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Interpersonal issues in knowledge sharing: the impact of professional discretion in knowledge sharing and learning communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide insight into individual teachers' behaviour and decisions regarding the exchange of knowledge, focusing on status, interdependence and reciprocity, and psychological safety. It highlights the key role of the individual professional in knowledge-sharing and professional development contexts. A social-constructivist perspective and qualitative design (case study) were employed. Eighteen teachers in upper-secondary vocational education were questioned in interviews or focus groups. Data was analysed by coding, interrelating, and reasoning. Results show how professional discretion directs intercollegial communication and sharing. Interpersonal issues (status, safety, and reciprocity) influence decisions about sharing with or withholding knowledge from certain colleagues. Consequently, professional development and processes of sharing and managing knowledge are in danger of falling flat when ignoring the individual's impact. This emphasises the importance of individual professionals' attitudes and preferences, and informal, social structures in approaches to professional development, knowledge-sharing practices, and learning communities.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the concept of the 'knowledge economy' or 'knowledge society' has been much discussed. This knowledge-driven world sees 'a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources' (Powell and Snellman 2004, 199). Meanwhile, stability and the number of routine jobs are decreasing while flexibility, knowledge, and creativity are gaining importance (Livingstone and Guile 2012), and neoliberalism has risen both in business and in education, with competition and performance as key elements (Huber 2016).

Education is not immune to global, neoliberal, and knowledge-driven developments (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019); education institutions rely and build on their knowledge base, which forms the core of their existence and operation. They are expected to educate individuals to succeed in the knowledge society (Hargreaves 2003) and to support economic productivity and competitiveness (Ball 2009). Therefore, teachers constitute

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a central category of workers and have a crucial role to fulfil in this context (Hargreaves and Goodson 2007, xvii). Against this background, professional development and knowledge management take a prominent position in education institutions, signalling the need for exchange of knowledge between employees.

This article aims to contribute to the existing literature on the process of knowledge sharing between teachers by studying intersubjective factors. The individual (professional) is the central object of study, placed in their social (work) environment. This differs from most studies that tend to focus on organisational and facilitative matters or formal organisational structures, and which appear to underestimate the role and influence of individuals in knowledge exchange, professional development, and organisational functioning. Little research delves into the examination of individual actors in this context, and this study aims to reduce this gap. It does so using the research question 'What role does intercollegial interaction play in knowledge exchange settings?', alongside which two subquestions, one concerning the nature of professionalism and discretion and one concerning the impact of intersubjective issues on interaction and knowledge sharing.

Learning organisations, managerialism, and professional discretion

Knowledge has a role in creating and maintaining the relationships and arrangements that underpin organisations, but also is a product itself, and under such circumstances, knowledge and its management are increasingly viewed as critical to organisational effectiveness and performance (Bosua and Venkitachalam 2013). As a reaction to this, organisations in the knowledge economy can act as learning organisations that support professionals in collaborative learning and improvement (e.g., Velada et al. 2007), and in which employees are expected to continuously expand their capacity and productivity strategies and be committed to collaborative learning (Kools and Stoll 2016; Odor 2018).

In the context of the current study, then, what may the sharing of knowledge and expertise concern? Amsterdam is one most densely and diversely populated regions in the world, facing common urban issues such as inequality, multiculturalism, anti-social behaviour, and housing shortages. The education institutions and the student and teacher populations involved in this study reflect these dynamics. Teachers, for example, are expected to possess knowledge and skills regarding many pedagogical issues, such as challenging classroom management, racism, and poverty. During so-called 'study-days', teachers can follow thematic masterclasses, or workshops hosted by colleagues, to learn and share insights. Another area of knowledge important to these teachers in vocational education concerns curricula and the work sphere. The interrelationship between courses, internships, practice, and third parties can be complex, and issues of examination, professional standards, and national and local regulations are regularly topics of discussion and professional development.

