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**Title:**

**Teacher Professional Development and Collaboration:  
Opportunities and Limitations in Two School Settings**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on ongoing research on Teachers' Professional Development (PD) and Teacher Collaboration carried out at the Universities of Minho, and Lisbon. The main goals of the research are: i) to identify teachers' professional development expectations and needs; ii) to analyse teachers' professional development opportunities in two school settings; iii) to identify teachers' notions of collaboration; iv) to analyse teachers' collaborative work in two school settings; v) to develop two intervention projects in two schools in order to foster teachers' collaboration and PD. This paper draws upon data related to goals iii) and iv). Data were collected through questionnaires (n= 114) and semi-structured interviews (n=14) between October and December 2006.

Findings suggest rather narrow views of teacher collaboration associated with difficulties in defining the concept. Collaborative work is mainly related to planning and other specific short-term activities. Personal difficulties, lack of training and relevant PD opportunities in collaboration, constraints associated with organisational and contextual factors are also identified by the teachers. The importance of leadership, sharing experiences, teacher motivation and job satisfaction are key issues of the effects and potential of collaboration. These and other related issues will be discussed further in the paper.

Key words: Professional development, teacher collaboration, school culture

**Introduction**

The concept of professional development has broadened over the years. The need to go beyond the 'deficit approach' (Eraut, 1987), which characterized many In-service education initiatives, and to foster its effectiveness in terms of impact on teachers' practice and student learning has led to the emergence of a more ecological and constructivist perspective (Sparks & Loucks-Horsley, 1990).

Researchers have conceptualized professional development as a more inclusive concept encompassing all formal and informal activities which are conducive to teacher learning and professional growth emphasizing the complex, dynamic and ongoing nature of the process (Marcelo, 1994; Corcoran, 1995; Fullan, 1995, Day, 1999). Day (1999), for instance, sees a clear connection between professional development and teacher learning. Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school.

Also of importance is the consideration of the personal, contextual and political factors affecting teacher professional development (Glatthorn, 1995; Day, 1999), which is seen as the 'crossroad' or the 'glue' that enables the linking of policy and practice, of schools and teachers (Marcelo, 1994). It has been widely recognised that workplace conditions play a key role in

enhancing teacher learning and development in schools and in classrooms with implications for the quality of education provided to students. Weiss (1999), for instance, emphasizes the role of leadership, autonomy and discretion, and teacher collaboration in professional development, morale and career choice commitment.

Empirical work has shown that job conditions and teacher community are related to learning at work and professional development. Clement and Vandenberg (2000) suggested autonomy and collegiality as being related to learning opportunities. The underlying process is that high autonomy and high collegiality are in a positive interplay with one another (a circular tension) enabling enough learning space to handle learning challenges. The opposite process is a polar tension, where autonomy and collegiality function independently.

Different kinds of cultures may co-exist in a given school, and consequently, different opportunities are available for teacher learning and development. Alongside individualism, other forms of teacher interaction have been identified, such as seeking and giving assistance, sharing teaching materials and collaborative work (Rosenholtz, 1989; Little, 1990; Lima, 1998).

School change and improvement literature has raised collaboration as an important issue in terms of teacher culture (Hargreaves, 1991; Day, 2004). Hargreaves (1992) has posited five basic forms of teacher culture; isolated and conservative individualism, balkanisation of strong groups competing for power, status and resources (especially in secondary schools), community oriented collaboration, managerially constituted contrived collegiality, and moving mosaic in an organization with shifting patterns in the post-modern age. In Balkanised cultures, collaboration is restricted to a team or department. According to A. Hargreaves (1992, 1994b), *collaborative cultures* refer to working relationships which are spontaneous, voluntary, evolutionary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable, whereas *contrived collegiality* is imposed and compulsory for teachers. Therefore, working relationships characterised by this form of culture are predictable and fixed in time and space. This kind of mandated collaboration is likely to have a limited impact upon teacher development.

