

Professional learning through connection: An integrated theoretical framework on role models as informal learning agents

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Rationale and theoretical framework

Global attention increasingly centres on educational quality, with a particular emphasis on teachers' professional development as a potentially crucial pathway to improvement. While formal professional learning is well-researched, less is known about informal professional learning, which often happens through collaboration within a teacher's network (Kyndt & Baert, 2013; van der Rijt et al., 2013). These interactions between teachers, both formal (mentors) and informal (role models), play a key role in professional growth (Gibson, 2004). Role models are suggested to significantly influence learning by offering tacit knowledge and shaping motivation through perceived similarity (Gibson, 2004; Morgenroth et al., 2015). Despite their recognized impact in other fields (e.g. Passi et al., 2013), interaction with role models in teachers' professional learning remains under-theorized.

Both social learning and role identification theory offer useful frameworks to understand role modelling. The first explains how individuals learn through observation, retention, and reproduction of others (Bandura, 1977). The second complements this by highlighting how perceived similarity motivates mirroring (Erikson, 1985).

Research design

The aim of this study is to investigate the characteristics of role models in professional learning contexts of teachers through a two-phased mixed-method approach, comprising a systematic scoping review of literature (2004-2024) on characteristics of role models in professional learning contexts and an exploratory multiple case study of teachers' professional networks in three Flemish primary schools. Semi-structured interviews (n=15) based on the concentric circles method mapped teachers' professional networks and identified key actors like role models. All data was processed in NVIVO using thematic analysis.

Results

Our findings introduce a new definition and a comprehensive characteristics framework.

First, our definition distinguishes between role model status (recognition as a role model) and role model behaviour (exemplary actions), clarifying how formal agents like mentors can demonstrate role model behaviours without being designated role models. Key themes include the dynamic nature of informal learning and the importance of perceived similarity in identification. While gender similarity appears significant, findings on shared ethnic-cultural backgrounds were inconclusive. Shared professional vision and values emerged as potentially more decisive factors, though further research is needed. Importantly, professionals often create "mosaic role models" by integrating beneficial attributes from multiple sources. Second, this study mapped role model characteristics across three dimensions. The social dimension includes approachability, communication skills, openness to feedback, and positive interpersonal qualities. The behavioural dimension highlights maintaining high professional standards, work-life balance, and inclusive leadership. The cognitive dimension focuses on professional expertise and commitment to lifelong learning.

Conclusion

Results indicate teachers select specific characteristics from these dimensions based on their unique learning needs, making the concept of an "effective role model" dynamic and evolving over time. Characteristics and from which domains teachers seek in role models depend entirely on their specific learning need. This underscores the importance of understanding role modelling as a contextualized process, rather than identifying universal attributes of effective role models. While further research is needed to understand the relation between teachers' learning needs and role model identification, this study offers valuable insights into how interaction between teachers can contribute to informal professional learning and teacher collaboration in general.