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EXPLORING THE RELATION  
BETWEEN TEACHERS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF  
WORKPLACE CONDITIONS  
AND THEIR  
PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING GOALS



# EXPLORING THE RELATION BETWEEN TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AND THEIR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GOALS <sup>8</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Schools' structural workplace conditions (e.g., learning resources and professional development policies), and cultural workplace conditions (e.g., school leadership, teachers' collaborative culture) have been found to affect the way teachers learn. It is not so much the objective conditions that support or impede professional learning but the way teachers perceive those workplace conditions that influences teachers' learning. Not much is known, however, about how teachers' perceptions relate to the way they direct their own learning. Using a sensemaking approach, we explored how four teachers' perceptions of cultural and structural workplace conditions were related with how they direct their own learning. The four cases were selected from a sample of 31 teachers from two secondary schools, and differed in the extent to which the teachers perceived their workplace as enabling or constraining their learning. We found that the content of teachers' learning goals is related to their perception of shared vision and professional dialogue in their schools, and driven by individual classroom-based concerns. Furthermore, we found that teachers' perceptions of cultural workplace conditions and supportive leadership practices seem to be more important influences for teachers' self-directed learning than their perception of structural conditions.

<sup>8</sup> This chapter has been submitted in adapted form as:

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers' learning is assumed to be influenced by the school in which they work. School factors such as teacher collaboration, resources for learning, policies for professional development and school climate, are understood as affecting how teachers learn (Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Imants & Van Veen, 2010; Smylie, 1995). Literature reviews indicate that the effectiveness of teachers' professional development is highly dependent upon the context in which the teacher is operating (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010). A teacher's workplace is an important environment as it could provide learning opportunities in daily teaching practice (Borko et al., 2010; Horn & Little, 2010), opportunities to learn together with colleagues (Little, 2012), and opportunities to apply new knowledge and skills that are learned outside the school context. According to Little (2012, p. 25):

... [s]chools that support teacher learning and foster a culture of collegiality and continuous improvement are better able to support and retain new teachers, pursue innovation, respond effectively to external changes and secure teacher commitment

Scholars in the field of teacher learning build on insights from workplace learning to further analyze these contextual influences (Fox, Wilson, & Deaney, 2010; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijgaard, & Imants, 2009; Imants, Wubbels, & Vermunt, 2013). Workplace learning studies aim to determine what workplace conditions enable or constrain professional learning (Ellström, 2001; Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009; Smylie, 1995). Furthermore, in recent studies it is argued that it is not so much the objective conditions which support or impede employees' professional development, but the way they interpret those organizational conditions in relation to their work and learning (Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009; Imants et al., 2013; Nishii & Wright, 2007; Tynjälä, 2012). Previously, a few studies have demonstrated how mediating psychological factors on part of the individual might impact the relation between structural and cultural dimensions of the school organization and teachers' professional learning (Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel, & Krüger, 2009; Kwakman, 2003; Thoonen, Slegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). Thus, it is of interest how teachers' perceptions of the workplace environment can be understood as affecting professional learning. We regard these perceptions of the workplace a consequence of sensemaking processes in which the teacher interprets messages from the institutional environment and integrate these messages in their existing framework (Coburn, 2001).

Furthermore, recent workplace studies relied on participatory approaches and socio-cultural theories (Tynjälä, 2012) to emphasize how employees are participating in communities of practice or participating in professional learning activities. However, within those approaches, the teacher as an individual making deliberate choices in the workplace environment is overlooked (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). The individual and the environment should be seen as mutually influencing each other through the interaction of workplace affordances and individual's agency (Billett, 2004; Imants et al., 2013). In this study, we focused particularly on teachers' actions as individuals making sense of

and consequently responding to conditions for learning in the workplace (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005; Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009; Imants et al., 2013; Poell & Van der Krogt, 2013; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Moreover, the participatory approach on the processes of learning shifts the emphasis away from *what* is to be learnt, thus creating the risk that workplace learning is treated as ‘an abstract idea or learning for learning’s sake’ (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015, p. 13). Our focus on teachers’ self-articulated professional learning goals can accommodate the perspective of teachers acting upon their environment because these goals are elected by the teachers themselves.