Collaborative cultures are different from both individual and balkanised ones. They foster and build on qualities of openness, trust and support between teachers and their colleagues. Day (1999) argues that contrived collegiality may be seen as 'a stage in the journey from individual or balkanised cultures towards more culturally embedded forms of collegiality and collaboration' (p. 81). This also relates to earlier research which suggests the importance of school culture and leadership in encouraging reflection and collaboration with implications for teacher professional satisfaction. (Rosenholtz, 1989).

In Portugal, the need to promote teachers' professional development through formal activities has led to the implementation of a national and compulsory In-service education and training of teachers (INSET) for all teachers in 1992. On the whole, INSET in Portugal can be described as a decentralized model (which depends on local dynamics and opportunities), as a rich and varied system (not only in regard to training centres but also as far as training opportunities are concerned). However, recent research carried out in Portugal has shown the weak impact of teachers' centres in fostering teacher professional development and educational innovation in schools, which was driven mainly by bureaucratic devices (Ferreira, 1994; Ruela, 1999; Barroso & Canário, 1999). In other words, the potential of a decentralized model led paradoxically to a formal and instrumental logic of INSET in the light of the national priorities rather than the local and contextual needs of teachers and schools (Barroso & Canário, 1999; Ruela, 1999). Despite this, it is possible to highlight some positive issues, namely the existence of a "culture of training" (Estrela, 2003) in so far as schools and teachers are now more mobilized and value more training and education as part of the teaching profession (Veiga Simão et al, 2003).

Some of these thoughts have inspired the research project reported here at a time where schools and teachers are facing a number of reforms associated with curriculum, school administration, teacher evaluation, and teachers' career statute in Portugal. Along with issues of autonomy, flexibility and attention to context, issues such as bureaucracy and other administrative are key influencing factors in school and teachers' work.

## **Methodology**

In this paper, we present data from a broad piece of research aiming at investigating Teachers' Professional Development Opportunities and Collaboration in two school settings. The main goals of the project are: i) to identify teachers' professional development expectations and needs; ii) to analyse teachers' professional development opportunities in two school settings; iii) to identify teachers' notions of collaboration; iv) to analyse teachers' collaborative work in two school settings; v) to develop two intervention projects in two schools in order to foster teachers' collaboration and PD. This paper reports on findings related to goals iii) and iv).

Data were collected through questionnaires (n= 114), which included both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was adapted from Flores, et al. (in press). Several levels of information were included: In-service training undertaken (concerning issues such as motives, teaching modes, content, number of INSET activities undertaken over last two years), Content of Work, School Leadership, Professional Orientation of teachers, Opportunities for Learning at Work and Professional Development. Background characteristics, such as gender, age, years of experience, academic qualifications, years of experience at current school, level of teaching, and school type were also included. Semi-structured interviews (n=14) were also used. Data were gathered between October and December 2006.

The process of qualitative data analysis was undertaken according to two phases: a vertical analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) according to which each of the respondents' interviews was analyzed separately. A second phase was then carried out according to a comparative or horizontal analysis (cross-case analysis) (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this phase, the method of 'constant comparative analysis' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to look for common patterns as well as differences. Quantitative data were analyzed statistically with the use of SPSS 15.

## **The schools and the Participants**

The study reported in this paper was carried out in an elementary school (A) located in northern Portugal and in a secondary school (B) located in the centre of Portugal. In school A there are 1110 pupils and 120 teachers, the majority of them with a permanent post; 536 students attend school B and 86 teachers are working there. Schools were selected according to the following criteria: geographical proximity in relation to the researchers involved in the study (School A and B) and success in terms of pupil outcomes, teacher retention and diversity of projects existing at school (School A).

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, 114 teachers participated (67,5% are female teachers and 28,9% are male). The respondents are 41 years old on average, with great professional experience (more than 15 years of experience=73%) and having a permanent post at school (70,2%). However, 46,5% are teaching for less than 5 years in current school (this is due to national teacher recruitment system, implying that teachers move from one school to the other frequently. There are high rates of teacher mobility). The majority of the teachers have a teaching degree (81,6%).

The interviewees are 11 in school A, i.e., all of the teachers who play a coordinating role at school. Three teachers were interviewed in school B, i.e., those who volunteer for the project "Collaborative practice" (an intervention project which is now under way). All of them are Language teachers.

