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Learning and Teaching: The Extent to which School Principals in Irish Voluntary Secondary Schools Enable Collaborative Practice

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Policy-makers in Ireland advocate teacher collaboration as being a vital component of educational reform and school improvement in inclusive and participatory communities of practice. The objective of this research study was to attempt to achieve a depth of understanding of the role played by principals in the reification of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy around collaborative practice in their schools. This paper attempts to capture a *snapshot* of the current culture around teacher collaborative practice and the extent to which such practice is enabled and/or encouraged by senior management. A qualitative approach was used to gather the necessary data which were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Some key findings include: principals have an astute awareness of how collaborative practice is conceptualised and contextualised within the Irish education system; there exists a broad range of formal and informal practices already at play; principals believe that clear structures and strategies will herald the creation of a new pedagogical landscape propagated by meaningful and highly effective collaborative practice; school leaders actively encourage and endorse collaborative practice; principals are positively seeking to re-culture schools and mediate the traditional norms that many teachers are essentially fearful to forsake.

Keywords: collaborative practice; leadership; policy compliance; collaborative affirmation; voluntary secondary school.

Introduction

In Ireland, as elsewhere, policy-makers advocate teacher collaboration as being a vital component of educational reform and school improvement in inclusive and participatory communities of practice. In essence, the construct of collaborative practice may be defined as a mutually beneficial relationship where two or more individuals or groups work together to produce a desired and shared outcome (Green and Johnson 2015). A culture of collaboration is committed to the development of professional learning communities where teachers jointly analyse and improve their classroom practice, thereby leading to higher levels of student achievement (duFour 2004). It is premised on the building of powerful collective responsibility, characterised by planning and improving teaching, not as isolated individuals, but as part of a high-performing team (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012). By engaging in collective inquiry and building shared knowledge, teams in a learning community have the capacity to

develop new skills and awareness, ultimately leading to re-positioning and transformation of school culture (DuFour et al. 2006).

In line with international policy discourses, the rhetoric of the key policy document *Looking at Our School (LAOS) 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2016a), the latest in a raft of policy documents originating with the Education Act 1998, the first piece of legislation to govern Irish educational policy since the Intermediate Education Act 1878, advocates a holistic, inclusive, participative view of learning, recognising the importance of quality teaching as a core element in enabling high-quality learner outcomes.

While new realities require different leadership behaviours and re-structuring to enact reforms, they are nonetheless mediated by contextual values, historical legacies and transformations. Schools in the Irish education system, and more particularly the religious-run Voluntary Secondary Schools (VSS), have not had a history of collaborative practice as the nexus of power and authority was located in the principal with the teacher being denied agency (Coolahan 1981; Lynch, Grumell and Devine 2012). The teacher operated a *closed door* system and an isolationist teaching culture pertained. This poses challenges for principals to mediate historical narratives with post-hierarchical options which are inclusive, collaborative and collegial in nature and where there is a distribution of agency. The argument will also be made, in this paper, congruent with Wenger's (2008) social theory of learning that a further challenge for school leaders is to lead in a transformative way to ensure continuity with the school's shared history of learning while facilitating a new order of discourse in the negotiation of meaning by mediating external forces.

Though research literature and policy-makers (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Hattie 2012; DES 2016a) recommend that teachers collaborate and that school principals are the key

influential agents in providing the space and resources for such collaborative practice, the research base on how it is actualised in Irish voluntary secondary schools is limited and empirical evidence is required regarding the nature and practice of leadership for inclusive, collaborative practice. In engaging with this current educational conversation and taking cognisance of the pertinent influencing contextual factors, the fundamental questions requiring closer scrutiny in the Irish Voluntary Secondary School context include:

1. To what extent do Post-Primary Principals in Voluntary Secondary Schools enable collaborative practice in relation to teaching and learning in their schools?
2. What is the principal's prior knowledge of collaborative practice?
3. What levels of collaboration are currently in operation?
4. How is collaborative practice enabled, facilitated and supported by principals?

The impetus for undertaking the current study is to explore and analyse how collaborative practice is enabled in voluntary secondary schools and how historical paradigms are mediated as schools are re-cultured. We first briefly review the literature on collaborative practice and extract a set of conceptual tools which frame the study. We then discuss the findings from the qualitative research on six voluntary secondary schools. This study, though small-scale in its extent, offers a powerful empirical lens to bring clarity to the nature of collaborative practice in the participating schools.