This study aimed to explore the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of their workplace environment and their learning and was guided by the following research question: *how do teachers’ perceptions of workplace conditions relate to their professional learning goals?*

## 4.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 4.2.1 TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GOALS

In our study we view teachers as active agents that develop themselves professionally, not as passive recipients of professional development. On the basis of studies highlighting the importance of addressing teachers as active agents in educational change efforts (Hoban, 2002) and studies on employees’ agency (Billett, 2004, 2011), teachers can be viewed as agents that self-direct their learning process (Janssen, Kreijns, Bastiaens, Stijnen, & Vermeulen, 2012; Lohman & Woolf, 2001). Self-directed learning as concept is derived from adult learning theories that positions the learner to have a sense of personal autonomy in their learning. This personal autonomy can be seen as learners taking control of the goals and purposes of learning and to assume ownership of learning (Garrison, 1997; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). In addition, studies on self-directed learning claim that in day-to-day learning employees ‘are responsible for most of the detailed decision-making about learning, including choices what to learn, how to learn, and at what pace the learning will occur’ (Confessore & Kops, 1998, pp. 367-368). The concept of self-directed learning is especially relevant in the Netherlands, as Dutch teachers are generally held responsible for their own professional learning and keeping teaching quality high. In this study we focus on *teachers’ professional learning goals* as the initial phase of teachers’ self-directed learning (Tough, 1979) and define a learning goal as *desired change in behavior or cognition* (Bakkenes et al., 2010; Fenstermacher, 1994; Putnam & Borko, 2000). We understand teachers’ learning goals as influenced by both self-perceptions (e.g., self-efficacy, career aspirations), tasks characteristics and responsibilities, and teachers’ perceptions of the context (e.g., as situated in practice with current classroom or school-wide issues) (Borko et al., 2010; Eraut, 1995; Horn & Little, 2010; Imants & Van Veen, 2010; Tynjälä, 2008).

### 4.2.2 WORKPLACE CONDITIONS OF SCHOOLS

There is a range of studies on relevant workplace conditions for teachers to work and learn (Ellström, 2001; Eraut, 1995; Imants & Van Veen, 2010; Rosenholtz, Bassler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 1986; Slegers & Leithwood, 2010; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Smylie,

1995) which share similar findings on what constitutes important workplace conditions in terms of teacher learning. Some examples of essential school conditions are that a) teachers share their work, jointly prepare lessons, or collaborate in a learning community (Little, 2012; Smylie, 1995), b) teachers are participating in school-wide decision-making on school improvement (Rosenholtz et al., 1986; Smylie, 1995), and c) teachers are supported in their learning by resources such as time, materials, colleagues, and feedback mechanisms (Ellström, 2001; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). This diverse set of essential conditions for teachers to learn during their work can best be understood if we consider them part of structural and cultural organizational conditions and features of school leadership that could stimulate or hinder teachers' work and learning (Imants & Van Veen, 2010).

Structural conditions refer to the way schools, teachers' work, and teachers' learning are organized structurally in terms of time, space, resources, work load, task variation, evaluation and feedback, organizational goals, and professional development policies. According to Ellström (2001), employees need to have access to adequate learning resources, which includes objective factors such as time for learning and reflection, and subjective factors such as knowledge of the task and work processes. As regards time, there needs to be a subtle balance between time for teaching and time for learning and reflection, both collaboratively and individually (Ellström, 2001).

The term 'cultural conditions' in the literature refers to building a shared school culture, aiming for a shared school vision, a culture of collaboration, a professional learning climate, and collective decision-making (cf. Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Little, 2012). It is especially the culture of collaboration among teachers and a shared understanding of the school's organizational goals that work to improve teachers' on-site learning, in which continuous learning becomes a school-wide norm embedded in the professional community (Little, 2012).

Leadership, which can be viewed as a cultural condition, is assumed to be relevant for teachers' professional learning through the way school leaders influence structural and other cultural conditions (Slegers & Leithwood, 2010). Supportive school leadership can be considered 'transformational' (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990) if it is characterized by the following three dimensions impacting teachers' work and learning, 1) vision (i.e., inspiring teachers to be engaged in their work by developing, identifying, and articulating a particular vision), 2) individual consideration (i.e., concern and respect for the personal feelings and needs of teachers), and 3) intellectual stimulation (i.e., challenging teachers to professionalize in such a way that the organization as a whole is learning).