## **Findings**

### **Teachers' Professional Orientation and their Workplace**

Teachers were asked to identify the ways in which they work with their colleagues at school. By and large, an unclear perspective emerged from quantitative data as far as individual professional orientation is concerned (see Table I). Teachers did not agree, nor disagreed when they refer to individualism at school (56,1%) and to encouragement to make decisions about teaching (43, 2%).

**Table I – Individual Professional Orientation**

ITEMS	SD	D	NA ND	A	SA
1. In my school, working relationships are characterized by individualism	8,8	18,4	<b>56,1</b>	13,2	3,5
6. In my school, we rarely discuss professional matters	<b>31,6</b>	<b>36,8</b>	23,7	7,9	0
10. My colleagues are a disappointment to me.	<b>19,3</b>	<b>34,2</b>	<b>41,2</b>	3,5	1,8
15. I am encouraged to make decisions about my teaching	1,8	18,9	<b>43,2</b>	<b>29,7</b>	6,3

Teachers' responses in regard to item 6 pointed to a positive trend, with 36,8% disagreeing that they rarely discuss professional matters and 31,6% strongly disagreeing, suggesting the existence of opportunities for teachers to talk about their professional experience.

This is in line with some of the items regarding collective professional orientation (see Table II). It is noteworthy that the majority of the respondents stated that they discuss their assessment practices (54,4%) and they also value interpersonal relationships among colleagues. They agree that they can rely on other members of the (teaching) staff and that their colleagues are easy to approach, 52,7% and 54,4%, respectively. However, the overall perception of the teachers suggests again an unclear position, especially when they refer to the time they are given during the school day to discuss their curriculum practices (item 2) and to existing conditions to discuss their curriculum practices (item 4). These are items which focused upon conditions for collective sharing and discussions at school rather on teachers' predispositions to work together.

**Table II – Community Professional Orientation**

ITEMS	SD	D	NA ND	A	SA
2. I am given time during my school day to discuss my curriculum practices	6,1	<b>27,2</b>	<b>50,0</b>	14,9	1,8
3. In my school, teachers usually work together in planning teaching	3,5	12,4	<b>45,1</b>	<b>32,7</b>	<b>6,2</b>
4. In my school, teachers are given time and conditions to discuss our curriculum practices.	<b>7,0</b>	<b>32,5</b>	<b>47,4</b>	11,4	1,8
5. In my school, we share teaching ideas and materials.	0,9	11,5	<b>42,5</b>	<b>36,3</b>	<b>8,8</b>
7. School meetings are important for the teaching work.	0,9	6,2	38,9	<b>37,2</b>	<b>16,8</b>
8. In my school, we discuss extra-curricular activities	0,0	8,0	<b>47,3</b>	<b>38,4</b>	<b>6,3</b>
9. In my school, we do (interdisciplinary) project work with other teachers and pupils in our school	1,8	12,5	<b>50,0</b>	28,6	7,1
11. In my school, we have discussions on assessment practices in our school	1,8	6,1	37,7	<b>43,9</b>	<b>10,5</b>
12. I can really rely on other members of the (teaching) staff	0,0	7,9	39,5	<b>47,4</b>	5,3
13. In my school there is a common purpose for teachers' work (in terms of quality) .	0,0	9,7	<b>47,8</b>	<b>34,5</b>	8,0
14. My colleagues are easy to be approached.	0,0	4,4	41,2	<b>43,9</b>	<b>10,5</b>

This view is corroborated by the interviewees when they spoke of the factors which hinder the development of collaborative work at school. From their accounts organisational issues are identified such as teachers' timetables, lack of common spaces and times for teachers to work together, amount of work teachers are expected to do:

"It is impossible. I have already worked on the organisation of teachers' timetables and we saw that it was impossible!!! (...) strategies to improve...besides having common times for us to meet... we are here 6, 7, 8 hours per way and then when we have to do meetings at the end of the day it's very hard." (A1)

"It's always difficult when teachers have such heavy timetables, because the school has lots of classes and pupils... It is very hard, timetables are diverse and it is hard to find a place for teachers to meet, in such a big school it is not possible. It's difficult. School organisation makes it hard to do... (A7)

"There also difficulties in terms of available time. There are no spaces for us to meet. We have to do it after classes" (A8).

