feel freer to share our views. (Hai)

From time to time, during the staff meetings, teachers were expected to give collective feedback on their colleagues' or their own demonstration lessons. However, they found this activity counter-productive because of its evaluative nature. In many instances the feedback was given only on the shortcomings of the observed lessons, making the teachers involved feel uncomfortable. In the opposite instances, very little feedback was given just to avoid conflict. In both scenarios, teachers tended to develop a self-defensive and detached attitude and as a result, little real sharing was taking place (see Saito et al., 2008 for a similar discussion). This finding will be discussed further when we address classroom observations as a learning tool in the next section.

In addition to regular staff meetings, professional seminars are mandated to be organized every semester in every school. These seminars are intended to create a platform for teachers to disseminate their innovative and creative teaching ideas and promote collaborative interaction among colleagues. However, not every teacher who was interviewed found this activity satisfactory in terms of his or her own meaningful learning and collaboration for a number of various reasons. For example, a teacher commented about the lack of genuine intention to conduct the seminar on the part of her group leader, which she believed affected the group's plan and deprived interested teachers of the opportunities to share their professional concerns:

> Although every month, every semester the school does lay out some plan for staff development, the implementation of this plan is not effective. In particular, we English teachers are required to give a seminar every semester (…) but I feel this is done only to show the school that we have done what they ask us to do. I have this feeling because there is a lack of close supervision at the group's level. For example, I was once told to prepare a seminar presentation and I did as I was told, but the seminar was, in fact, delayed until we were urged by the Principal and so it was done but there was a lack of a genuine intention. (…) Then another time the Principal asked for an end-of-semester seminar paper. The group leader did not have one at hand, so he asked me to search for materials and quickly complete one and submit it to the school. I did as I was told, but it was only for the "display" purpose. In fact, my colleagues never had a chance to read the paper to know what was written about. (Mai)

Echoing her view, another teacher stated that the activity failed to allow teachers to share their experience and insights because it tended to be conducted only for the sake of promoting the school's reputation:

> Every year, teachers who are nominated for the title "Excellence in Teaching" have to prepare a seminar paper to disseminate the innovative teaching methods that they employ. For example, last year I prepared a paper about students' phonological errors. When I was working on the paper, I did consult my colleagues. (…) This paper was then submitted to the Provincial Department of Education (DOE). Nominated teachers in all schools should send their papers to the DOE for a review. But we did not know where the papers were going to after that. So, although I wrote about my innovations, my colleagues would not have a chance to read my paper. (San)

Obviously, when the intention is good but is improperly realized, it is likely to become counter-productive in the sense that teachers would finally lose their confidence in its efficacy as a learning tool. The professional seminar is a sound professional development activity, but when it takes place in an environment of poor collegial collaboration, little real sharing would take place. This would seriously demoralize the presenters. For example, the following teacher mentioned a lukewarm, indifferent audience who seemed to show little interest in the presentations, thus substantially discouraging her and her other colleagues' participation for the next time:

> Initially, the presenters were very enthusiastic and eager, but there were teachers who came to listen with a lukewarm attitude. So the presenters lost their motivation. And next time they would not want to present again because nobody seemed interested. (Mai)

However, when professional seminars are more properly organized, teachers can benefit from those seminars one way or another. Hoa, for instance, revealed that the teachers in her group, who were highly cooperative, were very enthusiastic about the seminars because they enjoyed the opportunity to exchange freely the innovative teaching tips and strategies that worked for their classes and they learned from colleagues. Participants then selected and tried out those teaching tips and strategies in their own classrooms. Furthermore, like teachers in other schools, she also had to submit her seminar paper to DOE for consideration for the title of "Excellence in Teaching," but she believed that even though the paper did not earn her the title, she had learned a lot in the process because the paper was prepared with the collaboration of other members in the group. This evidence acknowledges the significant

role of teacher support groups in "providing opportunities for teachers to validate both teacher knowledge and teacher inquiry" (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1998, p. 723). Thus, professional seminars, when implemented properly, can have a great potential as an informal learning activity for teachers to engage in reflective and collaborative practices, which are necessary for their life-long professional development. Also, this supports Billett's (2001) view that expertise is reciprocal as professionals shape and are shaped by the community of practice.