Alongside this, neoliberal conditions in education drive competition and may cause fear of underperformance – a development that calls for adaptation and change within schools and that goes hand in hand with managerial cultures with so-called managerial transparency and accountability measures (Ball 2009; Darder 2019). Managerialism has become a typical form of governance that can be found in public and private organisations, including education institutions (Meyer, Buber, and Aghamanoukjan 2013). Using management's generic tools and knowledge, managerialism establishes itself systemically

in organisations, shifting decision-making powers from owners and employees to specific individuals with formal positions in line management (Magretta 2012). Often adopting a top-down approach, higher-level individuals set goals and performance indicators, provide infrastructures, and create incentives and penalties, to steer lower-level individuals (e.g., Brodtkin 2011). In education, this has resulted in increased standardisation (Ponnert and Svensson 2016) and teachers being held accountable to benchmarks (Ottesen and Møller 2016).

As education institutions are concerned with the performance of their employees on the one hand, and the management of knowledge on the other, knowledge management is crucial. The rise of managerial approaches introduced an increased focus on organisational professionalism, which is concerned with standardised procedures and practices to deal with external regulation and accountability issues. Besides organisational professionalism, Evetts (2009) distinguishes occupational professionalism, which concerns individual (discretionary) judgment, autonomy, and collegial authority within a group. A focus which shifts to organisational professionalism, then, may influence occupational professionalism and discretion. Whilst teachers were used to guide their own acting and performance (Deem and Brehony 2005), standardisation and managerial control also reduced teachers' traditional occupational professionalism and professional discretion (Ottesen and Møller 2016; Ponnert and Svensson 2016), implying less space for decision-making concerning daily work, interaction, and performance.

Although managerial processes explicate procedures and complicate the appliance of professional discretion, they do not necessarily make professional discretion disappear. Professional discretion depends on the context and organisational culture (Sanden and Lønsmann 2018) and can be carried out in different ways (Ellis 2011). Based on the literature discussed, a subquestion for the current study is how professionalism and discretion form, considering these developments and in the context of intercollegial interaction.

Professional development

Knowledge management and knowledge sharing between teachers are increasingly seen as means of professional development (e.g., Gairín-Sallán and Rodríguez-Gómez 2009; Runhaar and Sanders 2016). In the Dutch context, professional development often focuses on performance management and result-based cultures (e.g., Brouwer, Westerhuis, and Cox 2016). The operationalisation of this in schools often takes a form of professional communities (Vangrieken et al. 2017), called 'professional learning communities' (e.g., Stoll and Louis 2007), 'communities of practice' (e.g., Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), or 'communities of learning' (Paloff and Pratt 2003). Aiming at exchange and creation of knowledge, such communities can support teachers' professional development and co-construction of knowledge (Van Schaik et al. 2019; Verloop and Kessels 2006) through, for example, sharing outcomes of reflections and experiential learning (Avidov-Ungar and Ben Zion 2019; Girvan, Conneely, and Tangney 2016) and reflecting collectively and discussing collaboration (Kelly and Cherkowski 2015). A mixture of perspectives and experiences is believed to scaffold this interactive process (Van den Bossche et al. 2006), and the literature on schools as learning organisations points out the

key importance of the connection between personal and interpersonal learning (e.g., Admiraal et al. 2021).

For education institutions, interaction between teachers is pivotal to knowledge management, and for teachers, exchange can provide insights, support, and growth. However, it should not be assumed that communication and collaboration happen automatically. Adequate contexts of exchange require dialogue spaces between the individuals involved (Decuyper, Dochy, and van den Bossche 2010): intersubjective spaces constituted by and between individual teachers.

Aspects relational to knowledge sharing

Instead of assuming that individuals communicate and share when together, it is important to consider possible influences on their interpersonal behaviour. To study the second subquestion, which questions how intersubjective issues impact on knowledge sharing, this study includes factors expected to influence such interaction, which are status; exchange, reciprocity, and interdependence; and psychological safety.

Status

Status can be described as one's relative social standing, or position in a hierarchy (Van Vugt and Tybur 2015). Status has been identified as a factor that can affect communication and collaboration between groups of professionals and between individual professionals, as well as sharing behaviour (Andrews and Delahaye 2000; Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995; Park, Chae, and Choi 2017). Sutton, Neale, and Owens (2000) found that hierarchy affects participation in sharing and discussions, and Rehm, Gijssels, and Segers (2015) found that those who consider themselves to be 'senior' more easily share and exchange. Moreover, reflecting a key Foucauldian principle holding that dominant individuals tend to maintain their position, enhancement of one's status may be a motivation to share knowledge (Park, Chae, and Choi 2017). The concept of power has a prominent place in educational research, as 'educational institutions and their assorted sets of practices provide ideal environments for the interplay of multiple forms of power' (Murphy 2013, 8). Similarly, Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001) show how in the knowledge economy concerns about one's position can make people hide or hoard information and knowledge.