Theoretical background

The extant literature indicates that while sustainable improvement depends on successful leadership, it does not depend on a single visionary leader; teachers are at the core of the quality agenda with teacher agency and collaboration being implicit in educational leadership models (Hargreaves and Fink 2006; Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Harris and Muijs 2005). Teacher

learning and teacher collaboration are identified as being integral elements in the development of a (teaching) profession that is responsive to emerging school needs, where, in alignment with the distributed conceptualisation of leadership (Spillane 2006), all teachers are constructed as leaders with their active participation in schools, as communities of practice, enabling them to develop and broaden their expertise (The Teaching Council 2016).

Policy Frame

The key policy document *Looking at Our School* (LAOS) *2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2016a), along with recently published Department of Education and Skills (DES) Circular 0003/2018, in setting a structure for developing a quality framework for post-primary schools informs the analysis in this research. The impetus for this iteration of quality of educational provision is positioned within a broader system (Wenger 2008) and closely aligned with the discourse of new public management (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). In the race to attract global investment, the quality of our education system, according to the DES Chief Inspector, is considered to be one of the most critical factors by investors when deciding where to locate businesses (Hislop 2012). The operationalisation of this discourse of *quality assurance* entails its enactment through new procedures which comprise a set of inter-connected genres such as genres for staff and student learning and evaluations, planning, monitoring and, as a result, changes in institutions, their social relations, along with the practices and identities of their members (Fairclough 2010).

In leading change in schools the policy rhetoric recommends that principals provide a 'culture in which learning flourishes' by establishing structures that promote collaboration and a culture of improvement; setting up teacher-led groups to lead innovation and creativity in curriculum and teaching and peer observation; including students in decision-making fora and

making contributions to staff or management meetings; extending CPD opportunities for teachers by promoting the sharing experiences and learning and monitoring impact on student learning (DES, 2016a). To give legitimacy to the process, which is a complex endeavour, presents a challenge to principals to align different perspectives, broker and open new possibilities for meaning and participation in the school as a community of practice (Wenger, 2008).

In reconciling the different elements of the new imaginary, the challenge for school leaders is to work at integrating the various forms of participation and to take cognisance of the fact that educational design is an interaction between the local and the global, engaging 'learning communities in activities that have consequences beyond their boundaries' (Wenger 2008, 274). With the emphasis shifting from individual to group work and from independence to community, the challenge in education is to create possibilities for collaboration across diverse sites both within and across organisations. This configuration, which will require a paradigm shift in thinking in Irish post-primary schools, due to traditional norms of school isolationism and competition, indicates that an important aspect of the work of any *community of practice* is to create a picture of a broader context in which its practice is located (O'Donovan 2015). Enormous potential benefits accrue to schools, as communities of practice are enlarged and the sharing of ideas increases (Hargreaves and Fink 2006).

Contemporaneous with the aforementioned publication of the LAOS (DES 2016a) document has been the establishment of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) in 2015 and the publication by the Teaching Council (2016) of *Cosán*, the first national framework for teachers' professional learning. In line with the European Commission's *Education and Training 2020 Schools Policy, Shaping Career-long Perspectives on Teaching* (2015)*, Cosán*

(2016) provides a clear context for the development of professional standards and paves the way for a period of research which will inform the national implementation of the framework in 2020. The core values underpinning the CSL and Cosán frames are: shared professional responsibility, collective professional confidence and professionally-led regulation, and recognising an increasing breadth, depth, harnessing and sharing of sustainable leadership in the school organisation.

Unpacking Collaborative Practice

In respect of collaborative practice, Little (1990) proposes that collaboration can range from informal conversations about practice and advice-giving to joint enquiry and decision-making. For collaboration to be effective, it is based on mutual enquiry, joint communication and decision-making, reflective professional dialogue and debate to create the optimal learning environment for students (O'Donoghue and Clarke 2010). Collaboration, then, is a core element of teacher capacity-building, as it creates a climate of collective confidence-building and pools teachers' knowledge and expertise, by providing opportunities for teachers to work together (Harris and Muijs 2005). In strongly collaborative school cultures, practice is constructed as a collective activity, where

> ...teachers are committed to, inquisitive about and increasingly knowledgeable and well-informed about becoming better practitioners together, using and deeply understanding all the technologies and strategies that can help them with this (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, 127).

Professional Learning Communities

Shirley Hord (1997) who devised the term *professional learning communities*, identified five core elements of collaborative learning communities, as follows: shared vision and beliefs; supportive leadership in an environment where distributed decision-making and authority characterise the community of practice; supportive structural conditions in the forms of time,

resources et cetera; collective and collaborative learning to cater to student needs and to increase teacher effectiveness; colleagues sharing their practice to gain feedback leading to individual and collective organisational improvement.