Of all the informal learning activities, peer observation was mentioned as the most common professional activity carried out by the participants in this study. This is because, as mentioned above, peer observation is mandated to all schools teachers, who have to record their visits to other teachers' classes and report it to the inspectors by the end of each semester. Yet, teachers seemed to be more concerned with their mandated duty to fulfil the required frequency of observations than with their pedagogical purposes, despite the importance that their schools attached to this activity. Many of them even stated in the interviews that if the activity had not been made compulsory and part of their performance appraisal, very few would have visited other teachers' classes. The reasons for their reluctance were time constraints, overlapping teaching schedules, and professionally-undefined purposes of observation.

The interviewed teachers felt that peer observation just added further burden to their already heavy teaching load. Very often, the teachers interviewed mentioned that they were "too busy to sit in colleagues' classes." Lack of time for learning (Lohman, 2006) is a real obstacle to teacher learning. As Huard (2001) has explained:

> Teachers are always busy and their work is complex – there is always another class to go to, a duty to supervise, work to correct, or administrative duties to fulfil. Often, in all the rush and complexity this core work of teaching and learning and the reflective work and celebration of teaching, slip further down or off the agenda. (p. 14)

The overlapped teaching schedule made it extremely difficult for them to arrange a regular peer observation. Even when they managed to observe their peers, they hardly had time "to sit down together for a reflective discussion of the lesson." But time constraints did not seem to be the most demotivating factor for peer observation. It was the low quality of observation which was resulted from the lack of social trust which allows teachers "to express themselves intellectually and emotionally, and know that such expression, and discussion of it, is legitimate and accepted" (Boud & Walker, 1998, p.200). The interview data show that not every teacher would be open to his or her colleagues about his or her feelings about the lesson. Some teachers mention that they would give only fairly general and superficial comments just to avoid possible offence, unless the colleague was a close friend of theirs or if they felt comfortable with the person. For example, this teacher said:

> If this colleague is someone I feel close to, I will be most honest. If not, I would keep a distance (…). Some people might think highly of themselves. They might think their lessons are perfect and do not need anyone to advise them how to teach. (San)

Other teachers mentioned that they would hesitate to give feedback to senior teachers out of their respect to the latter. This type of mentality seemed to be influenced by Vietnamese culture, in which hierarchy defined by age indicates relative power status:

> Usually between us young teachers it is easier to give critical feedback, but if I observe a senior teacher's class, I would be very much hesitant in giving them my personal comments. (Tan)

Interestingly, a few teachers also emphasised that they would be more willing to share their thoughts if the peer observation was not for the purpose of appraisal. Otherwise, they felt uncomfortable to do so. For example, this teacher said:

> If it were not a mandated observation, which is for appraisal purpose, we would straight away tell what we like about the lesson, what we think we can or cannot adopt for our own students and for what reasons we say so. (Hoa)

This same teacher also mentioned that she often asked for permission to sit in with experienced teachers and that observing their classes made her realise both her strengths and weaknesses, and thus it was another critical source of learning for her.

Obviously, the traditional culture of peer observation in Vietnamese schools, which is evaluation-oriented, has made classroom observation a threatening, frightening experience and is like an ordeal (Williams, 1989, p. 86) to the observed teachers. Thus, instead of being a learning activity, which gives teachers an opportunity to share difficulties, feelings, contexts, or even joy and "relate their own experiences and practices with the experiences and practices of those in another classroom" (Barth, 1990, cited in Saito et al., 2009, p. 97), peer observation may become a source of conflict that makes collegial collaboration alienating because of its evaluative nature. As pointed out by Saito et al. (2008, p. 97), the promotion of this type of judgmental behaviour can put up a barrier among teachers and consequently adversely affect their collaboration. According to the teachers in the interviews, some teachers even thought that asking for help would betray their ignorance. Apparently, this feeling of distrust was unlikely to be helpful, while peer observation, discussions with peers, and sharing materials should have been common practices of Vietnamese school teachers given the limited access to the global professional discourse or expert knowledge for improving their knowledge base.