Exchange, reciprocity, and interdependence

In social exchange relationships, *exchange* refers to 'voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring' (Blau 1964, 91). As exchanges between parties are not negotiated (Molm 2003), investing parties share knowing that there is a possibility there will be nothing in return (Blau 1964). Expectations can affect decisions on what to share with whom, mostly because of expected future returns or rewards. Reciprocity is an important element of social exchange theory (Blau 1964; Flynn 2005) and influences knowledge-sharing behaviour (Goh and Sandhu 2013).

Teachers work within social exchange relationships, not only to share knowledge or expertise, but also because they regularly depend on colleagues' contributions to do their own work. Such mutual dependence can foster communication and sharing interaction (Decuyper, Dochy, and van den Bossche 2010; Renfrow and Howard 2013; Van den

Bossche et al. 2006), and especially positive interdependence stimulates collaboration (Decuyper, Dochy, and van den Bossche 2010). In the literature, less attention is paid to the actual content of sharing, which appears to vary from experiences and insights, to concrete products and materials. The limited studies on this topic assert that if individuals perceive their knowledge as a valuable 'asset', knowledge sharing is mediated by decisions about what knowledge to share and with whom.

Psychological safety

Sharing, and certainly sharing of personal knowledge and information, is not without risk. It can be precarious owing to the possibility of making mistakes, losing one's 'assets', and the power games involved (Homan 2001). Whether or not individuals feel that the social context is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, is commonly referred to as 'psychological safety' (Edmondson and Lei 2014). Psychological safety and associated risks affect learning (Carmeli and Gittell 2009; Edmondson 1999); a psychologically safe environment can increase the chances of effortful, hazardous behaviour (Edmondson and Lei 2014), and trust in the other party adds to the willingness to both share one's own and use someone else's knowledge (Holste and Fields 2010).

Materials and methods

This study focuses on interpersonal processes. It assumes that social and cultural conditions shape individuals, and the 'self' must be understood in relation to 'the social process in which the natural and the human environment are mediated through the significant others' (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 67–68). The exchange of individual perspectives and knowledge is at the core of social constructivism, which assumes that knowledge is constructed in social contexts. This social constructivism creates an intersubjective component as the cornerstone of this study.

To study individuals and their interaction, a research approach is required that allows participants to freely share their insights. Therefore, this study has a qualitative design. Qualitative research often aims to identify ways through which relationships between individuals operate and does so by collating and analysing rich data to infer meaning and explore the mechanisms behind relationships (Magrath, Aslam, and Johnson 2019). More specifically, this study can be depicted as a case study that involves participants from two similar education institutions. As an established method (e.g., Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2017), case studies allow for in-depth explorations of issues in real-life settings (Crowe et al. 2011), concerning for example events for which relevant behaviour cannot be manipulated or situations in which the researcher has little control (Rowley 2002). This applies to the context of the current study, as interpersonal behaviour, interaction, and teams change frequently, without any influence from the researcher.

The primary method used in this study is the interview. An important benefit of interviewing is that it adds to uncovering individuals' private and sometimes incommunicable social worlds through establishing a conversation that allows for sharing stories and experiences (Edwards and Holland 2013). In addition, focus groups were used, which in social and educational research allows for collection of rich data and the examination of social interaction and preliminary results (Curtis, Murphy, and Shields 2014). The choice was taken to conduct semi-structured interviews as these allow for flexibility and pre-set

topics (Boeije 2014; Curtis, Murphy, and Shields 2014), which are important to an open approach while maintaining some level of direction in the conversations. As this study builds on a theoretical background, previous studies on knowledge sharing have provided input for themes and formulating questions. Six main topics were discussed, relating to the constructs discussed previously. Topic A relates to *Exchange and reciprocity*, topic B relates to *Interdependence*, topics C and D relate to *Status*, and topics E and F relate to *Psychological safety*.