#### 4.2.3 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WORKPLACE CONDITIONS

Studies on school-organizational conditions have already shown that psychological factors mediate the impact of these conditions on teachers' engagement in professional learning, for example through teachers' commitment and self-efficacy (Geijsel et al., 2009; Kwakman, 2003; Thoonen et al., 2011). Similarly, the objective workplace conditions alone do not influence teachers' learning, it is how teachers make sense of their workplace as a learning environment, and as a consequence use the learning opportunities afforded by this environment (Coburn, 2001; Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009; Imants et al., 2013; Tynjälä, 2012). In this sensemaking approach teachers are seen as individuals who compare

school-organizational messages with their preexisting framework and decide whether to act upon school policy or not (Coburn, 2001; Weick et al., 2005). This process is dynamic, because both organizational conditions and work and learning processes change continuously (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010). In a similar vein, Billett (2004) introduced the concept of co-participation at work, referring to the process of learning 'shaped by interactions between what is afforded by the workplace and how individuals elect to engage with what is afforded' (p. 316). Merely taking into account situational factors to see workplaces as learning environments is not enough. Thus, it is at the intersection of what an organization affords an individual, and consequently the individual perceiving this learning environment, that we can understand how and what individuals are able to learn through work.

In line with Imants et al. (2013), we understand sensemaking in this study as the perceptions teachers have of their workplace as enabling or restrictive to their own learning, and consequently, in what way they use their perceived learning environment for how they self-direct their learning (operationalized as teachers' professional learning goals). An example of this sensemaking process is how teachers integrate organizational goals within their own goals and how their perception of their workplace influences this decision-making.

## 4.3 METHOD

### 4.3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

We explored the relationship between individual teachers' learning goals and their perceptions of their workplace environment in a small-scale interview study. From a sample of interviews with 31 teachers from two Dutch schools for secondary education (School 1 and 2) we selected a subsample of four cases (two teachers from each school) to explore this relationship more in-depth. Because of our specific focus on how teachers perceive their workplace as a learning environment, we needed a research design which was sensitive to particularities in different school contexts. Therefore, we first summarized how teachers within the two different school contexts perceived the schools' workplace conditions. On the basis of this descriptive analysis we were able to make a selection of four teachers and explain context-specific particularities within and across the four cases.

### 4.3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The study took place in two secondary schools (School 1 as described in Chapter 2, School 2 as described in Chapter 3). Prior to the interviews, a school visit of four months took place to learn about contextual factors that could influence teacher learning. Each four-month period was used for 60 classroom visits, and informal conversations with staff (see also Appendix A). After this socialization period, 16 and 15 teachers from School 1 and School 2, respectively, with varying levels of experience and teaching backgrounds were selected for interviews. In all, 31 teachers were interviewed on their perceptions of their school's workplace conditions and their learning goals.

The emphases on teacher professional learning differed per school. In School 1, the topics of interest were learning about ICT technologies in the classroom and coaching beginning teachers. Recently, ten teachers were invited to participate in a course on

coaching beginning teachers and obtain a coaching certificate. In School 2, school leaders recently held performance interviews and was conducting a short survey among teachers about the causes and consequences of their experienced workload. For the past three years, the plenary study days were focused on ICT (especially laptops) in the classroom.

#### 4.3.3 INSTRUMENT

Interviews were held on the basis of a semi-structured questionnaire and lasted approximately 75 minutes. At the start of each interview it was emphasized that teachers should feel free to articulate their own learning goals, without taking into account what others would like them to be learning. Because teachers may experience difficulty with articulating concrete learning goals for themselves (Janssen et al., 2012; Van Eekelen, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2006), we designed interview questions from various perspectives intended to support teachers to talk about their own learning (similar approach as Chapter 2 and 3, see Appendix B for questions). From these various perspectives and the follow-up-questions we aimed to deduce teachers' professional learning goals (see data analysis).

To study teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions, questions were designed to stimulate teachers to talk about the learning resources available in the school, learning culture, and the way their school management stimulates teacher learning. A sample question was: 'What do you see as concrete learning opportunities in this school, and what learning resources are available for teacher learning (e.g., books, instructional methods, websites, courses, professional learning communities)?'

#### 4.3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. We first compared 31 teachers' perceptions of their workplace to arrive at a selection of cases. These cases were used to explore the relation between teachers' perceptions and their learning goals more in-depth.

##### *Selection of cases based on teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions*

First, summaries were made of each teacher's responses regarding the questions on workplace conditions in their school. Next, all remarks on workplace conditions were listed in key sentences per teacher. A coding scheme was designed based on sensitizing concepts from workplace conditions literature (e.g., Ellström, 2001; Slegers & Leithwood, 2010; Smylie, 1995). Sample sensitizing concepts were 'Learning resources' (structural conditions), 'Professional learning climate' (cultural conditions) and 'Stimulating initiatives' (leadership). Every key sentence received at least one code from the coding scheme. The code could be either *Constraining*, if that matching sensitizing concept was experienced as constraining teachers' learning (example statements: 'little teacher influence in ...', 'too little time for ...', 'too much emphasis on ...'), or *Enabling*, if that sensitizing concept was experienced as enabling teachers' learning (example statements: '... stimulates my learning', '... is made available', or 'there is a culture/norm of ...'). On the basis of frequency counts we created a summary per school of teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions (see Table 4.1).