Individual Inquiry

According to Scribner (1999), another way in which teachers can experience professional development is through individual inquiry. This study suggests certain evidence that teachers seek to broaden their knowledge of the subject matter and improve their pedagogical skills, despite the limited resources available. However, similar to what Scribner (1999) found with his teacher participants, the present study also found that teachers were more interested in acquiring content-related knowledge and knowledge that was "immediately applicable to their classroom contexts" rather than critically examining current pedagogical practices (Scribner, 1999, p. 247) because content knowledge enables them to make informed pedagogic decisions. In addition, the present study shows that the extent to which the teachers engaged in self-directed learning seems to vary depending on the types of schools and students they encounter.

Searching the internet and sharing materials and resources (Lohman, 2006) were reported to be informal learning activities undertaken by teachers with a love of learning. In a similar study, most of the teachers reported the lack of proximity to learning resources (Lohman, 2000). In this study, although teachers in some elite schools have an annual budget to add new resources to their school library, most mainstream schools do not have that luxury. In these schools, the main types of library holdings are just grammar and exercise books, while number is fairly limited, and teaching methodology books are almost absent. The interview data of the present study reveal that teachers constantly search the internet for resources and/ or shared resources with others for solutions to their pedagogical problems. For example, one

teacher stated that online resources helped her in teaching writing skills:

> I often search online for effective ways to teach difficult contents; for example, ways to teach students to write a specific genre that is difficult for them. Writing letters of complaint is too challenging for my students, so I could search for the ways to make it simpler for them. (Mai)

Another teacher mentioned that online resources gave her the idea to use songs to teach English and organize group work:

> I often searched for materials on teaching methods on the internet (…). The online materials that I found were very helpful. For example, once I read about how to use English songs and I implemented the idea for my class. Another time I read about how to conduct group works. (Hoa)

Although Nam was teaching in a poor rural area, he thought that self-inquiry was so important for him because it helped him improve his teaching practice. He said:

> In the rural area, I don't have the opportunity to expose myself to native-speakers of English. I have to compensate for this constraint by listening to TV programs or listening to English on the internet. For professional knowledge, I access the information about [English] grammar and teaching methods on the internet.

Experiential Learning

Apart from peer and self-directed learning, many teachers commented that they also learned through their job experience and self-reflection. For example, some teachers in elite schools noted that they were progressing considerably by engaging in curriculum development because they were teaching a special group of students who needed to follow the curriculum specified by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), but also required additional learning components. The teachers in mainstream schools, however, did not enjoy as much autonomy and flexibility, and thus, had less opportunity to learn from this experience.

Similar to the teachers in Scribner's (1999) study, a number of teachers in this study also described previous classroom experience as a source of information to help them make changes to enhance their teaching. In other words, their learning happened as a result of a "gradual process of trial and error" (Scribner, 1999, p. 251), whereby they improved over the years by constantly reflecting on their past successes and failures. For example, this teacher explained how reflecting on her previous lessons helped her gain an insight into her own practice and become more effective:

> After each lesson I would self-evaluate how effective it was and which part I could have done better. (…) Sometimes I kept notes of how I would have liked to change it and next time when I taught the same lesson again I would try to make the change to see if it would work out. And I added new ideas each time I reviewed my lesson plan. (Hoa)

However, it seems that not every teacher saw reflection as an important part of their teaching job. Some teachers admitted to seldom spending time thinking back about their past lessons or contemplating about how to improve their practices because of the hectic teaching pace and family commitments after work. Others were afraid that the very thought of their past failure could seriously demoralise them, and thus, they tried not to recall their unsuccessful lessons. Obviously, busy schedules or fear of demoralisation should not be a reason for shying away from exercising in self-reflection, if teachers understand the enormous benefits that can be had from this activity. Thus, it is important for teachers to learn how to accept their limitations and

make use of past experiences in order to grow professionally.

Influence of School Culture on Teachers' Engagement in Informal Learning Activities.

In congruence with Scribner (1999) and Saito et al. (2008), the present study suggests substantial evidence of the impact of school context on teachers' engagement in informal learning activities. This impact will be addressed in two aspects, through students and school leaders' expectations, and collegiality.