- (A) *Interaction and sharing*. Questions focused on if and how sharing takes place, conditions to communicate/share, and contexts of interaction, in order to explore criteria for interaction (or avoidance) and sharing of knowledge.
- (B) *Interdependence*. Questions focused on ownership of knowledge and work, and on collaboration and exchange, relating to the need to either share with or avoid colleagues.
- (C) *Status*. Questions focused on the role of knowledge in interaction and on how positions may relate to interpersonal behaviour, focusing on teachers' perceptions and relative positions.
- (D) *Power*. Questions focused on authority, influence, and roles, aiming to discover power relations between colleagues.
- (E) *Trust/safety*. Questions focused on feelings towards colleagues, as trust was expected to underpin or prohibit the dialogue spaces needed for sharing and developing.
- (F) *Risks*. Questions focused on effects and risks of 'making public' one's knowledge.

Insights from the individual interviews (notes, transcriptions, and an initial, brief analysis) served to depict themes for the focus group conversations. The themes for the focus groups were *Communication and formulation of knowledge (centring on concrete exchange)*, *Facilitation (which arose as a theme related to topic A)*, and *Appreciation of colleagues/Influence of character (further exploration of topics C, E, and F)*.

The study is based on the data of 10 individual interviews. Consequently, two focus-group interviews of four participants each were held. The participants of the focus groups were different to those of the individual interviews. Out of the 10 individual participants, there were seven women and three men, and their ages ranged from 26 to 64, with an average age of 41. Out of the eight focus group participants, five were women and three were men. Ages ranged from 30 to 64, with an average age of 47. All participants worked in secondary vocational education in Amsterdam and had at least two years of experience in that sector. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, and names have been anonymised. In some cases, participant quotes are only referred to with gender, age, and/or function to decrease recognisability. The focus-group participants were explicitly made aware of the limitations to anonymity.

As indicated, the study adopts a social constructivist perspective. A second cornerstone stems from the possible role of status and power within the context researched. A generally accepted tenet in the sociology of knowledge is that knowledge is related to power (e.g., Murphy 2013), because individuals construct, contest, and confirm 'realities' through selectively distributing knowledge in their social context. These cornerstones coincide with the micropolitics perspective that scaffolds the analytical approach

deployed in this study. Micropolitics (Ball 2011; Blasé 1991) concerns formal and informal power and the way these are used in situations of conflict and cooperation to achieve goals in organisations.

The cornerstones scaffolded the analysis, in which interrelating and reasoning (Saldaña 2014) were used to consider how fragments and codes may interact. Connections were sought within, between, and among codes, for example by comparing content. Reasoning was involved to find causal probabilities, to summarise, and to evaluate. To provide an example: a talk over coffee may initially be coded as 'talk' or 'break'. With other participants subsequently adding fragments that include 'talk' as well as 'sharing', reconsideration of this results in changing the code to 'sharing interaction', adding meaning to a, at first sight, seemingly random conversation. Approaching the codes thereafter with a knowledge and social constructivist-informed lens, the content shows connections that concern the sharing of knowledge (interrelating), and a causality that could be summarised as 'exchanging information may be knowledge sharing' (reasoning).

Results

Standardisation and professional discretion

The first main finding is that professional discretion has a significant impact on the context of intercollegial knowledge sharing. Discretion, here, does not refer to making decisions on concrete in-class performance or daily tasks, but concerns decision-making regarding communication and collaboration. Underpinning this, results reveal standardisation processes through managerial processes within the school contexts researched. One example of this is that manuals for mentoring students and protocols for half-yearly student progression meetings set standards, limits, and criteria for grades and examinations, which impact on discussions regarding pedagogical and individual students' circumstances that teachers consider important to take into account. Another recurring issue is the focus the organisations place during meetings and study days on (knowledge about) systems, protocols, and accountability, rather than on individual professionalism and exchange of teachers' expertise. Saskia for instance sighed 'systematic learning is stimulated – so: all the rules, codes, policy aspects. But if it concerns nourishing the mind, inspiring, and discussing educational innovation, well . . .'. Facilitation and organisation of knowledge sharing and professional development tended to be organised top-down, often resulting in demotivation and resistance to opportunities and activities offered by the institution. Nora illustrated:

We had prepared it nicely and easily, so that we could have learned well from each other, and then we are told top-down it should be like this and that, well, then . . . I believe that the board should listen to teams more to make it attractive to learn from one another.

