



Teacher's Perspectives on Collaboration and Professional Development in Portuguese Schools

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Abstract

This paper is part of a broader international research project, which includes eight case studies carried out in public schools in Portugal and in Chile. It is a comparative study, which aims to understand the way teachers describe formal and informal opportunities for collaboration in their schools and its effect in terms of practical knowledge; to identify the enablers and inhibitors that influence professional collaborative learning at school; to understand the role of teacher evaluation and student academic results on teacher's professional development; to analyse how teachers with different skills, experiences and schools view their own professional development. In this case study, a public school, located in the north of Portugal, with sixty years of history, was selected. The participants in the study are teachers from different disciplinary areas and teaching departments. The school includes elementary and secondary school level, with regular and professional study programmes. Data collection is based on semi-structured interviews to the school director and to eight teachers, mainly coordinators of teaching departments. Results based on findings from teachers point out the importance of collaborative work, but they also recognize that schools need a reorganization that includes time for this purpose, integrated on teacher's schedule. Informal opportunities are also seen as fundamental for professional development and to improve student outcomes. Conclusions and implications for teacher collaboration and professional development will be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Collaboration, Professional Development, Informal and Formal Learning, Teacher's Perspectives, Portuguese Schools

Introduction

Collaboration is a key challenge and opportunity for schools and teachers to improve their performance and contribute to their own professional learning and development. Collaboration may assume different forms, such as collaborative planning, peer coaching, mentoring, collaborative action research, or even ranging from advice and consultation to shared decision-making (Hargreaves, 1998; Little, 1990). School culture and leadership is also an important variable influencing teacher collaboration and professional development, as collaborative cultures foster and build on qualities of openness, trust and support among teachers (Flores et al. 2007). Basically, culture is related with people when they are with each other in classroom, or at their disciplinary departments. In this relationship, comes out their values, beliefs and behaviors, shared by all organization members (Schein, 1985, in Day, 2004). Day (2004) refers that school is a physical canary, a formal organization, an employer. It's a rich social and psychological context where teachers develop a professional sense of practice, efficacy and community. For the author, this last aspect seems to be the most important value for the teaching and learning process, for teachers and students.

As referred by Day (2004), teachers understand that shared objectives, collegiality, taking risks, support, mutual respect, open mind, humor and celebration, life formation contributes to the collective passion for professional development. This passion helps to reject the tendency for individual cultures (like autonomy, isolation, and insularity rule), artificial collegiality (the relationships at work are imposed by autocracy), balkanization (exists a competition to obtain resources and rewards; loyalty to the discipline or to the department comes before the



loyalty to the school). According to Day (2004), the ideal would be for schools to assume collegial relationships, where people are as important as the professional, where the work by sharing should prevail towards an emotional comprehension. Denzin (1984, p. 137), mentioned by Day (2004), refers that shared emotions are the center of the meaning to understand, in a significant way, the others emotional experiences. According to Forte & Flores (2014), collaborative work brings several benefits such as moral support, which allows teachers to respond in a more successful way to the problems, among other advantages such as new ideas, reflection about practice, more analytical and creative energy to deal better with students and a stronger capacity to learn from others and to improve continuously. However, the construction of learning collaboration networks takes a long time to function, literature suggests that they offer significant effects, on teachers and, also on students (Day, 2004). Those effects are related with: less teacher's isolation, a bigger compromise to the mission, the objectives of the school and to teaching work, a better chance for teachers to be informed, skillfully renovated and inspired to inspire their students, significant development to adapt teaching to students, and a greater chance to look for a systematic and essential change.

This paper aims to analyze teacher's perspectives on collaboration and professional development and understand the way teachers describe formal and informal opportunities for collaboration in their schools and its effect in terms of practical knowledge and professional development. The study is part of a broader international research project, which includes eight case studies carried out in public schools in Portugal and in Chile.

Method

This study is part of a broader international research project and also a Masters Dissertation on Educational Management and Administration, carried out at the Portucalense University, in Portugal.

The objectives of the project include the following:

- To understand the way teachers, describe formal and informal opportunities for collaboration in their schools and its effect in terms of practical knowledge.
- To identify the enablers and inhibitors that influence professional collaborative learning at school.
- To understand the role of teacher evaluation and student academic results on teacher's professional development.
- To analyze how teachers with different skills, experiences and schools view their own professional development.