**Table 4.1** Number of key sentences coded as constraining or enabling workplace conditions per teacher.

	<b>Structural</b>		<b>Cultural</b>		<b>Leadership</b>	
	Constraining	Enabling	Constraining	Enabling	Constraining	Enabling
<b>School 1</b>						
Duncan	3	1	0	1	0	1
Ryan	3 <sup>a</sup>	4	2	4	1	1
Barbara	1	4	1	3	2	3
Susan	2	5	4	2	3	3
Sarah	2	6	1	2	3	3
Courtney	1	3	2	2	0	1
Gerard	4	2	5	2	6	1
Anna	1	4	3	0	0	2
Ronda	2	0	1	1	5	1
Richard	2	1	1	0	0	1
Paul	1	5	1	1	0	2
Henry	0	4	0	1	0	4
<b>Patricia</b>	0	4	0	2	1	1
Philip	0	5	0	1	1	2
Vicky	4	4	3	1	2	3
<b>Bernard</b>	4	1	1	0	2	1
<b>School 1 totals</b>						
<b>Sum</b>	30	53	25	23	26	30
<b>Mean<sup>b</sup></b>	1.84	3.28	1.53	1.41	1.47	1.72
<b>School 2</b>						
<b>School 2</b>						
Hanna	1	7	2	1	1	2
Alex	5	6	1	0	1	0
Alissa	0	6	0	1	0	2
Johan	0	4	0	2	0	1
<b>Erik</b>	1	6	1	3	1	2
Helen	0	8	0	3	2	4
Nicole	5	6	1	2	3	2
<b>Vera</b>	3	7	2	3	4	7
Ferdinand	2	7	3	1	1	1
Bart	2	4	3	0	3	1
Rick	2	6	0	4	2	3
Hester	3	3	0	2	1	1
Lois	4	7	3	5	4	2
Caspar	6	3	2	2	4	0
Karel	5	3	6	1	6	0
<b>School 2 totals</b>						
<b>Sum</b>	39	83	24	30	33	28
<b>Mean<sup>b</sup></b>	2.43	5.37	1.57	1.97	2.17	1.83

**Note.** All names are pseudonyms. Names in bold are selected cases for further analyses.

<sup>a</sup> Italic number-pairs indicate that at least one of the key sentences of this teacher (in this category) was coded as enabling and constraining.

<sup>b</sup> Mean key sentences were corrected for the double-coded key sentences, i.e., if one key sentence was coded as both enabling and constraining.

Based on the coding of teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions, we distinguished similarities and differences both within and across schools. The numbers from Table 4.1 show that schools differed mainly in their mean average key sentences about structural conditions (i.e., higher mean score of enabling structural conditions in School 2 compared to School 1). The numbers for each teacher show great variation within each school. For example, in School 2 the teachers differed in their perceptions about the structural conditions: Nicole sees them as both constraining (5) and enabling (6), Helen perceives them as clearly enabling (8), and Caspar perceives these conditions as mainly constraining (6). In addition, these numbers show that some teachers explained extensively how the school was supportive (or not) to their professional learning (for example Gerard in School 1), whereas others did not make a lot of remarks (Richard in School 1).

Differences between schools also became clear from the content of the remarks teachers made. In School 1, teachers mentioned a lack of opportunities to learn from each other and opportunities for feedback and evaluation. For example, four teachers were negative about the absence of performance interviews in the school (structural). Negative perceptions about collegial collaboration were mainly articulated with respect to some subject departments that were not perceived as supportive to their work and where opportunities to exchange ideas for lessons were missed (cultural). Teachers from School 1 acknowledged that the school leader is accessible and supportive of their initiatives (leadership). Simultaneously, nine teachers were negative about top-down leadership and a lack of shared decision-making in the school (culture and leadership). For example, one teacher explained:

We are not being heard. School management decides top-down, and that goes like 'this is how you are going to do it', which results in resistance from teachers.