The effect of these processes and standardisation is that teachers start to use discretion as a 'tool': who to communicate with, and who to involve in an inner circle of trust, sharing, and collaboration. They start to form their own small-scale groups, as an attempt to belong to a professional community that focuses on occupational professionalism, instead of on organisation-wide meetings, protocols, etc. As such, standardisation

appears to result in fragmentation of teacher interaction, in which discretion is deployed to establish or avoid intercollegial interaction.

This experienced decrease in space for professional discretion and autonomy does not *eliminate* space for individual decision-making. But the individual decisions of a teacher regarding communication, sharing, and being open to colleagues strongly affect both the occurrence and the content of interpersonal sharing. One experienced female teacher illustratively indicated that her willingness to listen or exchange simply ‘depends on who says it’, and a mid-career male participant shared: ‘That might have to do with taste. In the sense of . . . I don’t *like* you, or I don’t *believe* you, or you are not honest to me.’

Interpersonal issues in discretionary reasoning

Such decisions relate to interpersonal matters. If asked, ‘Would you like to share your knowledge?’, all of the interviewees initially responded in the affirmative. As Khalid put it: ‘your own backpack with tools will increase, causing your range and problem-solving work opportunities to increase’. Participants acknowledged a variety of benefits of exchanging ideas and techniques, such as developing more complete courses. However, when thereafter asked ‘Always and with anyone?’, most participants started to show signs of doubt, raised eyebrows, or promptly said ‘no’. These findings show that actively sharing knowledge is not an obvious thing to do and indicates that there are causes or reasons not to engage in knowledge sharing and exchange. These insights demanded further exploration from two angles: participants’ views on the interaction with their colleagues that share their knowledge, and views on actively sharing one’s own knowledge.

As for the first, analysis reveals that decisions on listening to a colleague and accepting information and advice depend on three factors. Most importantly, the content has to be useful and adequate; second, the colleague has to be ‘a good employee’; and third, the colleague concerned has to be an affable person. Irene indicated that she considers it important that someone ‘is able to convince me that it will bring me something’ – she prefers proof and results over ‘just another story’. Other participants used words like ‘effective’, ‘functionality’, and ‘applicability’.

Although many participants indicated that the estimated worth of the content is the most important factor in their decision-making, a baseline attitude towards the other person influences them in their communicative behaviour. Factors two and three are of a more subjective nature, and participants indicated that the initial willingness to communicate with a colleague, whatever their role in the interaction or exchange, partially depends on feelings towards the other. It appears that communication is more likely to occur, and shared knowledge or content is accepted more easily, when the colleague providing it is judged as being friendly and a ‘good professional’. The descriptions participants used during their interviews picture a professional who ‘supports others’ and ‘offers help’, ‘is serious’, ‘keeps promises’, ‘teaches well’, ‘shows involvement’, and delivers in time, ‘minding deadlines’.

The results above imply that individual discretion impacts on behaviour and intercollegial communication. Analysis shows that the discretionary reasoning involved in actively sharing and collaborating is also related to issues of interdependence. Interdependence influences teachers’ judgment on colleagues, as it adds to the ‘good professional’ aspect.

Interpersonal relationships between colleagues are especially found to be affected by practical inconveniences that can arise from being dependent on colleagues. Nora finds being dependent unpleasant, 'because you have to chase others, and the interaction is not benefitted by this'. In such situations that involve two colleagues, it appears to be a case of whether or not one feels like communicating with the other, similar to social interaction in everyday life. On a larger scale, this mechanism of discretion appears to also apply to (sub)groups. Nique described: 'Issues with subgroups . . . are you part of it or not? Do I concede you my information or not?' This, too, adds to the fragmentation of interaction.

Trust and risks

Relating to actively sharing one's own knowledge, results indicate that protectionism affects the willingness and decisions to share knowledge, implying perceived risks. This finds a base in the 'huge investment in your job' (An-Nah). As Thomas mentioned, 'when exchanging teaching material or knowledge, there is a chance that teachers say "I developed this, so it is mine".' Participants clearly expressed a sense of ownership and, when colleagues are involved, a protective attitude fuelled by the fear that 'someone can benefit at the expense of your hard work'. They believe there are colleagues that produce (e.g., knowledge and material) and colleagues that consume. The consensus on this is that it is unfair to use someone else's knowledge or material, when there is little or no 'quid pro quo', that is, return or reward for work delivered. If 'someone has worked with heart and soul and thinks "well, nice, and what do I get in return?"' (An-Nah), these thoughts add to discretionary reasoning, usually with a negative effect.