Students and School Leaders' High Expectations

In this study, students' and school leaders' expectations are the challenges in terms of subject-matter knowledge and pedagogy that seem to be the most powerful driving forces for teachers' engagement in learning. In elite schools, the teachers were working with groups of carefully selected, strongly motivated, and high-achieving students. Thus, they had to constantly seek information to broaden their knowledge of the subject matter and enhance their pedagogical skills in order to meet students' high demands and expectations. Besides that, they also found themselves accountable to the parents, who were extremely concerned about their "gifted" children's study results, and to the school leaders, who always pushed teachers to increase the students' academic performance. In this case, academic performance is measured by the students' high-stake examination results. This type of impetus is evidenced by what Hoa and Hai said in their interviews.

> Working in an elite school, every teacher has to make continuous, enormous effort to learn, and indeed, we cannot just rely on external training but also have to teach ourselves how to teach. …We are working with excellent students…This means we have to try our best to improve our professional knowledge and skills. If we do not improve our English proficiency, we will not be able to keep up with the curricular requirements. If we do not update our knowledge regularly, we will not be able to respond to the students' increasingly demanding needs. (Hoa)

Hoa went on to assert that her school leaders tended to set very high expectations on the teachers, which drove teachers to see professional learning as the only key to their success:

> In my school, professional learning is a regular activity because being a teacher at an elite school means facing the possibility of lagging behind and losing out if you do not actively engage yourself in further studies.

In contrast, teachers in mainstream schools, especially those located in disadvantaged areas, where students are by and large less academically advanced and poorly motivated, reported little engagement in informal learning activities. The stories told by Mai, Nam, Tan, and San help shed light on this situation.

Mai, working in a mainstream school in a city located in Central Vietnam, was quite frank that most teachers in her school, "were not concerned about improving their teaching" because of the school's low expectations of them. In her school, English language is only one of the subjects taught; hence, the school did not give it any more special attention than it gave to other subjects. Interestingly, this teacher appeared to be keen on continued learning in order to be professionally competent enough to teach extra classes outside the school, where students are more academically demanding. She said:

> My teaching context is unfavourable for teacher development. I have no drive to learn except that I need the knowledge to teach in outside language centres. These centres demand well-qualified teachers,

> so I have to constantly upgrade my knowledge if I do not want to be laid off. I would say that is my only motivation.

Sharing this view, Nam, who taught in a rural area where the students "were almost illiterate in English [despite many years' learning the language]", stated, "Students did not do the homework, and in the classroom they were all quiet. This makes teachers really frustrated."

Similar stories were told by San and Tan, who worked mainly with ethnic minority students in disadvantaged mountainous areas. According to these teachers, their students saw little benefit in learning English, while they were still struggling with Vietnamese, and saw no future outside their home villages. Thus, the need to communicate with English speaking people is non-existent. Plus, these students could not concentrate on their studies because they had to help around the house after school while their parents worked. Since teachers in this school did not have any academic challenge presented by the students or had pressure from the school leaders, they seemed to be content with their existing knowledge and pedagogical competence:

> Self-directed learning is a luxury to many teachers because the students are not so demanding. Everybody feels that their knowledge is sufficient to teach with what they have, while they have many other businesses to attend to. No time for, and no need of, self-learning. (Tan)
>
> Students in my school are still not fluent in Vietnamese, let alone English. They are more interested in housework than learning . . . Unlike urban people, parents in my area do not expect them to learn English… This makes teachers feel that they don't need to upgrade their knowledge. (San)

Student learning is one aspect of school culture and it affects the degree of teachers' engagement in informal learning activities for their professional development, either positively or negatively. In this case, it would seem that low student expectations produced low levels of motivation for and participation in teacher learning on behalf of the teachers.