Since the 1990s, the concept has been unpacked and a number of perspectives of what constitutes professional learning communities has been presented (Jones et al, 2013). Stoll et al. (2006) outline that while their research confirms Hord's (1997) five descriptors, they identify three other significant characteristics; mutual trust and respect; inclusive school membership and a school-wide sense of community, premised on openness, partnerships and networks. DuFour et al (2006) propose that the essence of a learning community is a commitment and focus on the learning of students, realised through continuous learning for educators. The development of professional learning communities bears great potential to build capacity within the teaching profession to exact meaningful and lasting improvement over time (Stoll et al, 2006). Such communities of practice, as loci 'of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge and negotiation of enterprises' hold the key to real transformation (Wenger 2008, 85).

Impact of the Role of the Principal in Professional Learning Communities

The leadership of the principal is essential to the establishment of learning communities (duFour and Eaker, 1998), and because of the striking changes in the world at large, where traditional modes of schooling are no longer relevant, there has never been a time when the input and role of school leaders who focus on deep change at all levels of the school organisation is more urgently required (Fullan 2017). The headteacher has the ability to distribute leadership, share authority and facilitate the work of staff (Thompson et al. 2004),

while also having the responsibility for communicating and providing opportunities for growth as well as being lead teacher, lead learner and curricular leader (Jones et al. 2013).

In this era of accountability, however, if principals are to truly become *lead teachers* and *lead learners*, they need to move beyond traditional leadership styles, re-define leadership and develop teacher leaders who themselves will become change agents in Professional Learning Communities where collective action is taken to improve and change the learning experiences for students and teachers (Thompson et al. 2004). In such communities where people critically reflect on and interrogate practice (DeMatthews, 2014), the sharing of knowledge and negotiation of enterprises holds the key to real transformation (Wenger, 2008).

School leadership, however, is a construct beyond the scope of the Principal alone (O'Donovan. 2015) as it has become increasingly evident that for schools to develop in this current complex era of rapid change, a *new order* of leadership, is taking shape and informing the discourse on leadership practice in schools. This is based on an emergent and distributed view of leadership and purposeful collaboration, empowering classroom teachers to undertake leadership roles and responsibilities (Harris and Muijs, 2005). In this new order, effective principals promote teacher leadership capacity, identify leadership opportunities that teachers can effectively manage (DeMatthews, 2014), while facilitating dialogue and providing opportunities to build shared knowledge (duFour et al, 2006).

Methodological approach

The objective of this research study was to attempt to achieve a depth of understanding of the role played by principals in the reification of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy around collaborative practice in their schools. To reach this goal, the researchers

concluded that a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, offered an interactive way of constructing knowledge through probing, listening, interpreting and ultimately understanding the varied perspectives of the participants true experiences in their own school settings (Mertens 2005).

Research Participants

A sample of six post-primary principals, two male and four female, ranging in age from early 40s to the mandatory retirement age of 65, was selected to facilitate the enquiry. The intention was to capture a snapshot of the current culture within each of the participating schools around teacher collaborative practice and the extent to which such practice is actually enabled and/or encouraged by school leaders. One key interview question posed during the data collection stage intentionally addressed that issue head on asking school principals:

> As a leader of learning, how can you encourage and even participate in collaborative practice in your school? (Q.6 Interview protocol)

This question, which links directly to the overarching research question presented in the introduction to this paper, was supported by a series of sub-questions deep-diving into principals' current practices in their schools such as: Where you visit teachers' classrooms, how can you move from the position of evaluator to collaborator?; How do you model being a lead learner? This in turn supported the researchers in understanding two of the emergent themes namely, Theme 2: the current levels of collaboration within the school and Theme 3: how such collaborative practice is *enabled* or even *modelled* by the school leader.

The six schools, to which the selected principals are attached, are what the Irish school system identifies as Voluntary Secondary Schools (VSS). VSS form the majority of schools on the Irish education landscape. Such schools are privately owned and managed, predominantly under the trusteeship of religious communities, and may be fee-paying or non-fee-paying. Though the non-fee-paying schools, which form the majority in this sector, are generally owned

and operated by the trustees, they are largely funded by the Irish state through the DES (Moynihan 2013). The schools selected for the purposes of this research included three all-male schools and three all-female schools situated in medium to high-density urban locations in Ireland. The researchers also determined that the participating schools should have a student population in excess of 250 students in order to offer the greater complexity and challenge of innovation and change in schools ranging from medium to large in the Irish context. Ultimately, this was a purposive sample through which the researchers could gather facts, identify attitudes, explore past, current and possible future behaviours around teacher collaboration and elicit associated reasons and explanations (Silverman 1993).

Data gathering and analysis

The principals were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. This approach affords the researcher flexibility around topics, themes and issues that s/he can explore during the interview process rather than a structured or fixed list of questions. A mini digital recorder was used, with the written consent of the participants, to record the interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim for on-going and subsequent analysis. Field notes were taken by the researchers to record elements such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions in order to attend to what Kvale and Brinkman (2009, 30) refer to as the 'emotional tone of the interaction'. These notes were duly added to the transcripts with a view to enhancing the analytical process. The interview transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach.