Trust is found to impact on the willingness and choice to communicate with others. Central to this is the behaviour of avoiding situations in which one might become subject of gossip or doubt about one's professionalism. Nique elaborated on her experience in her team, where 'if you share things in our team that didn't go down smoothly, you get a sort of label', and other participants mentioned similar cases that point towards the influence of psychological safety. As a consequence, learning from and working with experience and knowledge of a more personal nature tends to limit itself to the individual (for instance, through personal reflection) and is less likely to reach the stage of interpersonal sharing. The participating professionals often 'more easily share success than failures' (Ronny) and consider whether 'is this a success story, or a debacle' (Van Dijk), avoiding vulnerability and leaving opportunities and knowledge untouched.

Status

Two key elements were found regarding hierarchy and status and their effect on knowledge sharing: seniority, and one's perception on being considered as a knowledgeable person. Junior teachers prefer not to share their knowledge and engage too much in interaction, while being on the other, more 'senior side' of this spectrum seems to allow for sharing. Irene, an experienced senior teacher, pointed out the friction she observes between 'younger colleagues' and 'us' by differentiating explicitly: 'I think the youngsters are quite self-confident which makes you think "My my, you've only got your diploma for one year now".' Junior teachers indicated being familiar with such situations. As for

the second key element, findings show how factual knowledge provides teachers with a position in their community, a position that not only results in colleagues taking their advice and coming to them when in need, but also increases self-confidence. Partially, hence, status 'consists of having the knowledge and overview' (Mira). These results suggest that awareness of positional differences is a matter of status rather than organisational hierarchy.

Discussion

The results indicate that standardisation processes are taking place and add evidence to the existing research which claims that line management imposes standards, assessment, and infrastructures (Brodkin 2011) and which sees a decline in traditional professional discretion (Ottesen and Møller 2016; Ponnert and Svensson 2016). Brodkin (2011, 447) holds that 'performance measurement can have a powerful influence on street-level discretion (that is, you get what you measure)'. While individual control and space for decision-making are contested by the boundaries set by managerialism, teaching professionals value their professional discretion because it constitutes their professional performance and positions them as an individual professional in the organisation, providing some distance from shared organisational professionalism. This study once more underlines that in this knowledge economy, 'as people's jobs and roles become defined by the unique information they hold, they may be less likely to share that information – viewing it as a source of power and indispensability' (Davenport, Eccles, and Prusak 1992, 54). The organisation then indeed 'gets what it measures': necessary teaching, participation (at best), or merely presence at compulsory meetings and study days, and required administration, but not necessarily more than that. Occupational professionalism and professional discretion are being 'pushed' towards the space remaining as teachers move to small-scale interpersonal contexts below 'the organisational level'. This development has three significant effects on the individual professional and their intercollegial behaviour, resulting in limited interaction and exchange of knowledge.

First, teachers appear to empower their professional status by deploying their discretionary space to manage and maintain their position. Considering how individual knowledge and expertise symbolise the professional's being (contrasting general procedures and organisational standards), sharing one's knowledge may affect one's professional being. Regarding 'the organisation' (often referred to as 'the management'), they keep a distance and protect their autonomy, as they appear to sense that 'autonomy is a set of freedoms to act which are a set within firm limits and which may be withdrawn or curtailed' (Ball 2011, 122). Laying low seems to be the strategy here, in order to avoid the risk that autonomy is curtailed. On the other hand, there is the intercollegial position. Recalling that an important reported foundation for status is being 'a good, knowledgeable professional', insight into one's knowledge and products can affect the position one has in their team. Significant in this context is that teachers are found to consciously share or withhold knowledge, using their discretionary liberty. After all, they, and no one else, decide on what they share and with whom. Providing access to one's knowledge implies putting one's own position into play and might impact on the position of colleagues when providing them with knowledge or tools.

With this, results confirm the claim that issues of status affect communication and collaboration between professionals (Andrews and Delahaye 2000; Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1995; Park, Chae, and Choi 2017). However, although Park, Chae, and Choi (2017, 22) suggest that individuals may 'proactively share knowledge because this behavior increases their social prestige and recognition', results do not support or contradict this as a motive to share knowledge. Rather, it is found that professionals try to maintain, or at least not decrease, their status by carefully deciding what to share with whom.