In School 2, teachers' initiatives are stimulated and rewarded, and at the same time eight teachers mentioned to experience a heavy workload (structural). This workload seems related to the high number of innovations (ICT) and school activities the school has been introducing over the past couple of years. Eight teachers feel that the school is focused too narrowly on ICT, and too much time is spent on learning about ICT (structural and cultural). The school leader is perceived as being accessible and having good relationships with the teachers, although seven teachers experienced the school leadership as directive, since they do not have a say in what they want to focus on themselves (leadership). For example, one teacher said:

Within the themes which the school deems important, everything is possible. There is much pressure to learn about ICT and to implement school policies.

Teachers from both schools perceived the following structural and cultural workplace conditions and leadership practices as enabling their learning: learning opportunities provided (i.e., time, facilities, resources), collaboration among colleagues, support from management and autonomy for teachers to decide what they want to learn individually (i.e., initiatives are rewarded and requests to do a workshop or follow a course are usually

approved). What was perceived as constraining was a lack of teacher participation in decision-making (top-down) and a lack of a clear vision in the school and the accompanying policies and procedures.

In addition to these differences between schools, Table 4.1 also shows that school's workplace conditions could be perceived as enabling *and* constraining by teachers from the same school. An example of this within-school variation can be found in teachers' perceptions of school leadership. In both schools teachers perceive their school leadership as accessible and as stimulating initiatives for professional learning, however, there were nine teachers from School 1 and seven teachers from School 2 that experienced a directive school leadership. To explore such within-school variation more in-depth and how different perceptions of the workplace conditions relates to teachers' self-directed learning, we selected two cases from each school.

For the selection we used a purposive sampling technique, to arrive at maximum variation between cases (Creswell, 2007); we wanted to select four teachers, two teachers from each school, with one teacher from each pair perceiving the workplace as clearly enabling learning and one teacher perceiving it as clearly constraining learning. We selected four teachers from our sample of 31, namely Patricia and Bernard from School 1 and Erik and Vera from School 2. The selected cases also differed in the way their perception of the workplace related to their learning goals, so we were able to show the variation that exists in these relationships. For example the case of Vera does not show a clearly enabling or clearly constraining perception about her school's workplace conditions from Table 4.1, but from her 'constraining' remarks an interesting relationship with her learning goals could be demonstrated. That is why we included her. These four teachers, two men and two women, also differed regarding years of experience and the subject they taught.

#### *Exploring the relation between perceptions of workplace conditions and learning goals*

To be able to relate the four teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions to their learning goals, we first had to deduce their learning goals from their answers to the questions on teacher learning. In this study, we defined professional learning goals as *desired change(s) in behavior or cognition*. A learning goal could start from a task that had been imposed on the teacher or in response to school-wide issues, but it only counts as a goal if the teachers *themselves* approach it as something to learn about (according to our perspective of teachers as self-directed learners). Teachers could formulate learning goals related to their classroom context and learning goals that were related to their broader school context (see also Chapter 2 and 3 for a description of analyzing learning goals).

To explore the relationship between teachers' perceptions of the workplace and their learning goals, a profile of each teacher was created in which the teacher's learning goals and workplace perceptions were summarized. First, we explored within each case how teachers' perceptions of the workplace as enabling or constraining their learning were related to their learning goals and looked for examples that would demonstrate this sensemaking process. Finally, we compared cases in order to distinguish thematic similarities across cases that could answer our research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## 4.4 RESULTS

### 4.4.1 TWO CASES: PERCEPTIONS OF WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AS ENABLING

**Patricia (27 years of experience, school I).** Patricia is a Music teacher that started working at this school 15 years ago as part-time teacher. She now works full-time, with half of her time teaching (15 lessons per week), and half of her time filled with extra-curricular responsibilities, such as coordinator of the school's international program, coaching beginning teachers, mentor of two classes, and coordinator of a compulsory in-school PD course. One of her learning goals focuses on implementing more ICT technology in her classroom, because at the moment she does not feel comfortable using new digital technologies and software programs in her class. She just returned from a week-long masterclass on international education in Lapland and got inspired to use the digital technology that was presented there. She has a strong preference for learning by doing (e.g., hands-on), in courses, through interaction with (international) subject colleagues, and by reflecting on her teaching with and without others. According to Patricia her school offers both compulsory learning opportunities and opportunities upon your own request. For example, her masterclass was facilitated by the school leader in terms of scheduling her for a week off and stimulating her to go. Patricia arranged a European grant for herself to be able to attend this international masterclass.

Also, Patricia experiences a clear school vision on active student learning which matches her own ideas of effective teaching.