"The school has no free spaces, it has too many pupils. Offices are for tutors... but at this moment they are used for teaching. So, there are the timetables, the lack of spaces, I mean, teachers are overwhelmed in the staffroom." (A10)

Although the "I do not agree nor disagree" is the most indicated answer, there is a trend to agree in teachers' responses in items 5 (we share teaching ideas and materials), 7 (School meetings are important for the teaching work), 8 (we discuss extra-curricular activities), 9 (we do (interdisciplinary) project work with other teachers and pupils in our school) and 13 (there is a common purpose for teachers' work (in terms of quality)). This seems to indicate the existence of opportunities at school to share experiences, ideas and materials and to undertake collaborative planning and joint work.

The disagreement in teachers' answers is more relevant when they refer to school constraints and limitations, namely in regard to lack of time and place for teachers to discuss their curriculum practices. However, teachers tend to agree that they are not given time or conditions to work together. Another important fact is that teachers tend to value school meetings for teaching work. Teachers also agree with the existence of trust and easiness in approaching their colleagues (see item 12 and 14, Table II)

### **Collaboration: conceptions and practices**

In teachers' accounts, the emerging idea is that collaboration implies joint work and sharing. The former is understood in different ways including issues such as learning in collaboration, discussing problems, interaction and interdisciplinary work. The latter is referred to by the teachers, less frequently, and it includes the ideas of exchanging experiences and ideas. The following quotes illustrate the ideas of joint work:

*"For me, it means joint work... when you talk about your work with other people..." (B1)*

*"Collaborative work is about analysing a given situation that needs an intervention from the part of a group of teachers..." (A1)*

*"...it is group work... meaning sharing experiences." (B2)*

*"It is about a group of people who work for the same purpose. We have the same goal and we work in partnership" (A4)*

*"It is when I learn with everyone... that's it" (B1)*

*“It is a working group, and you have to make an effort to collaborate with everyone in the group. It is always a rich experience because you contact with experiences from the various participating teachers.” (A8)*

*“It happens when people work together, when they discuss problems... B1)*

*“I mean, I have concerns in being accountable to anyone, I am learning with everyone and we have a certain freedom to contrast ideas ... (B1)*

*“Team work demands joint work, there is no fear to interfere in other people’s work. Each person has his/her own role, and results will be better in the end.” (A11)*

By and large, teachers’ accounts point to rather narrow views of teacher collaboration associated with difficulties in defining the concept. Ambiguity along with a broad understanding of the concept emerged from the qualitative data. Alongside the ideas of interaction, learning, problem discussion and problem solving, teachers also use the work sharing to define collaboration. This is related to both formal and informal contexts, and it is associated with teachers’ daily work at school:

*“It means sharing tasks, it means helping one another, doing common or similar tasks. It also means sharing your experiences with others” (A9)*

*“We have to share the planning and its implementation, everything has to be implemented in partnership...” (A4)*

*“And collaborative work among teachers means sharing, working as a group, is being seated in this classroom and saying “What have you done? What are you doing? What are you going to do? And everybody’s responsible...” (A1)*

*“Collaborative work is sharing experiences and ideas, in theory they are great but when they are put into practice they don’t work... (B3)*

These categories are in line with Little’s (1990) ideal types of collegial relationships, ranging from telling stories, support, sharing and joint work. In other words, the idea of collaborative work implies the existence of joint work, shared responsibility and also the initiative and leadership of teachers in their professional practice.

Teachers also stated that collaboration in schools, although understood in different ways, is limited by a number of factors. Some of them related to personal difficulties, and motivation, others to external issues such as lack of relevant training and PD opportunities in collaboration and constraints associated with organisational and contextual factors such as lack of spaces and time in schools.