The researchers selected grounded theory particularly for its inductive based nature and its tendency to be more open-ended and exploratory in terms of how one applies it to the data (Charmaz 2009). This kind of exploration is evident in grounded theory which consists of 'simultaneous data collection and analysis with each one influencing and focusing the other

throughout the research process' (Charmaz 2005, 508). The analysis commenced with the first full transcript and was ongoing throughout the process. The key question posed by Glaser (1978) *What is happening here?* was very much in the mind of the researchers from the beginning. The most important features of grounded theory that were engaged included: initial coding to break the data into component parts (Charmaz, 2009); naming each line of each full transcript and not just the notes as in other thematic analysis methods to ensure the capture of ideas and understandings that could otherwise be overlooked whilst concomitantly bringing the researcher to a deeper level of understanding overall; (Charmaz 2009); using memos to tease out information and ideas and to encourage the researchers to ask critical questions of the data. 'Written records of analysis' is how Corbin and Strauss (2008) define memos. They add that the writing process helps the researcher to *think*, and that it is through such thinking that the actual analysis eventually occurs. The researchers recognised that memoing undoubtedly enhances data exploration therefore it was logical to include this as part of the analysis process. Due to the relatively small sample size, all such analysis was conducted by hand without the use of qualitative research software.

Ethics

Mertens (2005) highlights that ethics in research needs to be considered from the outset. The researchers believed that this investigation was not going to impinge in any way on the participants rights nor was it going to be excessively sensitive. Nonetheless, a formal, full and open application was made to the supporting university's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC) seeking ethical approval which was duly granted in March 2018.

Limitations

Generalisability is defined as 'the researcher's ability to generalise the results from the sample to the population from which it was drawn' (Mertens 2005, 4). This research study included six school principals, which is a relatively small sample, from the larger population of school leaders in the VSS sector and, therefore, needs to be cautiously applied to that population. Nonetheless, it creates a useful starting point in filling the current lacuna in research in this field in the Irish context and offers a rich and contextualised understanding of the experiences and agency the participating principals have in their professional engagement with collaborative practices in their organisations.

Findings

By focusing on the lived experiences of the principals in the participating schools and by using four of the key themes emanating from the data, the purpose of this paper is to probe and analyse the implications and challenges of emerging themes for the enactment of models of Collaborative Practice in Voluntary Secondary Schools in Ireland. The themes which will be discussed in this paper are:

1. Conceptualisations of Collaborative Practice
2. Current levels of collaboration in schools
3. How Collaborative Practice is enabled by the principals
4. Why principals engage in Collaborative Practice
5.

Theme 1: Conceptualisations of Collaborative Practice

To provide a roadmap for subsequent analysis on collaborative practice as it pertains to schools in the Irish Voluntary Secondary School system, it is considered essential to give voice to how the construction of collaborative practice is conceptualised from the perspectives of the

participants in the schools involved. The initial question probed respondents' understanding of Collaborative Practice and where they locate themselves conceptually.

The research data indicate that collaborative practice as an organisational routine is constructed by principals as an emergent structure which, according to Principal 1 (P1) is 'very new at second level' being part of an evolving educational landscape. The questioning on this mode of practice prompted reflection and discussion on the complexities of historical legacies characterised by 'an ingrained professional culture' (P1) dominated by individualism where every teacher was 'master of his or her own fiefdom' (P5), thereby requiring further deliberation on how collaborative capacity will be built. There was a general consensus that the whole process, while requiring compliance with what is set outside, will necessitate the production of new meanings and repertoires (Wenger, 2008). Some principals opined that it represents a 'cultural shift' (P1, P2, P6) instituted by broader policy contexts (in the form of new Junior Cycle Framework (JCF) and School Self-Evaluation (SSE) by way of example) which require principals to mediate tensions exacerbated by 'fear of change' (P4, P6) and teachers' uncertainty and sensitivities, as schools are re-cultured. While recognising that the whole process is generative of new meanings, all of the respondents in the study view Collaborative Practice as positive and as being a key component to enable the development of schools as inclusive, participatory communities and to enable school improvement in the current educational landscape.

> I think the isolationist thing doesn't work anymore especially with the pressures that are in life today and the curricular changes and things like that. So this is much better from every perspective, it gives all the comfort, it's like family you know (P6).

This calls on school leaders to facilitate debate among all stakeholders to take innovative steps to develop strong relationships of collaboration as schools adopt new elements and models of practice.