Second, the development relates to psychological safety. The issue of intercollegial status mentioned earlier links into this. Similar to how Homan (2001) and Edmondson (1999) describe the psychological circumstances of learning and sharing in group settings, this study found that knowledge sharing in a group setting is not without psychological risks. Sharing may result in exposing flaws or being judged, possibly resulting in a change in perceived status. The hesitancy found implies insufficient psychological safety in teams, which complicates the possibly fruitful sharing of outcomes of reflections and experiential learning as posited by some studies (Avidov-Ungar and Ben Zion 2019; Girvan, Conneely, and Tangney 2016). Various participants elaborate on positional risks, doubts, and possible responses from colleagues that affect their willingness and decisions regarding intercollegial communication and knowledge sharing. The positive relationship Sutton, Neale, and Owens (2000) found between position and level of activity was also found in the current study that shows a relationship between seniority and sharing. Rehm, Gijsselaers, and Segers (2015, 121) write that 'members from lower hierarchical positions will mainly follow discussions and rarely interject', and this study confirms this idea. Junior teachers are more hesitant to participate and share, whereas more senior teachers and those with more knowledge (hence: a higher social position) not only more easily share their knowledge, but in some cases explicitly doubt the contributions of junior colleagues. This implies that more senior teachers perceive higher levels of psychological safety compared with junior teachers. Therefore, it is appropriate to state there was no 'shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risktaking' (Edmondson 1999, 350), creating barriers to interaction and exchange.

Third, the development affects exchange and coping with interdependence. Burns (1961, 261) describes how in a micropolitical environment, individuals can simultaneously be 'co-operators in a common enterprise and rivals for the material and intangible rewards of successful competition with each other'. The analysis reveals a reciprocity mechanism that influences sharing and that builds on social exchange theory. Considerations as discussed by the participants at this point are based on the same reasoning as Blau (1964, 91), writing that 'voluntary actions of individuals ... are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring'. The results support Blau's (1964) core principle holding that someone exchanges knowledge or a product, being aware of the possibility there might not be something positive in return. In line with Goh and Sandhu (2013, 292), the common principle found in the current study regarding exchange is that 'if the cost is higher than the benefit, one would not participate in the action'. The protective behaviour regarding material and knowledge found partially results from pride and time invested. Individuals are reluctant to expose and exchange, in keeping with Jarvenpaa and Staples (2001, 172), that concerns of 'power, rational gains, and distrust lead people to hide or hoard information and knowledge'.

The current study thus supports studies that found reciprocity as an element of social exchange (Blau 1964; Flynn 2005; Goh and Sandhu 2013). It contributes the notion that expected *negative* rewards, such as someone else claiming credit for work done by others, can also affect and form an obstacle to exchange. The most profound implication of the protective attitude found is that it can curb intercollegial knowledge sharing and, with that, thwart the development of learning communities and learning organisations. Although considerations of rewards and risks mostly relate to direct colleagues, analysis also shows a fear of colleagues taking credit somewhere else in the organisation. This suggests that some form of reward or recognition from the organisation may influence discretionary reasoning regarding knowledge sharing, and that the organisational reward system could play a role in the knowledge-sharing arena.

While accepting that interdependence is a given fact in the participating schools, exchange of knowledge and material nevertheless is shown to be related to discretionary reasoning regarding possible gains or losses. This can result in teachers sharing only what is (practically) necessary, and at a moment that suits them, which they decide upon based on their attitude towards the respective colleague(s). Participants spoke about their own performance being dependent on their colleagues, and results highlight a working environment in which interdependence is common, reflecting the existing theory about interdependence in teams of professionals (Decuyper, Dochy, and van den Bossche 2010; Van den Bossche et al. 2006). However, the claim that these studies make – that task interdependence fosters communication and information sharing – cannot be supported by the current study. The finding that participants have to ask some colleagues multiple times for input suggests that *communication* may increase, but that *sharing* does not necessarily follow. Considering the discretion at play, it may be adequate to approach some (targeted) exchange situations as dependent, rather than interdependent, social contexts. Although within the organisation and work context employees are interdependent, not every employee depends on every colleague directly.

