

COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF A CASE STUDY

S. Massa¹, E.A. Machado¹, M. Abelha^{1,2}, A.S. Albuquerque¹

¹*INPP, Universidade Portucalense (PORTUGAL)*

²*CEIS20, Universidade de Coimbra, LE@D, Universidade Aberta (PORTUGAL)*

Abstract

In recent years, professional collaboration in the teaching profession has been defended as a determinant of excellent teaching. It is essential to share ideas, suggestions, and strategies on how to teach, in an articulated and joint work, to achieve the desired results more effectively. The collaborative work allows increasing the knowledge built through the interaction between the different elements, taking full advantage of the different potentialities of each one of the actors.

This paper aims to present the preliminary results of a case study on collaborative teacher learning, which is part of a project that also has an international dimension - of a comparative nature - since it includes 8 case studies, whose main objective is to understand how teachers describe formal and informal opportunities for collaborative professional learning. Therefore, we will present the results of a questionnaire which was applied during 2016-2017, in a school of Northern Region of Portugal, with a sample of 219 teachers (n = 219), distributed by different levels of education.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, case study, professionalism, teaching work.

1 INTRODUCTION

Collaboration plays a crucial role in solving education problems, as it is associated with improving the quality of teaching and learning and school development. As Hargreaves [1] says, "one of the most promising paradigms emerged in the postmodern age is of collaboration, as an articulating and integrating principle of action, planning, culture, development, organization and research" (p .277).

The significant changes in the school's role and the resulting teachers, in large part, from the (new) demands that fall on them, highlight the weaknesses and limitations in the response expected. The need to respond to the school population's ever-greater heterogeneity confronts the teacher with the ineffectiveness of a form of teaching that knows a few variants for the average student. The idea of an inclusive school that guarantees access and success for all students involves providing diversified responses.

As Little [2] points out, "the reason for promoting the study and practice of collegiality is, presumably, something is gained when teachers work together, and something is lost when they do not" (p. 166). Although collaborative work seems to deserve widespread agreement among teachers at the theoretical level, Roldão [3] considers there are not many practices, evident in research, that can be classified as authentic, collaborative work, regarding effective joint work between teachers.

With the same mind-set, Oliveira-Formosinho [4] explains that contemporary society's accelerated evolution has increasingly complexified the educational process. This author [4] (p. 12) refers that the current "post-industrial and postmodern, urbanized and massified, computerized and globalized" society makes the "variety of experiences suitable for preparation of children and young people (...) it far exceeds possibilities of any teacher in solitary performance". In this way, Oliveira-Formosinho [4] adds that teaching collaboration "is a means to deal with this complexity", being "an asset for teaching action in a school for all".

Leitão [5], on the other hand, claims that "it is surprising how over the last few years practices of teachers" continue to be subdued and dominated "by a structurally competitive and individualistic culture" (p. 8), which makes it extremely important to sensitize and call for a change in attitudes, regarding the direction education must follow, in the interests of real education for all.

Chioca and Martins (in Alarcão & Canha [6]) argue that collaborating is an attitude of openness towards the other and the possibility of self-transformation. Therefore, according to the statements of Alarcão and Canha, collaboration "requires the will to do with others" [6] (p. 48). According to the same authors, it implies the existence of prerequisites: trusting the other, valuing their knowledge and

experiences and "believing that with them it is possible to go further than alone" [6] (p. 48). It is also imperative to reveal humility in valuing our knowledge and experience, "admitting and wishing that they change and enrich themselves through the collaborative meeting" [6] (p. 48).

Edwards and Mackenzie (cit. Alarcão & Canha [6]) argue that professional collaboration dynamics are anchored in a capacity they call a "relational agency". This concept is based on each member of the group's ability to align their thinking and actions with their collaborative partners' thinking and action to understand reality better and act on it.

Collaborative work can then be conducive to professional development, a development that "is based on a systematic process and deepening and reconstructing knowledge with a view to improving practice" [6] (p. 51). Thus understood, professional development comprises "a learning process, which requires great personal investment, self-will, effort and commitment to the profession" [6] (p. 51). In the same vein, Day [7] states that "collaborative learning with colleagues within the school or other schools was assessed as an extremely important form of CPD [Teacher Professional Development]" (p. 24).

In short, according to these authors, professional development is a process which accompanies life and is fostered by collaborative experiences, not only of learning, but also of training.