Consistent with the literature, another overarching conceptualisation across all six schools constructs Collaborative Practice as a sharing of practice and responsibilities in the school as a Professional Learning Community where there is a focus on and commitment to ensuring quality and improvement in student learning (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012):

> It's looking at us as a staff coming together to get the best for the students in terms of teaching and learning and all being part of the learning process (P4).

> The focus is on teaching and learning. There is also collaborative practice amongst the students, parental involvement and the input of the Trust are not to be ignored (P1).

> Collaborative practice is the sharing of responsibility. I think the whole area of shared leadership responsibility can sometimes be misinterpreted in the school context, because ultimately in our sector, the voluntary secondary sector, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the principal and while this shared responsibility is all very well, ultimately the principal has to take control, has to be in control of the school (P3).

Theme 2: Current levels of collaboration in schools

Across all the schools involved, the research found a variety of modes of informal and formal teacher collaboration, with the efficacy of the informal being constructed as a key component of teachers' collaborative practice. This category of *informal* is often voluntary in character, with the concept of volunteering being deeply rooted in Irish education and is closely allied to the ethos of Catholic Church teaching which informs the ethos of a preponderance of Voluntary Secondary Schools. Any model of leadership for collaborative practice in Voluntary Secondary Schools is mediated by these values, as opined by one principal:

> I think the most successful schools are those that have that (volunteerism) add-on, the added value, if you want (P3).

Subject Departments

In relation to formal structures, any discussion on the *how* of collaborative practice needs to focus on the agency and roles of Subject Department meetings:

> As in most schools now, we have the subject departments ..... first of all, they were non-existent twenty years ago ... then they came in but they tended to be perfunctory, not much happening ...we have our opportunities now with Croke Park hours [As per DES Circular 0008/2011, 33 additional hours outside of school time for essential activities to take place without reducing class tuition time] for subject departments to meet and discuss and do subject planning (P1).

In line with the above quotation, the research data indicate that subject departments are to the fore in building collaborative cultures in respect of discussing and evaluating teaching and learning in supportive and collectively responsible teams in the Voluntary Secondary Schools. It is noteworthy that levels of engagement vary according to the management approach of the principal (Harris and Muijs 2005). In all instances, however, and a salient finding from the research data is that the construction of subject department teams is a shared, collaborative phenomenon negotiated as part of a joint enterprise in a professional learning community, with students' learning being at the centre of the discourse (Wenger 2008; O'Donovan 2015).

Modes of Teacher Learning and Professional Development

There was evidence across all the participating schools that school principals create opportunities for teachers to engage in collaborative learning and professional development, to purposefully drive and develop effective PLCs. Such advancement is also supported at staff meetings which constitute key organisational routines where practitioners are afforded the space to engage in professional dialogue. The research data indicate, however, that there is divergence across the researched schools on the levels of teachers' participation on leading professional conversations in relation to pedagogy and methodologies. The trajectories of this mode of collaborative practice vary between schools. In some schools, teachers' contribution to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is informal and is enacted in the staffroom on a daily basis, while in others, principals encourage teachers to give presentations and lead discussions at staff meetings on innovative methodologies and pedagogies, along with students giving feedback on methodologies, in some contexts. Prior research shows that construing

learning as a process of participation and giving teachers opportunities to lead in this manner has had a positive effect on the quality of relationships and teaching within schools (Harris and Muijs 2005; Wenger 2008).

Team teaching

The concept of team teaching which is conceptualised as an emerging organisational routine is promoted by principals, as a key instrument in the building of collaborative work practices aimed at enhancing quality teaching and improved learner outcomes. There is congruence in the data emerging from each of the associated schools where the principals explain that team-teaching is viewed as a support for students' learning and has been introduced in two formats (1) as part of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) programme, focusing on the inclusion of SEN students in the mainstream classroom and (2) where teachers have classroom management difficulties:

> Team teaching helps hugely in the area of differentiated learning (P3).
>
> It first needs to be seen as a supportive process for the students in the room and you work from there (P2).
>
> Team teaching occurs in the same subject area and a certain amount of it outside of the subject area in order to evaluate class management as opposed to the methodology of an individual subject (P1).

While principals suggest that team-teaching is implicitly mandated by the Department of Education and Skills, they assert that it is not supported by requisite professional development programmes.

> I think team-teaching is a new area completely and I can't think of anytime there was in-service training given on it by the Department (P1).

This calls for a commitment on the part of policy makers to identify and make explicit exemplars of effective team-teaching and models of classroom observation and to provide

training, supports and resources to schools to develop models of team-teaching relevant to each school context and to an increasingly changing profession.