Within this context, characterised by limited psychological safety, a professional status under pressure, and sensitive social exchange relationships, a significant form of daily professional discretion takes is deciding what knowledge, to what extent, is shared with whom, and at what moment in time. The distribution of knowledge to others or throughout the organisation can impact on the performance of colleagues, of teams, of departments. It can, for example, influence the fulfilment of tasks and the cognitive capabilities of others. Knowing how to deploy knowledge and discretion also can enable one to steer their environment and possibly to influence management and organisational professionalism. In the context of daily practice, Sanden and Lønsmann (2018, 116) refer to this space as the ‘power to act within and across the frames and expectations set up by the language policy’, representing ‘the interplay between individual agency and institutional structures’. The current study, too, suggests that professional discretion can act as a mediator between rules and procedures on the one hand, and daily practice, interaction, and performance on the other, but also implies that this power reaches beyond individual performance.

Conclusion

From a professional development and a knowledge management point of view, knowledge sharing and intercollegial collaboration are essential. This study posed the question

'What role does intercollegial interaction play in knowledge exchange settings?' The current study underlines the importance and necessity of intercollegial interaction and knowledge exchange, considering benefits for professional development and practice. However, the role of intercollegial interaction entails more than actual communication and exchange, as it also relates to managing professionalism and relationships. With reference to the subquestions, it shows that the social environment and intersubjective issues impact significantly on the process of intercollegial communication and sharing. Most profoundly, this study shows how professional discretion provides the individual professional with the power to share or withhold knowledge. Teachers are found to use their discretionary space to mould and direct their intercollegial communication, and, answering the first subquestion, their occupational professionalism and professional discretion appear to become instrumental to maintain autonomy and influence over their position and practice. Previous research indicates that management processes may complicate the appliance of professional discretion, but do not necessarily make professional discretion and forms of its application disappear. The current study aligns with these claims, providing increased insight into the exercise and role of professional discretion through social interaction and intercollegial communication.

Teachers' discretionary reasoning in turn is impacted by status, interdependence, and safety and reciprocity, which provide grounds for judgment and behaviour. As such, professional discretion is crucial to engagement and scaffolded by personal preferences and assessment of others. This answers the second subquestion: intersubjective issues impact on knowledge sharing as they impact on both the initial willingness to connect and communicate, as well as on the degree and content of communication and sharing.

Meanwhile, standardisation processes, top-down management, and a focus on organisational professionalism can be perceived as a threat to one's professional being, while putting emphasis on changing individual positions. The implications of professionals using professional discretion instrumentally evolve around discretion not simply being a decision-making tool for professional performance, but also a means of exercising power and managing intercollegial collaboration. Sharing or withholding personal knowledge is found to serve as a defence mechanism to protect one's own position, as well as a tool for selecting those colleagues that are judged to be worthy of possessing more knowledge and involvement than others, with that manipulating the professional work environment.

As intersubjective issues and social processes between colleagues are impacting on knowledge sharing, communication, and collaboration, this implies that individual decisions can act as a brake on the operation of professional communities and learning organisations. This also raises doubts whether or not time and (public) money spent on intercollegial exchange initiatives in schools deliver the results aimed for. This study shows that the role intercollegial interaction plays in knowledge exchange settings is crucial. Intercollegial interaction is at the core of knowledge sharing and management, as *the knowledge to be shared resides in individuals that control the content and degree of their communication and knowledge exchange*. Davenport, Eccles, and Prusak (1992) sharply question why, when information is a primary unit of organisational currency, owners would give such knowledge away. This illustrates that knowledge is related to power, as individuals selectively distribute knowledge in their social context (see Murphy 2013). These dynamics imply that teachers cannot reap the benefits of exchanging knowledge

and expertise without being aware of intersubjective issues, and for management and leaders it shows that attention has to be paid to such intersubjective issues that affect behaviour and attitudes between colleagues, with extra attention to employees that are relatively new and the possible role of reward systems. If interaction and exchange remain limited, then opportunities for development remain limited, and the knowledge present in professionals largely remains individual capital instead of more widely available for the benefit of colleagues and the organisation. Most fundamentally and critically is the insight that the individual is the core and key actor in knowledge sharing, not the community or learning organisation they are (put) in, and that this individual's choices define the success of knowledge sharing and knowledge management.

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