This study aims to analyze and discuss teacher collaboration and professional development based on findings from a case study carried out in Portugal, in a public school, located in the north of Portugal. The following research questions were defined to guide the study:

- How important are formal and informal experiences of teachers for their practical knowledge?
- What are the facilitating and inhibiting features that contribute to the development of collaborative teacher work?
- What is the role of teacher evaluation and student results for teacher collaboration and professional development?
- What conditions contribute to teacher's professional development and learning?

Data Collection

The research design of the study combines a qualitative and quantitative approach. The methods for data collection include a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The questionnaire was applied to all teaching staff at the school (N=173), from October to December 2016. For the semi-structured interviews, the school director and teachers with coordination roles in the school were selected (N=8). The semi-structured interviews were carried out from January to March 2017. Table 1 presents a summary of the phases and methods of data collection.



Table 1. Phases and methods of data collection

Phases	Moment	Participants	Data collection	Data Analysis
1st Phase	October to December 2016	Elementary and secondary school teachers. (N=173)	Questionnaire	Statistical analysis using the SPSS program. Content analysis of written comments by the participants.
	January to March 2017	- School Director - Department Coordinators - Coordinator Internal	Semi-structured Interview	Content analysis of interview transcriptions.
2nd Phase		Evaluation (N=8)		
3rd Phase	March to June 2017	Teachers that authorize the observation	Participant Observation	Content analysis of field notes and observations.

For the purpose of this paper, only qualitative data from the 2nd phase of data collection, this is, from the semi-structured interviews to school leaders and teachers with coordination roles in the school, will be analyzed and discussed.

Ethical procedures were considered during the data collection. The research protocol was provided to the School Director, who authorized the development of the study in the school. Informed consent (to the director and teachers) and confidentiality of the data were assured at all research procedures.

The school

The school participating in this case study is a secondary school, with historical reference and over 60 years of existence. It was the first industrial and commercial school in the region and it aims to be a reference in education/training, offering basic level education and a wide range of secondary level education (nighttime inclusive). The school receives students coming from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and it is designated as a TEIP school (Educational Territory with Priority Intervention), concerned with disabilities, overcoming absenteeism and social exclusion in early school. The school includes a multidisciplinary team, including a psychologist, a social worker, a coordinator of social and cultural activities, special education specialists, etc. It is the school with the highest number of students and teachers in the region: 1273 students (between the teaching daytime and nighttime); 173 teachers (day and night). In Portugal, schools are organized in mega-groups, according to recent changes in the Portuguese legislation. This organizational change introduced many challenges for teachers work, their pedagogical practices, collaboration with others, and their personal and professional development. Besides this "problem", the different policies or external regulations, produce a permanent conflict toward teachers' identity and a stable culture of the profession. For these reasons, the context chosen for the study seemed relevant and enriching, considering the objectives of the international project and the impact of its results on the school analyzed. Besides this, the report of the external evaluation of the school called attention to the importance of the development of collaborative practices amongst school teachers and departments. Therefore, the participation of this school in the international research project seemed to be an excellent opportunity to develop further steps in this direction.



Participants

The selection of the participants in the study followed the research protocol of the international project, which suggested the selection of six to eight teachers, with roles of coordination and leadership, besides the role of teaching in the school. The teachers of this case study were selected by the researcher, based on the criteria of those who were involved in intermediate leadership processes, such as the ones with the role of Coordinators of Curricular Departments (CCD), from different disciplinary groups, and also other teachers who play a significant role in the school, such as the Responsible for the Library and the Internal Evaluation Coordinator. A brief description of the characterization of the participants in terms of sex, age, academic qualification, years of teaching, years of teaching in this school, school department and coordination roles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Characterization of Participants

#	Sex	Age	Academic Qualification	Years of Teaching	Years of Teaching in the School	School Department	Coordination Roles
T1	M	66	Master degree	36	17	Philosophy	Director of the school and top leader
T2	F	50	1 ^o cycle of graduation	28	23	Portuguese	CCD – Intermediate leadership and teacher
T3	F	52	Post-graduation in mathematics	31	31	Mathematics	CCD – Intermediate leadership and teacher
T4	F	54	1 ^o cycle of graduation	30	27	Foreign languages	Coordinator of the national reading plan. Responsible for the school Library. Coordinator of the French disciplinary group and teacher
T5	F	54	1 ^o cycle of graduation	31	28	Mathematics	Internal evaluation coordinator and teacher
T6	F	53	Master degree	26	25	Experimental sciences	CCD – Intermediate leadership and teacher
T7	M	54	Post-graduation in School administration and management	25	25	Social sciences	CCD – Intermediate leadership and teacher
T8	F	51	Master degree	24	24	Foreign languages	CCD – Intermediate leadership and teacher

CCD – Coordinator of Curricular Department

Data Analysis

For data analysis, a content analysis was carried out and data from the semi-structured interviews was organized in different categories (Bardin, 2009). The major categories emerging from the data were the following:

- School leadership and culture;
- Enablers and inhibitors of professional collaborative learning at school;
- Opportunities for professional development: formal and informal experiences;
- Being a teacher today and in the future

In the next section, findings will be presented and discussed, according to the data analysis and the review of literature in this field.