You see, in this school active student learning was emphasized in the school's vision. They really want teachers to use teaching methods that foster active student learning in class. As a teacher working in a school where there is no such vision, you might find yourself alone in learning about this topic and then it gets really hard.

She is coordinator of the compulsory in-school PD course for second-year teachers. The focus in this course is on how to use activating teaching strategies in class. In this course a small group of teachers come together regularly and share their experiences and give advice on implementing new activating teaching methods in their classrooms. Patricia explains that she also learns from these suggestions for her own teaching practice. She aims for a continuous adaptation of instruction to match students' learning processes and students' worlds.

The case of Patricia shows how her perception of the school as offering learning opportunities upon teacher requests in combination with the school's vision that fits her ideas of good instruction, makes her positive about the learning opportunities in this school. She acts upon these school conditions by organizing an international grant and masterclass for herself that provide her with hands-on experiences to feel comfortable in learning about digital technologies in the classroom. Her learning goals seem to result from creating her own learning opportunities by going abroad and her involvement as coordinator of the in-school PD course. In terms of sensemaking, we found that Patricia's positive experiences with structural and cultural conditions in her school strongly relates with her ambition to continuously develop herself as a teacher.

**Erik (4 years of experience, school 2).** Erik has taught Religious Studies at this school for four years, and this year started a university program to become a licensed teacher. When he talks about his workplace environment he states that this is a great if not the best school for teacher professional learning, because there are so many learning opportunities, opportunities for task differentiation, a strong learning culture, and an accessible school leader. He compliments the school leaders for having an eye for individual teachers and their professional learning.

Regarding his learning goals he is determined to grow professionally but feels obstructed by his current work load. This year he experiences an increased work load due to task differentiation (e.g., coordinating school activities, teaching a new subject). He now needs to set his boundaries and learn to say ‘no’ to any more differentiation.

I want to deliver quality in my lessons (now it's more about quantity), so I want to acquire more content knowledge, which I can do by spending more time preparing classes, but I do not have time for that.

An important detail is that he does not blame the school for this high work load, but accepts that the work load is part of a teacher’s job. Although he is really positive about the school as a learning environment, he cannot seize the opportunities offered because he feels he lacks time to develop himself professionally. Therefore his learning goals are related to reducing this work load and his school duties, in order for him to make room for deepening his content knowledge and subject-specific pedagogies.

Erik’s case shows us how a teacher’s agency is played out in a high-work load environment, because he tries to change the tide by focusing his learning goals on managing his work load before moving on to what he actually wants to learn. In terms of sensemaking, we found Erik’s perception of the work environment as supportive (although restricting his learning opportunities because of the high work load), combined with his personal ambitions to deliver quality in his lessons, to be key for him to take responsibility and try to self-direct his learning.

#### 4.4.2 TWO CASES: PERCEPTIONS OF WORKPLACE CONDITIONS AS CONSTRAINING

**Bernard (34 years of experience, school 1).** Bernard has 34 years of teaching experience and will soon retire as a teacher. He predicts he will leave this school with a feeling of bitterness because he does not receive any appreciation and recognition for his work. In all those years he has worked hard and conscientiously to prepare his math lessons and tests, and has ‘delivered’ students with good exam grades. He feels that he is not rewarded for these efforts. Instead, he feels that appreciation goes to teachers that organize extra-curricular activities.

In this school there is a lot of appreciation for everything, they think it's amazing if you organize a school trip to Burundi, but if I'm at home designing a school exam, that takes me longer. Then they act as if every teacher in this school performs equally well when it comes to teaching, but that is not true. [...] And I'm part of an organization in which I feel I have less and less to say, whilst I'm still good at my job, I think that's weird.

He gives an example of how he became disenchanted with the school organization; an occasion when things were decided without input from the teachers. He explains that he used to be very involved in school and organized a Project Week for students for more than 15 years in a row, but during one management meeting it was decided that from then on there was no longer going to be a Project Week.

Concerning his learning goal, he feels that there is no reason to change his teaching because his students' performance on the exams is above average. If he feels he needs to learn anything, he does not need any support or training to do so. Whenever there were curriculum changes in the past, he taught himself the new material because he knew his students would also have to learn it themselves. Although he does not articulate explicit learning goals he keeps investing in drawing up good examples and assignments for his students to practice with, because he does get appreciation from his students, and simply because he gets paid to make his students do well in their exams.