Collegiality

Collegiality was also a factor that potentially impacted teacher learning by expanding opportunities for teacher collaboration and sharing (Scribner, 1999; Saito et al., 2008). The present study suggests that uncooperative colleagues tended to strongly discourage teachers from both contributing to the process of collective professional learning and looking for help from within their community. Various excerpts from the teacher interviews show that teachers would not feel comfortable to share their professional concerns with every colleague in their schools. This was because they found that not everyone would be interested in this learning experience. For example, Mai stated in the interview:

> [T]he problem with teachers in my school is nobody listens to anybody else, and nobody is keen to develop themselves professionally . . . The post-observation discussion is, in fact, chaotic because everybody is self-defensive. Nobody is open to others' ideas.

Besides teachers who were enthusiastic about sharing insights and learning from colleagues, there were also those who held a critical attitude towards colleagues. It was perhaps because of the fear of this attitude that many teachers commented that they would hesitate to discuss their difficulties with colleagues' approaches. They would rather keep quiet about their problems than be seen as "less proficient." It seems that personal relationships were an important matter in teachers' interactions. Where good personal relationships existed, teachers tended to be more open. This is justified by San:

> [I]n general [in my school] sharing of teaching ideas takes place only among close friends. There are teachers who are not daring enough to ask colleagues to share ideas for fear of betraying their ignorance. Sometimes I do ask others for help and I know they can help but they are so preserved. They do not tell.

A lack of constructive collegial collaboration is rooted in Vietnamese educational culture whereby educators feel that they have the right to judge others' behaviours according to their own values. Such an evaluative culture seems to do more harm than good to the collegiality of the school, because as pointed out by Saito et al., (2008, p. 97), the attitude tends to represent a "third-party viewpoint[s]", which is "separated from the instructor's," rather than insider's insights. Thus, it is important for teachers to learn how to accept that "to err is human" and show mutual support for one another (Saito et al., 2008, p.97). Teachers also need to learn how to communicate to their colleagues in order to contribute to the collegiality of the school. Instead of adhering to an assertive conversation style, teachers should learn how to talk to their colleagues in a more "democratic and dialogic manner" (Saito et al., 2008, p.100), so that they can participate more effectively in the discussion of professional issues. Finally, schools need to develop norms of collegiality, openness and trust (Billett, 2001, Ellstrom, 2001) to ensure the creation of a constructive, non-judgmental environment. In this way, teachers will build up trust and open up to one another, and thus, engage in a more meaningful collaboration. One of the ways to achieve this end is perhaps to establish a "culture of support" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p. 119), in which peer observation is less evaluative and judgmental in nature and more encouraging for teachers as an opportunity to learn and develop as reflective teachers.

CONCLUSION

In congruence with Scribner (1999) and Saito et al. (2008), the present study provides substantial evidence of the impact of school contexts on teachers' engagement in informal learning activities. It is revealed in this study that searching the internet for teaching materials and peer-observations were the two most common learning activities that the teachers in this study pursued. Unlike teachers in Lohman's (2006) study, the teachers in this study did not mention other learning activities such as talking with others, collaborating with others, sharing materials and resources with others, scanning professional magazines and journals, trial and error, and reflecting on one's own actions. This can be explained that all Vietnamese schools, even the universities, are under-resourced, and teachers have very limited access to professional magazines and journals, while reflection is not part of Vietnamese professional culture. The highly-centralised system discourages teachers to take a trial-and-error approach to their classroom practice but encourages the culture of prescribed sameness of teaching behaviour (Saito et al., 2008) instead. This is really a great barrier to teacher development.

Regarding the context-related factors affecting teacher learning, the findings of the study reveal that teachers' personal motivation for learning is an important determinant of their participation in learning at the workplace, an issue which has been rarely discussed in the literature of teacher learning. Like student learning, teacher learning is voluntary. The motivation to become better teachers constitutes a great driving force for Hoa, Hai and Nam in the study to search the internet for both teaching materials and theoretical accounts to use in their classroom despite the constraints of a rural area like the case of Nam. In contrast, other teachers in the study seemed to be satisfied with their status quo and were not committed to further professional growth. The findings of the present study show that

where the school leaders both push and support teacher learning and where the students are demanding, teachers in general are better motivated to engage in on-going learning activities. Also, teachers working in the urban schools seemed to have a stronger drive for self-inquiry than those working in the rural or disadvantaged areas. It is evident that teachers' motivation for learning is social in the sense that it is strongly influenced by contextual factors such as the students, the school leadership and the broader social milieu.