In this sense, in Sanches' perspective [8], the classroom space is "sacred" for the teacher and the students, which generates almost natural isolation. According to the same author, this isolation "is well paid because, thus, the teacher does not create opportunities to discuss his pedagogical-educational act with his peers" [8] (pp. 134-135). Sanches believes that, due to the students' diversity and problems, "the teacher cannot survive without support, discussion and sharing" (p. 135). The same author also considers teachers' resistance to collaborative practices "essentially has to do with a long past of working in class 'behind closed doors'" (p. 135).

In turn, Azevedo [9] states that "a compulsory and universal school, universal not only in access but also in success" (p. 39) also requires a positive attitude and the promotion of success on the part of all professionals from each school.

Alarcão, instead of collaboration, applies the term "collaborative interaction", because "it is a concept formed by two concepts [collaboration and interaction], when they associate, create a new synergy and acquire a more potent meaning" [9] (p. 22). This author, from her experiences, lists some characteristics and situations of genuine collaborative interaction: framing in a pair and or a group; the intentionality of the activity to be carried out; the commitment of each one to the cause/task/project; shared task management; the assumption of the role/roles of each in the peer or group; the management of individual contributions to the joint activity; respect for the diversity of members; loyalty to the objective of the activity; the critical, implicated, co-constructive look; the humility to accept criticism and suggestions; satisfaction in the process and results; and the recognition of personal and professional development.

Goulet and Aubichon (cited by Boavida & Ponte [10]) make trust "the first step towards collaboration" (p. 49), stressing it is essential for participants to question ideas, values, actions openly, in a climate of mutual openness and respect.

Regarding dialogue, Olson (cited by Boavida & Ponte [10]) sees the multiplicity of voices as a means of enriching understanding, making the conversation increasingly informed. However, a dialogue is not just an instrument of consensus, but ideas should be put at the service of confrontation to build new understandings.

2 METHODOLOGY

To conduct the study, the questionnaire was applied to teachers (of different degrees of education), teaching in the same group of schools belonging to the Pedagogical Zone Board located in the district of Porto.

The questionnaire survey was based on a script, designed following the investigation's objectives, with pre-coded responses, using the digital form created with the Google Forms tool, so that respondents must necessarily choose their answers from those given to them formally proposed. To treat the collected data, we opted for descriptive statistics and content analysis.

The study followed the norms of research ethics in education at the international level, namely informed consent and data confidentiality that will only be used for investigative purposes.

3 RESULTS

Faced with the question - *In my department, I am encouraged to play leadership roles*, as we can see in Table 1, the total of respondents (219) was divided by the different answer options, so we cannot draw conclusive data, being worth noting the most chosen option by teachers - *Neither agree nor disagree* (36.5%).

Table 1. *In my department, I am encouraged to play leadership roles.*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	15	6,8%
Agree	65	29,7%
Neither agree nor disagree	80	36,5%
Disagree	42	19,2%
Strongly disagree	17	7,8%
Total	219	100,0%

From Table 2 analysis, we found that collaborative work may correspond, from the interviewed teachers' perspective to sharing ideas and teaching materials to be a practice widely adopted in this group. Only 13 teachers said *I do not agree nor disagree* (5.9%), 7 selected the answer - *Disagree* (3.2%), and 3 responded *strongly disagree* (1.4%).

Table 2. *At my school, teachers share ideas and teaching materials*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	75	34,2%
Agree	121	55,3%
Neither agree nor disagree	13	5,9%
Disagree	7	3,2%
Strongly disagree	3	1,4%
Total	219	100,0%

From Table 3 the analysis, we found that 91 teachers (41.6%) answered - I agree, 57 teachers (26.0%) selected the option *Neither agree nor disagree*, 30 teachers (13.7%) chose the answer - I strongly agree and that 32 professors said I disagree (14.6%). Less significant was the response to the Disagree option (4.1%). These data will allow us to infer that teachers are beginning to break free from an individualistic culture, thus starting a reflective process and sharing experiences with their peers.

Table 3. *In my department, I am encouraged to make decisions on how to teach.*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	30	13,7%
Agree	91	41,6%
Neither agree nor disagree	57	26,0%
Disagree	32	14,6%
Strongly disagree	9	4,1%
Total	219	100,0%

From the analysis of the data collected concerning the question - *In my department, I am encouraged to make decisions on how to evaluate* (Table 4), we conclude most respondents selected the options Agree (42.0%) and Strongly Agree (17.8%), which leads us to infer that teachers reflect, within their department, on decisions in the way they evaluate themselves. It should also be noted a significant

percentage (27.9%) of respondents said that *Neither agree nor disagree*, which causes some perplexity.