Findings

This section explores the main findings from the interviews to the coordinators of curricular departments and the school director. As referred previously, the data was organized in four main topics, which are presented and discussed in detail in this section. Evidence from the interviews, based on the participants' quotes, is also provided to support the findings.

a) School Leadership and Culture

According to the school director's opinion, the school culture is still under construction, since the school was recently grouped. However, this school has a strong culture related with the professional teaching and also with higher level training. About leadership, the director reinforces the co-responsibility and a democratic leadership. Coordinators, in regard to the school leadership and culture, refer the great environment to work.

"Well the culture of the school group is still under construction, it is still very recent. Secondary school has a very strong culture linked to vocational training and higher level training. It is rooted in the community, having turned 60 years in March. It is definitely a school that has formed many medium-high level individuals in this city. It has a professional training culture, but also a very great concern with the academic training of the students, in addition it also invests a lot on student active citizenship. It is a grouping of schools that wants to build a new identity based on and supporting the identity and culture of the secondary school already rooted in the community, matching it with other schools, in which the reality is clearly very different, even by the geographic location of the Secondary school that is in the center of the city and the others in the periphery."

(Teacher #1_SchoolDirector)

"As a student I attended two different schools in this city, one of them was this one and it was this one that I preferred. There was a better environment between students and teachers here, almost 40 years ago."

(Teacher #5 Internal evaluation coordinator)

"The environment is very good among teachers. Especially in my disciplinary group, there is a lot of sharing, it is almost a family, with the other groups we also relate very well, there is a good environment, I think."

(Teacher #7 CCD)

"I am not the right person to talk about this as I am the school leader, but when I joined the school management team, I have always defended a democratic, participative management, of joint responsibility of all the intermediate leaderships. That is why I have given the intermediate leaderships adequate conditions and they know that they have the necessary autonomy to make decisions, within the framework of the legal normative. The delegation of competences is a fact here, it shows a democratic management and with the basic principle that I have always defended: he who is in the school has the capacity to decide. This means that when the director is not there, there will always be someone who has the ability to decide and to solve problems in the immediate."

(Teacher #1 School Director)

b) Enablers and inhibitors of professional collaborative learning at school

Coordinators on their interviews consider that facilitating features are related, mostly, with emotional issues like empathy, capacity to collaborate and availability. The inhibitors are mostly related with incompatible schedule, different interests, difficulty on following the rules, different academic backgrounds and qualifications, values and age.



I notice that sometimes we go on opposite directions, in terms of class council, the teachers who are more involved with the class ... we should have identical directions. I realize that some colleagues, by their way of being, do not follow the rules ... I like to follow the rules because an organization with rules is essential for the success of students and also for us teachers, to have a good environment, ensuring a better quality of teaching and learning.

(Teacher #7 CCD)

Schedules are the main obstacle, incompatible schedules that do not allow us to sit down and talk about anything, we often exchange ideas by e-mail, regarding the preparation of a test, for example. Factors that facilitate are the spirit of collaboration and availability among colleagues.

(Teacher #6 CCD)

I have more affinity with people of my own age, it is usually with them that I talk and I share the work more. Colleagues from the same year in which I finished my degree, there is greater empathy with them. There is probably not so much affinity in terms of certain people, with more complicated personalities, for example, to develop conversations.

(Teacher #8 CCD)

c) Opportunities for professional development: formal and informal experiences

The coordinators interviews reveal that formal experiences fallow higher and independent initiatives both from the Ministry of Education, by several education legislations.

We are together in the same boat and we help each other, we celebrate our birthday days, sharing little snacks and gifts. Our relationship is great, we know each other well. The colleagues who are placed here feel this and, most of them, like to be here. We also cherish them, we try to help, and so they feel sorry for not being able to continue in school.

(Teacher # 5 Internal evaluation coordinator)

Disciplinary areas meet at least twice per period. It may happen that it is necessary to meet every month, but this regularity is not always needed. But at least twice a period, I think that all disciplinary areas meet. The class directors meet with the equivalent periodicity.