To sum up, he experiences the school as a constraining workplace due to a lack of recognition for his work, and its top-down leadership and decision-making; neither does he see an urgent need to change his teaching practices. The case of Bernard shows us that teachers that experience their workplace as constraining their work and learning might focus their learning on assisting student learning (classroom context goals), and turn away from issues in the broader school context (school context goals). In terms of sensemaking, Bernard's case provides a good example of how a teacher's personal history (cf. ontogeny Billett, 2011) serves as a filter for how he perceives his current workplace environment. This, together with Bernard approaching retirement and lowered investment, may have resulted in a teacher that does not see a need to change (Beynon, 1985).

**Vera (12 years of experience, school 2).** Vera works as a Dutch language teacher at this school and, in general, values the opportunities for learning in terms of time, facilities and differentiation in tasks. She is eager to take up new challenges within and outside the school in order to keep herself motivated as a teacher. Nonetheless, she does not feel the urge to go along with the current emphasis on digital learning (ICT) in her school. Her learning goals are aimed at developing her content knowledge, guiding special needs students, and coaching beginning teachers. She does not feel comfortable with the direction in which the school is heading, i.e., towards more use of digital devices and – to prepare for that – spending many plenary team sessions on improving teachers' digital competences and software use. Therefore, she experiences the school's ICT learning environment negatively because there does not appear to be sufficient time for developing digital content, and for discussing the vision behind the use of ICT in the school and the way teachers can use it effectively.

I'm frustrated during the ICT team sessions. We're going really fast in the domain of ICT, but they do not consider the negative sides of it, that is what we as school need to think about, what do we want to achieve by using ICT in our school.

Instead of moving along with current innovations in her school (i.e. ICT) and without experiencing enough challenges in teaching itself, she now focuses on out-of-school learning

activities such as developing a literature course for retirees which is subject related but not school related, and challenges her to develop interesting subject materials.

To sum up, she perceives the current ICT trend in school negatively, which sometimes frustrates her, but she still likes to learn a lot and wants to experience challenges in her work. The case of Vera shows how schools might offer many learning opportunities in terms of team sessions and facilities on a certain topic, but if teachers experience no shared vision or space for exploring the possibilities, they may focus their learning on other topics of interest. In terms of sensemaking, Vera finds it difficult to integrate the implementation of the innovation with her own beliefs what good education constitutes. As a result, she creates new (out-of-school) learning opportunities for herself.

#### 4.4.3 COMBINING RESULTS

The structural conditions that were mentioned in these four cases concerned resources (in terms of permission for cancelled classes) for Patricia, enough time for Erik, and learning opportunities and task differentiation for Vera. The cultural conditions and leadership characteristics that mattered for teachers' self-directed learning were a clear school vision for Patricia, opening the school dialogue about work load for Erik, not being recognized and top-down leadership for Bernard, and lacking school dialogue on the underlying arguments for the innovation at Vera's school. Both Patricia and Bernard (School 1) and Erik and Vera (School 2) work in the same school environment but perceive it quite differently, but also the two 'enabling' cases and the 'constraining' cases differed in the way they made sense of the workplace conditions.

In general, we saw that Patricia and Erik, who experienced their workplace as enabling learning, differed in the way they articulated their learning goals. They were similar in that they both showed a high level of agency by either organizing their own learning opportunity abroad (Patricia) or by taking responsibility for their own work load (Erik), but different in what they would like to learn, depending on their interests, levels of experience and school-based learning opportunities. The learning goals formulated by Bernard and Vera, who perceived some characteristics of their workplace as constraining teacher learning, had in common that they focused on other goals than the school management envisioned for their organization. Bernard focused solely on his classroom context and his students' learning. The content of Vera's learning goals related to other school responsibilities (coaching colleagues, coaching students) and learning goals outside the school context (organizing a literature course for adults).

## 4.5 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### 4.5.1 CONCLUSIONS

From the 31 interviews about teachers' perceptions of the workplace conditions, we can conclude that learning opportunities, collaboration among colleagues, support from management, and autonomy to decide what to learn were regarded as enabling teacher learning. Teacher participation in decision-making (top-down), a lack of clear vision and accompanying policies and procedures were perceived as constraining teacher learning. By exploring four teachers' cases more in-depth, we tried to gain further insight into how

these perceptions about the workplace as enabling or constraining relate to teachers' self-directed learning. We addressed the research question: *how do teachers' perceptions of workplace conditions relate to their professional learning goals?*

Based on four different cases, we found that structural conditions played a minor role in how teachers perceived their workplace as learning environment compared to the cultural conditions and characteristics of leadership. Teachers' perceptions of the cultural conditions and leadership characteristics seemed more important when teachers formulate learning goals for themselves. This finding relates to earlier studies on the importance of a shared understanding of school goals, professional learning climate and transformational leadership practices for teacher learning (Jurasaitė-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Little, 2012). The cultural conditions and leadership characteristics in this study concerned a clear school vision (Patricia), having a schoolwide dialogue on issues that matter most (Erik & Vera), and being heard, feedback and recognition (Bernard).