Table 4. *In my department, I am encouraged to make decisions on how to evaluate*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	39	17,8%
Agree	92	42,0%
Neither agree nor disagree	61	27,9%
Disagree	18	8,2%
Strongly disagree	9	4,1%
Total	219	100,0%

Regarding the development of projects (Table 5), it seems evident, from the data collected and patents in Table 5, this group, within the different departments, there is an encouragement to carry out these same projects. In fact, we can see that 45.5% of respondents answered - *Agree* and that 16.4% opted for the statement - *Strongly agree*.

Table 5. *In my department, I am encouraged to develop projects*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	36	16,4%
Agree	99	45,5%
Neither agree nor disagree	54	24,5%
Disagree	28	12,7%
Strongly disagree	2	0,9%
Total	219	100,0%

Table 6. *At my school, I am encouraged to play leadership roles.*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	25	11,4%
Agree	77	35,5%
Neither agree nor disagree	79	35,9%
Disagree	28	12,7%
Strongly disagree	10	4,5%
Total	219	100,0%

From the data in Table 7, we will not be able to draw exact conclusions about the respondents' conceptions regarding the question - *In my school, my opinion and experience are considered in the decision-making process*, although selecting the option *Agree* predominates (50.2%). However, we cannot say that this is the respondents' real positioning, as a significant number of teachers answered - *I do not agree or disagree* (27.9%).

Table 7. *At my school, my opinion and experience are considered in the de process*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	22	10,0%
Agree	110	50,2%
Neither agree nor disagree	61	27,9%
Disagree	17	7,8%
Strongly disagree	9	4,1%
Total	219	100,0%

Like the data analysed in the previous questions, the data obtained regarding the question - *In my department, I am encouraged to participate in training actions* (Table 8) show most of the answers focus on the options *Strongly agree* and *Agree* (35.6% and 21.9%, respectively), which leads us to conclude that there is a clear incentive to attend, within the department, continuous training actions. Once again, we are surprised by the lack of agreement or disagreement of 28.3% of the teachers who answered *Neither agree nor disagree*.

Table 8. *In my department, I am encouraged to participate in training.*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	48	21,9%
Agree	78	35,6%
Neither agree nor disagree	62	28,3%
Disagree	24	11,0%
Strongly disagree	7	3,2%
Total	219	100,0%

Given the question - *Teachers work together in planning activities at the school level* (Table 9), most respondents selected the options - *Strongly agree* (48.2%) and *Agree* (43.6%).

Table 9. *Teachers work together to plan activities at the school level*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	105	48,2%
Agree	96	43,6%
Neither agree nor disagree	8	3,6%
Disagree	8	3,6%
Strongly disagree	2	0,9%
Total	219	100,0%

Like the data previously analysed, we also found, from the information in Table 10, teachers, when asked about collaborative work practices in their department, reveal that they *Agree* (46.1%) and *Strongly agree* (37, 4%).

Table 10. *In general, in my department, teachers work collaboratively.*

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	82	37,4%
Agree	101	46,1%
Neither agree nor disagree	24	11,0%
Disagree	11	5,0%
Strongly disagree	1	0,5%
Total	219	100,0%

When asked about the practice of collaborative work within the disciplinary group (Table 11), we found that 103 of the respondent teachers reported *Agree* (47.0%) and that 99 selected the option *Strongly agree* (45.2%).

Table 11. In general, in my disciplinary group, teachers work collaboratively.

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	99	45,2%
Agree	103	47,0%
Neither agree nor disagree	9	4,1%
Disagree	6	2,7%
Strongly disagree	2	0,9%
Total	219	100,0%

From the analysis of Table 12, we can conclude that the respondents divide by the categories - *Agree* (49, 8%) and *Strongly agree* (31.1%). Only a minority of respondent professors said they *Disagree* (5.5%) and *Strongly disagree* (0.9%), which may mean that in this group, teachers generally adopt the practice of collaborative work.

Table 12. In general, at my school, teachers work collaboratively

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	68	31,1%
Agree	109	49,8%
Neither agree nor disagree	28	12,8%
Disagree	12	5,5%
Strongly disagree	2	0,9%
Total	219	100,0%

From Table 13 data analysis, we found most respondents selected the options - *Agree* (48.4%) and *Strongly Agree* (27.9%), which leads us to deduce that, at the level of the Grouping in which we conducted in our study, collaborative work within the Class Council is, overall, effective. To be noted that only a small percentage of teachers mentioned *Disagree* (4.6%) and *Strongly disagree* (0.5%).