(Teacher #1 CCD)

The informal experiences are associated with teacher's daily work at school. Collaboration in this way of thinking is viewed like a simple sharing process, this means, that there seems to be a difficulty to understand the real mean of the concept of collaboration. When asked about the informal experiences of collaboration, some of the teachers gave answers such as "No, not that I know of." or "No, I do not know what you mean. Our meetings are held in an informal way, maybe...". Another teacher, however, answered the following:

Yes, for example to prepare tests and activities and to share and / or discuss something that may have occurred or is occurring outside of what should be the normal development of the teaching and / or learning process.

(Teacher #3 CCD)

d) Being a teacher today and in the future

When asked to find metaphor that suggested how to be a teacher today and in the future, the teachers interviewed had some difficulties to answer this question. Some preferred to write about the discouragement and negative thoughts they feel, when thinking about the disrespect for the teaching career today.

I want to continue to think that we are the sun that will illuminate the minds of these kids, although we are increasingly more substitutable because they will gather information from sources we do not know ourselves, their rhythm is different from ours, but we (teachers) and the school will still continue to be a privileged space of information and knowledge for some more time.

(Teacher #1 CCD)



In the near future, a change in the process of teaching versus learning must take place in an disruptive way, in the sense that, first of all, it will attract the students and we, the teachers, will do not feel anymore in class as if we were "preaching to the fish."

(Teacher #3 CCD)

At the moment, I am in a phase of great demotivation, so I only think about negative things. Maybe in the port without a shelter, at this moment I feel unmotivated about my profession.

(Teacher #8 CCD)

I am a person that knows very little, I am always trying to improve what I know and my practices, because I feel that I know little very more and more. It is a fast pace in personal and professional life. In the future, I want to be here experiencing what is next, but I have some fear about the future, in practice, this is what we have ... Regarding the students we can have in the future, the citizen that we are going to have is what worries me.

(Teacher #7 CCD)

A gear, which needs to be well oiled so that it can continue to work in the future, because I think that as an education professional, I am not isolated and it is necessary that things interconnect I am thinking of those wheels that spin in the same direction, if there is something that stumbles, they will stop working ...

(Teacher #6 CCD)

As parents are very, very absent, the school seems to be a kindergarten; The students have very little autonomy, they want to learn by playing; They are less and less responsible.

(Teacher #5 Internal evaluation coordinator)

Results, Conclusions and Recommendations

Results based on findings from teachers point out the importance of several aspects related to collaboration and professional development in schools. Some of the results can be summarized according to the following points:

- a) positive perception of the importance of collaborative work, recognizing its importance for teaching work, professional development and organizational performance;
- b) nevertheless, this positive perception is mainly focused on a vision of collaborative work in its informal dimension;
- c) reinforcing the idea that collaborative work, in order to be maximized, presumes the existence of a democratic, participatory and responsible organizational culture, allowing teachers to have high degrees of autonomy in the exercise of their functions;
- d) recognition that the main inhibiting factors of collaborative work refer to the organizational dimension (especially schedules) and to the socio-affective dimension (difference / diversity of interests, values, attitudes, academic culture, etc.);
- e) the importance of certain attitudes to facilitate collaborative work, such as empathy, openness and willingness to collaborate, and teachers are relatively apprehensive about the future, both for the challenges they face and for the autonomy of the students, absence of parents, demotivation, etc.)

These findings are in accordance with previous research and studies in this field, as for example, the study carried out by Forte and Flores (2014), about teacher collaboration and professional development in the workplace, which points out to the problems and limitations situated at the organizational level, such as time and working conditions, the lack of training in collaboration, and issues such as motivation and personal difficulties. Teachers recognize the importance of collaborative work, but they also argue that schools need a reorganization that includes time for this purpose, integrated on teacher's schedule. Informal opportunities are also seen as fundamental for professional development and to improve student outcomes.

Based on these results, recommendations for future improvement should focus on the following strategies:



- a) to foster the positive perception of collaborative work in all its dimensions, whether informal or formal, creating opportunities for teachers to experiment and innovate;
- b) reconfigure teaching work in a more flexible and integrated way, especially with regard to schedules and curricula, so that effective collaborative work is possible outside and within the classroom;
- c) develop opportunities for continuous training that allow the experience and acquisition of skills and attitudes that facilitate collaborative work;
- d) reinforce an organizational culture based on democracy, autonomy and participation, so that collaborative work can take place in an environment of trust and recognition.

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