Principal's involvement in classroom observation

The research evidence indicates that, in the schools as a professional learning community there is a commitment by the principals to build learning capacity with emphasis being placed on generating improved learning outcomes for students and where improvements and decisions are promoted by challenging conversations about effective and ineffective practice (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Harris and Muijs 2005). One of the criteria used to evaluate how students learn is for the principal, teachers and students to have a collaborative dialogue and engagement on the issue and, thus, to eliminate teacher isolation and open the heretofore impenetrable classroom door (O'Donovan 2015). The following elucidations indicate diverse modes of practice and belonging in relation to the principal's involvement in classroom observation:

> I visit every class every day on the pretence of who's absent today, you learn five or six different things each morning ..... last year we announced class visits to observe learning and they rioted ..... the staff rioted (P1).
>
> I wouldn't visit the classes, I feel they are competent enough (P3).
>
> I visit Post-Graduate Master of Education students, I visit teachers I might have in for a year ...I haven't gone in to regular teachers classes ... we discussed it with the staff and there was hullabaloo... I don't know how that culture will be broken down, because there's no point going in on an excuse, you need to go in as a professional with a pedagogic focus (P2).

The evidence indicates, in line with the TALIS (OECD 2009) findings on Direct Supervision of Instruction in the Schools, that collaborative dialogue between principals and teachers in relation to their teaching as part of observation of classroom teaching and learning does not form a significant part of the culture of Irish Voluntary Secondary Schools (O'Donovan 2015), despite an intentionality on the part of principals, in some instances, to develop a model of classroom observation and professional dialogue.

Theme 3: How Collaborative Practice is enabled by the principal?

Effective school leadership has been identified as a key component in the creation and support of learning communities in schools (Flores et al. 2009). Across the selected schools, principals presented as ardent supporters and enablers of teacher collaborative practice within their schools. In particular, they acknowledged the varying levels of formal and informal practice that occurs in their schools on a daily basis and how this forms a crucial constituent in teachers' own professional learning (PL). While a strong case is made by all principals interviewed for the improved provision of formal PL, the importance and value of the informal learning that occurs at every level of the school is passionately emphasised.

> [Teachers] are there for the good of their students…and you tap into that informality. Now, to make it more formal… yes, that's the way the world [of education] is going, but we must not underestimate the informal collaboration that goes on (P4).

The likelihood of meaningful collaborative practice thriving in an educational setting is greatly increased when the appropriate structures and conditions are present (Fullan and Quinn 2015). A common approach promulgated by the research participants to support formal collaborative practice is the creation and implementation of appropriate structures and strategies to facilitate the process. Such structures and strategies include: the creative provision of space and time for teachers to discuss and plan collaborative methods; the distribution of leadership to subject department heads and/or individual teachers; challenging, and encouraging teachers to challenge the isolationist and insular culture that has permeated the Irish education system; encouraging peer observation; and promoting a culture of trust, respect, sharing and teacher self-confidence.

Central to the success of creating a collaborative teaching and learning environment in schools was the pace at which all of this should occur. There was a unanimous assertion by principals that amplifying the level of collaborative practice in their schools needed to happen

at a slow and steady pace predominantly based on the idea that what is actually being enacted amounts to a culture shift, an immense task that requires considerable time, care and persistence. One principal stressed 'we need *time* and *training* to run collaborative work' (P1). The research participants agreed that the empowerment of teachers to move from a place of individualism to a place of effective or highly effective collaboration requires school leaders to be openly passionate, non-judgemental and clearly communicative of the rationale behind the development of such practice. The encouragement and development of team teaching by principals as an example of a progressive form of collaboration was raised by a number of participants. They favoured such practice as a move in the right direction in the development of a more truly collaborative culture within the organisation:

> We had a [team-teaching] pilot…ending up in collaborative practice. The Department [DES] want team-teaching because that's how they're getting observation in the back door (P1)

Principal 4 was very passionate about the power of both team teaching and observation in the classroom where he proposed the teacher delivering the lesson 'is actually driving the other teacher to improve by seeing things…simple things maybe…that they have observed in their… their colleagues classroom…*that's* collaboration'.

Theme 4: Why principals engage in Collaborative Practice?

School improvement studies indicate that schools which are improving are characterised as spaces where teachers are encouraged to work together towards shared goals with the aim of supporting the learning and teaching processes of the school, as a community of practice (Harris and Muijs 2005). The emerging research findings indicate that, across their schools, the respondents encouraged and endorsed the efficacy of the collaborative practice model as a

means to focus on depth of organisational learning thereby enabling optimum, positive and affirming outcomes for students and teachers.

> Of course collaborative affirmation is part of the collaborative thing, so to speak ... that the message to the teachers and the pupils indeed, is that the learning and teaching are number one (P1).