The case of Bernard emphasizes the importance of individual support, recognition of performance and school management's involvement in teachers' teaching. Not feeling recognized in your work narrows teachers' focus down to doing only what teachers are paid to do, namely to teach. An important implication of this case might be that being recognized as a professional or feeling heard, can have a positive effect on teachers' self-directed learning. On the other hand, we do not know whether Bernard would formulate more learning goals if his perception of the school as learning environment was more enabling. The career phase before leaving teaching is characterized either with confidently looking back on their career and gradual withdrawal from the profession or with dissatisfaction and increasing disillusionment due to tensions in the workplace (Beynon, 1985; Day et al., 2007). It seems that Bernard falls in the latter category and his (lack of explicit) learning goals are maybe more a result of an interaction of his perception of the current workplace environment, his personal history with this environment, and his current career phase. Late-career teacher Patricia does not seem to fall in either of these end-of-career categories. In contrast, her perception of the same school as Bernard's is one that clearly enables teachers learning by offering plenty learning opportunities and communicating a clear vision on good education. Interestingly, both Patricia and Bernard perceive the same school environment quite differently. This also seems to relate to what both teachers need from their environment for their specific learning goals; Patricia likes to learn in courses and through interaction with (subject) colleagues which she can easily organize for herself in this context and within her responsibility as coordinator of an in-school PD course. Bernard would probably benefit from more recognition of his teaching. Apparently, the same environment can be perceived differently as a result of different concerns and learning goals of teachers (cf. Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009).

Second, the cases of Erik and Vera show how a professional dialogue in school can influence the direction of teachers' learning. Erik's school leaders try to understand the causes and consequences of teachers' work load experiences, and at the same time Erik perceives it as his responsibility as a teaching professional to be able to manage work load. The management's being understanding and having teachers discover the causes of their own work load might have made teachers more aware of their own responsibility in managing the work load. In contrast, the case of Vera shows how a lack of dialogue in the



school or of school leaders' vision on (ICT) innovations can influence the way teachers make sense of the innovation ("why are we doing this in the first place?") and shifts their focus away from it. Vera decides to move away from the current innovation and search for other topics that interest her. Both Erik and Vera work in the same school environment but perceive it quite differently. As a consequence of this sensemaking process, their enactment of their school environment differs in relation to their classroom concerns and learning goals. From these cases we conclude that besides their perceptions of their workplace environment, teachers' learning goals are a result of an interaction between their own concerns of the classroom, and the context of the school.

#### 4.5.2 IMPLICATIONS

Our findings demonstrate teachers to differ greatly in how they perceived the same work environment and what consequences this has for how they direct their own learning. Future studies on workplace conditions for teachers' learning should take this sensemaking process into account when drawing inferences about how the school as learning environment can support teacher learning. If we are to organize professional schools for teachers to learn, school-organizational workplace conditions are still granted a central role (Smylie, 1995; Van Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012). For school leaders it can be very complex to steer teachers' learning in a particular direction or to experience any direct influence at all on teachers' learning pathways (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Poell & Van der Krogt, 2013). Nevertheless, it remains important for school leaders to show interest in teachers' individual learning pathways and recognize their current performances, and to stimulate a shared vision while maintaining a professional learning climate (Hoekstra, Korthagen, et al., 2009; Janssen et al., 2012; Little, 2012; Tynjälä, 2012). Because of teachers making sense of what their school environment affords and actively directing their learning (Billett, 2004; Bryk et al., 2010), we should not expect school leaders to have a one-way influence on what teachers learn. It is at the intersection of what a school affords and the sensemaking processes of teachers that professional teacher learning emerges. The task and challenge for school leaders is to create such workplace 'norms' that teachers feel it is their own responsibility to continue learning, but at the same time keeping the school's collective goals in mind (Little, 2012). Furthermore, school leaders should be aware of the dynamic character of teacher learning at the workplace, which implies that the ways teachers perceive their workplace environment and the ways this influences their learning can differ within and across teachers and from time to time (Bryk et al., 2010). Our study showed that keeping this balance between individual and collective goals and creating an environment for teacher learning is a complex endeavor.