As the findings of the study indicate, although the most accessible professional development activity to Vietnamese school teachers is peer observation, which is also regulated by the Ministry of Education and Training, most of the teachers in the study appeared to be unenthusiastic about this learning activity. The traditional culture of peer observation in Vietnamese schools, which is evaluation-oriented (Saito et. al., 2008), has made classroom observation a threatening, frightening ordeal (Williams, 1989, p. 86) to the observed teachers. Thus, it is recommended that this type of judgmental observation be abolished so that peer observation really becomes a useful learning experience for teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

According to the teachers in the interviews, some teachers even thought that asking for help or raising their own teaching problems in the staff meeting would betray their ignorance. Apparently, this feeling of distrust was unlikely to be helpful, while peer observation, discussions with peers, and sharing materials should have been common practices of Vietnamese school teachers, given the limited access to the global professional discourse or expert knowledge for improving their knowledge base. As a result, an environment of mutual trust should be established within each school so that teachers are not fearful of criticism by colleagues when they reorganise the syllabus and try out new teaching ideas in the classroom. Unquestionably, collegiality is a factor that potentially impacts teacher learning in the sense that it can either expand or limit opportunities for teacher collaboration and sharing (Scribner, 1999; Saito et al., 2008). The present study suggests that uncooperative colleagues tended to strongly discourage teachers from both contributing to the process of collective professional learning and looking for help from within their community. Various excerpts from the teacher interviews show that teachers would not feel comfortable to share their professional concerns with their colleagues, unless they trust them.

In order to build good collegiality, which is based on mutual trust, teachers should be convinced that an evaluative culture, which is embedded in the Vietnamese traditional culture, does more harm than good to the collegiality of the school. Teachers also need to learn how to communicate to their colleagues to contribute to the collegiality of the school. Instead of an assertive conversation style, teachers can learn how to talk to their colleagues in a more "democratic and dialogic manner" (Saito et al., 2008, p.100), so that they can participate more effectively in the discussion of professional issues. Finally, schools need to develop norms of collegiality, openness and trust (Billett, 2001, Ellstrom, 2001) for the creation of a constructive, non-judgmental environment for teachers to build up trust and open up to one another, and thus, engage in a more meaningful collaboration. That learning environment should be nurtured in a "culture of support" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003, p. 119), in which teachers are encouraged and supported to participate actively in "peer-based learning through mentoring, and sharing skills, experience, and solutions to common problems" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 12). This school-based culture of support would motivate teachers "to learn together through participation in group-oriented activities with shared goals, and responsibilities, involving joint problem solving" (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 12). This is quite critical in contexts where

teachers have limited access to the global community discourse.

In sum, this study aims to examine the common informal learning activities undertaken by the teachers within the school context and factors embedded in the school context that facilitate or hinder teacher learning. According to the interview data, it was clarified that teacher learning at the workplace is limited to very few activities and was influenced by the school context at various levels such as intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural. This evidence gives rise to the need of enacting a deliberate, effective learning culture within school systems, which encourages a high degree of sharing and a shift of focus from the individual practice of teaching to a collective understanding of pedagogy and collegial collaboration. To promote teachers' informal learning, in addition to the provision of time and resources, attention should be focused on nurturing "a climate or culture that recognises and rewards teachers excellence" (Viskovic, 2005, p. 403), making social trust, peer support and cooperative learning within the cultural norms of a school. Towards this goal, studies of workplace learning or community practice should be used as sources of new ideas for the promotion of teacher learning within a school. Vietnam needs to change its traditional mindset which over-emphasises the role of teachers' formal learning such as training workshops, graduate training, and so on to adopt new theories of workplace learning or a community practice as sources of new ideas for teacher development.

Although the present study reveals some important issues related to the influence of school cultures on teachers' engagement in informal learning activities, it is not clear whether the informal learning activities teachers claimed to pursue lead to the increase of students' achievement or not. This question, therefore, should be addressed in future studies.

REFERENCES

Barth, R. (1990). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bath.