Participants frame the construct in an inclusive community, where good practice is validated and where the emotional identities of all stakeholders are valued and respected, congruent with the values of care and nurture underpinning the ethos of Voluntary Secondary Schools:

> I am a huge believer in the school as being a community ..... where pupils are generally happy ..... it's very high on my agenda that a teacher understands what being part of that community is and that is being supportive and supported (P3).

The practice is constituted as being generative of models of distributed leadership, where staff confidence, teacher leadership and capacity are built and where the participants construct their roles as being 'in the realm of developing middle leaders' (P2) along with being cognisant of 'succession planning from the minute you come inside the door' (P2).

While a preponderance of the extant corpus of research evidence indicates that best practice is best exemplified by teachers working collaboratively, the staff's willingness to collaborate stops at the classroom door and teachers in many schools persist in working in isolation (duFour 2004). A common assertion proffered by all research participants across their own schools, as they seek to re-culture schools and mediate traditional paradigms, pointed to the importance of carefully managing the process and being sensitive to staff politics and the sensitivities that pertain when endeavouring to allay the heretofore fearful nature of teaching culture in respect of opening the classroom door. While participants are aware of the challenges in cultivating a culture of change and acknowledge that it is a slow process, there is a firm recognition that 'barriers are being somewhat broken down' (P2).

In further developing the discussion on the process of mediating the traditional isolationist paradigms, the participants discussed the compliance norm as it pertains to curriculum, assessment and middle management structures. All respondents proffered the view that requirements of the new Junior Cycle Classroom Based Assessments (CBAs) and subsequent post-assessment Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings where teachers collaborate to reach consistency in their judgements of students' work according to externally set criteria, will aid the collaborative process. They agree that this structure will facilitate the development and implementation of collaborative practice and offer new understandings of how the school can sustain change as part of an identity of participation (Wenger 2008).

A number of participants, however, were vocal in interrogating the centrally-mandated compliance and accountability norms and the rationale underpinning them. They posited the view that the results-driven, outcomes-based skills and competencies paradigms of current education policy are informed by business models and driven by the inspectorate in alignment with the OECD's policy and business focus which is 'writing the script for education systems' (P3). This principal goes on to say:

> Also schools are such busy, busy places and now we're in the business where education is a commodity…we need to get good reports from the OECD…we all want to be up there, first, at the top of the PISA reports, TIMSS reports. And you see, we nearly feed into it ourselves in management… they [the teachers] don't want to miss their class… they don't want to go to any in-service [collaborative practice professional learning] for fear they'll miss their class because they're results-driven themselves.

In mediating the tensions, the participants opine that schools 'are not solely for the production of future workers'. School leaders 'wield a way around the generic formulae' (P2) by promoting creativity in their own school contexts, through emphasising 'more holistic learning, building resilience and ensuring that students are enjoying their own learning' (P2).

Barriers to Collaborative Practice

The research study indicates that there is a variety of barriers impacting on the implementation of Collaborative Practice routines in Voluntary Secondary Schools. The first is located in the emotional subjectivities in the professional relationships of teachers in the selected schools. The respondents agree that change is resisted as there is 'a fear of the unknown, a fear of failure' (P4), particularly among the cohort of more senior teachers, the trajectory of whose lived 'experience of meaning' (Wenger 2008, 135), has been as 'master of his/her domain' (P1) in a historically isolationist culture. Historical legacies coupled with the pervasive 'results-driven competitive culture' (P3) both at inter-school and among teachers in a school organisation as a community of practice is further augmented by a reticence to collaborate and share resources, as:

> ..... teachers keep their ideas to themselves, they don't want to share them with others in case they'd rob them (P2).

Principals, in planning for the enactment of collaborative models of practice in their organisations, are conscious of 'not damaging rapport or relationships with teachers' (P4, P6). The emotional intensity on the part of the principal of constructing the school's 'emotional map' (Moller 2005) is not only focused on fostering good relationships, but also as part of a process of knowing the emotional subjectivities of all the agents in the school. The respondents, in managing change, are acutely aware that in mediating the collaborative and competitive paradigms subtle and delicate management are required (Wenger 2008).

Consistent with research literature (Harris and Muijs 2005), the proliferation of compliance mandates and accountability regimens, emanating from the Department of Education and Skills and the Inspectorate is constructed as a barrier to school autonomy in negotiating models of collaborative practice. The following quotation is typical of sentiments expressed by principals in each of the schools:

> We're being corralled into a model that isn't working ..... I actually resent that policies or diktats are issued and principals are supposed to be the enforcers ..... that is not going to serve education best in this country (P3).