Table 13. In general, in my class council, teachers work collaboratively.

Categories	Absolute Attendance	Relative Attendance
Strongly agree	61	27,9%
Agree	106	48,4%
Neither agree nor disagree	41	18,7%
Disagree	10	4,6%
Strongly disagree	1	0,5%
Total	219	100,0%

4 CONCLUSIONS

We recognized collaboration among teachers as a factor of success. In this perspective, we called teachers to promote an efficient, professional relationship, including practical skills for teamwork. In fact, the consolidation of a culture of collaboration within the school community will produce a collective and consensual view of the necessary changes in the educational establishment's organization and functioning. Concomitantly, internal conditions are created so that he can respond with quality to diversity. Collaborative work appears, then, under this logic, as the axis and hinge of the development of the inclusive school.

Following this line of thought, we believe that the existence of collaborative work among everyone can contribute to solving problems experienced in the exercise of the profession, while it will improve the educational success of students since only working collaboratively, will the necessary efforts be

profitable so that it is possible to overcome obstacles in an authentic school spirit as a learning community.

Now, although the participants in our study claim they value collaborative work and tend to be, at the level of their perceptions, in some of the strongest conceptions of collaboration, their views may not necessarily coincide with their actual practice. Therefore, we deduced by the analysis and interpretation of the collected data that it is still noticed, despite some advances and ideals, apparently, defended by the participating teachers, a certain internal incipience in the collaboration procedures.

As facilitators of collaborative work, teachers emphasize the importance of a good relationship between peers to encourage collaboration between teachers, as well as the importance of leadership.

In fact, the role of leadership, and highlighted by some teachers as a facilitating element, highlight the importance of efficient leaders in creating and maintaining learning communities. However, concerning this point, whether in the data obtained in the questionnaire surveys or through the interpretation of the actors' discourse when conducting the interviews, the results are not conclusive as to what happens in the Grouping context on which the investigation was carried out.

REFERENCES

- [1] A. Hargreaves, *Os professores em tempos de mudança. O trabalho e a cultura dos professores na idade pós-moderna*. Amadora: Editora MacGraw-Hill, 1998.
- [2] J. Little, "The persistence of privacy: Autonomy and initiative in teachers' professional relations". *Teachers' College Record*, no. 91, pp. 509-556, 1990.
- [3] M. C. Roldão, "Colaborar é preciso - Questões de Qualidade e Eficácia no Trabalho dos Professores", *Noesis*, no. 71, pp. 24-29, 2007.
- [4] J. Oliveira-Formosinho, "Do modo de aprender ao modo de colaborar - Para uma pedagogia da colaboração docente". In *Formação, trabalho e aprendizagem - Tradição e inovação nas práticas docentes*. (J. Formosinho, J. Machado, E. Mesquita), pp. 9-12, Lisboa: Edições Sílabo, 2015.
- [5] F. Leitão, *Aprendizagem Cooperativa e Inclusão*. Lisboa: Ramos Leitão, 2006.
- [6] I. Alarcão, B. Canha, *Supervisão e Colaboração: Uma relação para o desenvolvimento*. Porto: Porto Editora, 2013.
- [7] C. Day, "A liderança e o impacto do desenvolvimento profissional contínuo de professores" In *Formação e Desenvolvimento Profissional Docente: Perspectivas Europeias* (J. C. Morgado, M.I. Reis) pp. 29-39. Braga: Universidade do Minho, 2007.
- [8] I. Sanches, "Compreender, Agir, Mudar, Incluir. Da investigação-acção à educação inclusiva". *Revista Lusófona de Educação*, vol.5, pp. 127-142, 2005.
- [9] J. Azevedo, "Que tem a Europa para oferecer aos recém-chegados a uma longa escolaridade obrigatória?" In *Escola para todos- igualdade, diversidade e autonomia* (J. Machado, J. Alves, (Orgs.)), pp. 13-40, Porto: Universidade Católica Editora, 2014.
- [10] A M. Boavida, J.P. Ponte, "Investigação colaborativa: Potencialidades e problemas". In *Reflectir e investigar sobre a prática profissional* (GTI (Org)), pp. 43-55, Lisboa: APM, 2002.