The notion of collaboration (and the difficulties in put it into place) is also referred to by the teachers when they talk about school and professional culture, mainly in regard to individualism and lack of workplace conditions encouraging collaborative work in schools:

*“Collaboration... is not very difficult to define; it is difficult to put into practice... (B3)*

*“Some years ago we worked in a very individualistic way. I am in teaching for over 33 years, and I think that year after year we are improving this kind of collaborative work. We were used to work in an isolated way... I mean, this is also a limitation. I mean, I enjoy working alone, but I have always worked with another teacher [it has to do with the nature of the subject, i.e., technological and visual education]. I think there are personal difficulties. It has to do with each person’s personality...” (E5)*

*“Joint work has been introduced step by step in schools. Teachers were not used to work together...” (A7)*

*“And then you still feel an individualistic culture at school. But I think that we move gradually to a positive situation... I mean, it has to do with these new curriculum areas such as project work and supervised study which need two teachers to be put into place. I think that these projects are changing something at school”. (A10)*

From teachers’ accounts the idea of collaboration associated with a practice with visible outcomes in terms of teaching quality and pupils’ learning also emerged:

*“In relation to pupils involved, it has been an opportunity to undertake important learning experiences and development of competencies” (E1)*

*“This way of working is better to monitor pupils’ work...” (E9)*

However, teachers highlighted the formal and short-term activities when they spoke of collaboration. Planning and formal meetings are key aspects in their accounts:

*“At the level of the departments, this kind of work is done at the formal meetings. We do planning, in terms of curriculum, experimental activities, and report organisation. In this case we can say that there is group work, I mean, at least in my department. And then throughout the year teachers work more individually...” (A4)*

*“I mean, it is formal and informal. Joint work has this two aspects, if it is a serious job. What is informal becomes formal. (...) meetings at departments, and so on... everything is planned.” (A3)*

*“In my department, it happens several times due to specific activities. Some of them required more control, more meetings and more contact between people. I mean, activities to look for materials, to look for spaces, to have better coordination when it comes to more specific activities... such as the school journal.” (A8)*

When asked about the nature of the projects they were involved in at school, 59,8% of the teachers stated that they were working in some kind of collaborative project whether it relates to a Ministry of Education imposition, an initiative of the Cluster of schools/schools, and a decision of a group of teachers and/or students. In regard to the content of the projects, they are associated with imposed curriculum initiatives (ICT, National Math Plan, Portuguese Language, etc), decisions made by the administration and management team of the cluster of schools/schools (research projects with universities, educational project of the school, curricular project, etc), and/or driven by the needs and interests of a group of teachers and students (e.g. elaboration of curricular materials, maths club, environment club, etc). Overall, projects are driven by an imposition from the Central government and they are developed in schools in order to respond to these national requirements. However, there is also a number of initiatives (although less frequent) which stem from teachers and pupils’ interests and needs. In this case the idea of collaboration associated with a shared purpose and assuming a less formal nature.

## **Conclusion**

Three main ideas can be drawn from the data. First, teachers are positive when they describe their workplace and the ways in which they relate to their colleagues. They stated that they discuss professional matters. Second, problems and limitations to collaborative work are situated more in terms of organisational matters such as time and conditions at school rather than on teachers, along with lack of training in collaboration, although issues such as motivation and personal difficulties (some of them associated with strong professional individualistic culture) also emerged from the data. Third, although teachers valued interpersonal relationships at school, they also valued formal meetings when they described

the contexts in which they worked, such as department meetings and projects driven by central government initiatives or by school administration and management. However, a number of teachers' initiatives do exist at school, associated with their interests, situated problems and pupils. This study corroborates earlier work which emphasises the key role of informative, supportive and encouraging leadership in the formation of teachers' professional orientation and a sense of community, with implications for teachers' learning and professional development, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and commitment. Evidence from this study supports the contention that effective school leadership plays a key role in creating and sustaining learning communities (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1999; Fernandez, 2000; Barker, 2001; OECD, 2005). The recognition and support of conditions for sharing experiences at school is central to enhance teacher motivation and job satisfaction, and therefore, authentic and productive collaborative work. The importance of leadership to create and maintain learning and development-oriented school cultures, and to enhance teacher motivation as a key issue in their professional growth, associated with the sense teachers make of their own work, become central if teacher collaboration is to be fostered.

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