Discussion

An initial key finding was that principals have a deep understanding and astute awareness of how collaborative practice is conceptualised and contextualised within the Irish school system. True teacher collaboration, in its fullest sense, is positively constructed by principals and is very much an emergent structure that is evolving in an educational space that remains essentially anchored to its historic isolationist and insular culture. The actualisation of openly shared pedagogical practice is viewed as a necessary development inextricably tied to a deep desire to contribute to the ultimate goal of greatly enhanced student learning outcomes. The researchers posit that teachers now have the agency to meaningfully engage in collaborative practice that they were previously denied due to hierarchical historical narratives (Lynch, Grummell and Devine 2012).

The research revealed that in all of the schools there exists a broad range of formal and informal practices already at play offering a solid foundation on which school leaders and teachers can build a truly powerful and effective collaborative structure scaffolded by innovative methodologies, effective pedagogical approaches, carefully developed strategies, unrestricted sharing of *best* and *next* practice, and synergies 'achieved by agents negotiating their role boundaries' (Gronn 2002, 438). Already, the introduction of team-teaching practices and initiatives is repositioning how educators are engaging with one another congruent with the recommendation that teachers work together and that school principals are the driving agents in providing the space and resources for such collaborative practice (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012; Hattie 2012; DES 2016a). We propose it is forming the basis for a new perspective on the actualisation of a very effective collaborative school community necessarily sustained

by supportive school leadership. Clear calls are made, however, for a greater commitment on the part of policy makers to make appropriate professional learning, training, supports and resources available to school communities as they endeavour to renegotiate their purpose and practice.

Coinciding with Stoll et al. (2006) this research reveals that principals believe the structures and strategies that particularly include temporal and spatial provision, distributive leadership practices, and a head-on challenge to the enduring traditional culture of isolationism, all underpinned by a reimagined culture of trust, mutual respect, sharing and caringly nurtured teacher self-confidence, will herald the creation of a new pedagogical landscape propagated by meaningful and highly effective collaborative practice. We argue that mediating the historical and emerging paradigms will be a journey that will need to be undertaken at a gradual and temperate pace if the cultural shift required is to transpire with the support of each of the stakeholders, not least the teachers and the students for whom they have ultimate responsibility.

The emerging research findings from this study reveal that school leaders actively encourage and endorse collaborative practice as a pathway to deep organisational learning and the optimisation of positive and affirming outcomes for both teachers and their students. We suggest that school principals are central to framing the construct of an educational landscape where collaborative practice can be cultivated in an inclusive community of learners (DuFour et al. 2006) where all members of that community are valued and respected in congruence with the foundational ethos of Irish Voluntary Secondary Schools.

While almost all leaders and educators, at all levels in the participating schools, present as interested and willing to engage in on-going collaborative practice, however, for the majority, that willingness currently stops at the classroom door. The data foregrounds that principals, through what we call *collaborative affirmation*, are positively seeking to re-culture

schools and to endeavour to mediate the traditional norms that many teachers are both reluctant and essentially fearful to forsake. We define collaborative affirmation as the promotion and encouragement, by the professional learning community, of collaborative practice within and beyond the organisation with the focus on building leadership and teaching capacity for the enhancement of student learning outcomes.

This research amplifies the participants' view that the compliance imperative wave (which includes SSE and the new Junior Cycle programme) that is currently breaking over the education system in Ireland, will help to bolster the aforementioned re-culturation process. It will also facilitate the emergence of effective or highly effective collaborative practice (DES 2016a) opening education practitioners' minds, and eventually their classroom doors, to a shared, active, creative and resilient school environment. Notwithstanding that lofty goal, participants are acutely aware of the tension that persists between the Governmental/OECD business agenda as a key driver within education systems and the holistic development of students as creative, critical and independent thinkers and learners.

Conclusion and areas for consideration

Subsequent to the analysis of the data gathered during this research endeavour, the authors posit that it is a prerequisite, for the advancement of a truly collaborative environment in the VSS sector, that a befitting resourcing model is put in place, including adequate funding, to facilitate the exploration of the extant possibilities that exist. This will help transform our schools through the appropriate mining of the wealth of professional capital (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) that permeates our education system. Some significant reimagining by the relevant stakeholders is required to deliver a more effective model of professional learning for teachers and school leaders who are already moving towards a collaborative model that ought to have the informal work that is currently happening on the ground recognised, supported and

formalised as appropriate. The recent developments in school middle management as outlined in Circular 0003/2018 (DES 2018) need to be continuously reviewed and enhanced in order to further advance an organised and scaffolded structure of distributed school leadership. The inclusion of the voices of all stakeholders is paramount in the promotion of what Spillane (2006) refers to as a distributive model of shared and democratic decision-making.

Finally, the authors see considerable scope for further study in this area as the dynamic continues to change and the culture continues to evolve in the reconstruction and re-culturation of the Irish education landscape.

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