Billett, S. (2001). Learning through work: Workplace affordances and individual engagement. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 13*(5), pp. 209-214.

Birchak, B., Connor, C., Crawford, K. M., Kahn, L. H., Kaser, S., Turner, S., & Short, K. (1998). *Teacher study groups*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Bogdan, R., & Biklen, R. C. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn-Bacon.

Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education, 22*(2), pp. 191-206.

Bransford, J.D., Brown, A.L., & Cocking, R.R. (Eds.) (1999). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school.* Washington: National Academy Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The ecology of cognitive development: Research models and fugitive findings. In R. H. Wozniak & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), *Development in context: Acting and thinking in specific environments* (pp. 3-44). New York: Erlbaum.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Ellstrom, P. E. (2001). Integrating learning and work: Problems and prospects. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 12*(4), pp. 421-435.

Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education, 26*(2), pp. 247-273.

Eraut, M., Alderton, J., Cole, G. & Skenker, P. (2000). Development of knowledge

and skills at work. In F. Coffield (Ed.), *Differing visions of a learning society, volume 1*. (pp. 231-262). Bristol: Policy Press.

Hargreaves, A. (1997). From reform to renewal: A new deal for a new age. In A. Hargreaves & R. Evans (Eds.), *Beyond educational reform: Bringing teachers back in* (pp.105-125). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Hoffmann, M. H. G., & Roth, W. M. (2005). What you should know to survive in knowledge societies: On a semiotic understanding of "knowledge". *Semiotica, 156*, pp. 101-138.

Houle, C. 0. (1961). *The inquiring mind*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Huard, A. (2001). Enabling conditions for quality teaching. *Unicorn, 27*(3), pp. 14-17.

Johnson, S. M. (1990). *Teachers at work: Achieving success in our schools*. New York: Basic Books.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (1997). Chaos/complexity science and second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics, 18*(2), pp. 141-165.

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

Lieberman, A., & Grolnick, M. (1998). Educational reform networks: Changes in the forms of reform. In A. Hargreaves, A. Lieberman, M. Fullan, & D. Hopkins (Eds.), *International handbook of educational change* (pp. 710-729). Boston: Kluwer Academic.

Lohman, M. C. (2000). Environmental inhibitors to informal learning in the workplace: A case study of public school teachers. *Adult Education Quarterly, 50*(2), pp. 83-101.

Lohman, M. C. (2006). Factors influencing teachers' engagement in informal learning activities. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 18*(3), pp. 141-156.

Lohman, M. C., & Woolf, N. H. (2001). Self-initiated learning activities of experienced public school teachers: Methods, sources, and relevant organizational influences. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 7*(1), pp. 61-76.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moor, S. & Shaw, P. (2000). The professional learning needs and perceptions of secondary school teachers: Implications for professional learning community. *Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association,* New Orleans, USA.

Nicholls, G. (2000). Profesional development, teaching and lifelong learning: The implications for higher education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 19*(4), pp. 370-377.

Retallick, J. (1999). Teachers' workplace learning: Towards legitimation and accreditation. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice 5*, pp. 33-50.

Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenholtz, S. J. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools*. New York: Longman.

Saito, E., Tsukui, A., & Tanaka, Y. (2008). Problems on primary school-based in-service training in Vietnam: A case of Bac Giang province. *International Journal of Educational Development 28*, pp. 89-103.

Scribner, J. P. (1999). Professional development: Untangling the influence of work context on teacher learning. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 35*(2), pp. 238-266.

Smylie, M. (1988). The enhancement function of staff development: Organizational and psychological antecedents to individual teacher change. *American Educational Research Journal, 25*(1), pp.1-30.

Strauss, A. L. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newburry Park, CA: Sage.

van Lier, L. (1997). Observation from an ecological perspective. *TESOL Quarterly, 31*(4), pp. 783-787.

Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teacher professional development: An international review of literature*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Viskovic, A. R. (2005). 'Community of practice' as a framework for supporting tertiary teachers' informal workplace learning. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 57*(3), pp. 389-410.

Williams, M. (1989). A developmental view of classroom observation. *ELT Journal 43*(2), pp. 85-91.