

Teacher's Collaborative Work: Perspectives and Practices

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Abstract

This work aims to study the concepts and collaborative working practices between teachers, the factors that promote or hinder collaboration and examine the practices of these teachers in their work context. This investigation started in the professional context and the conviction that collaborative work between teachers can bring them numerous benefits to their learning and subsequent professional development. In this regard, [1] points out that the collaborative work "is structured essentially as an articulated work process and thought together, allowing better achieve the desired results, based on the enrichment brought by the dynamic interplay of several specific knowledge and various cognitive processes in collaboration." This approach to the study was carried out taking into account two dimensions: a) The conceptions of collaborative work, in order to characterize the conceptual universe of teachers about collaboration, who understand for collaboration, the requirements set by the collaborative work and the consequences of it. b) Collaboration practices, in order to describe existing practices in school and identify aspects facilitators or inhibitors collaboration between teachers. We adopted an interpretative qualitative methodology and design of this research as a case study. The techniques used for data collection were semi-structured interviews and documentary research. Study participants expressed a suitable collaborative design arguing that this is how it should guide their work. Nevertheless, the results suggest that the collaborative practices of this group of teachers are still not adequately confirmed and situations of sharing and reflection are a systematic practice. Emerging data indicates the need to promote collaborative work by mobilizing reflective processes with the involvement of teachers, which share materials, processes and strategies, in order to develop the critical skills and self-reflexive teachers. The coordinator is indicated as an element that plays a key role as supervisor and facilitator of collaborative work between teacher's.

Keywords: Collaborative Work, Individualism, Collaborative Cultures, Professional Development.

1. Introduction

This research aims to study the conceptions and practices of collaborative work among teachers. Collaboration is seen today as the key to the success of any organization and it is increasingly taking over as important in education, because it is considered to facilitate success in learning.

The reflection on the topic of collaborative work is therefore essential in order to implement in schools a collaborative culture in a continuous and concerted form, which is important for the improvement of students' learning. However, there are many challenges for schools and teachers to perform a true collaborative work. In the opinion of several authors, collaboration is essential for the professional development of the teacher and it is understood as a process that involves people working together with common goals, experiences, and each other's knowledge, enhancement in this type of work, presenting itself as a strategy to address and overcome the difficulties of professional activity [2][3][1]. Collaborative cultures, usually spontaneous, implies voluntary working relations and is development-oriented, involving careful negotiation, making decisions together, communication, dialogue and learning on the part of all participants. In this way, the collaborative work is structured as a work process articulated and thought out together, which allows reaching better targeted results based on enrichment brought by the dynamic interaction of several specific areas of knowledge and several cognitive processes.

Once teachers face increasing expectations related to their work, as well as a progressive saturation for innovation and reforms, the authors [4] say that it is important that: (...) [teachers] work and plan more collaboratively with their colleagues, sharing and developing a set of skills instead of trying to deal alone with the duties that nowadays teaching requires.

As a solution to isolation, the deepening of collaboration has become one of the main strategies for improvement. However, this process is only possible if teachers are involved in frequent, continuous and, progressively, concrete and precise conversations about the practice of teaching (and not on the

characteristics and failures of colleagues, their social lives, defects and failures of students, their families and the illegitimacy of the demands that society imposes to school). Through this type of interaction, the professors construct a common language adequate to the complexity of teaching, which is able to distinguish one practice (and its virtues) from others; (...) teachers and administrators plan, conceive, investigate, evaluate and prepare teaching materials together.

Through joint work on materials, these agents share the difficult development task that is required for long-term improvement, confirm the emerging understanding of their approach and make the standards of higher demand. This process guarantees that the work objectives are achievable by both teachers and students. Although the advantages of collaborative work among teachers are very recognized, in practice the essential work of the teacher continues to be carried out individually.

These were the premises that led to this study in order to access the conceptions of teachers about what collaborative work is, how their collaborative practices happen and whether these practices influence the teaching and learning processes. In conformity with the objective of this study, the following research issues were identified:

- I. What are the teachers' conceptions about collaboration/cooperation?
- II. What collaboration/cooperation practices exist in the school?
- III. What are the promoters of collaborative/cooperative work among teachers?
- IV. What are the constraints to collaborative/cooperative work among teachers?

2. Methodological options

2.1 Nature of the study

Taking into account the nature of the objectives to be attained, a qualitative, interpretative, investigative approach was used, since it allows the description and understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of its meaning. We intend to conduct an investigation of "ideas, the discovery of the significant inherent to the individual, since he is the basis of all inquiry".

2.2 Data collecting techniques

Data collecting consisted on a semi structured interview answered by teachers. Concerning the semi structured interviews, their main purpose was to understand the teachers' designs of collaboration/cooperation; Collaboration/cooperation practices existing in their work contexts; Aspects considered as promoters of collaborative/cooperative work among teachers; to identify constraints to collaborative/cooperative work among teachers.

The interviews followed guidelines previously elaborated in accordance with the objectives of the study.

Concerning the structure and organization of the guidelines, there are six main parts: part (A) corresponds to the legitimization of the interview and the guarantee of the motivation of the interviewee; part (B) intends to identify the teachers' conceptions about collaboration; Part (C) intends to identify the existing collaborative practices in the school; Part (D) intends to characterize the teachers' perspective on the aspects that can promote the collaborative practices among teachers; Part (E) identifies the constraints to collaborative/cooperative work among teachers. Finally, part (F) corresponds to the end and closure of the interview.

The questions had therefore a semi structured character and the order in which they were asked was flexible.

Regarding the data processing of the interviews, a content analysis was undertaken. The content analysis is defined as a "...very used method in text analysis, and it is used for data processing of studies where the data was collected orally or in writing form". During the analysis, a set of topics, categories and subcategories, indicators and record units emerging from the subjects' testimonies in study were taken into consideration.

2.3 Contexts and samples

The study was developed in a secondary school in the Lisbon area, with 6 professors from different recruitment groups, in the academic year 2017/2018, distributed as follows: 1 Professor of mathematics; 2 informatics teachers; 2 Portuguese teachers; 1 English teacher. The sample was defined according to the availability of the participants in the study. The interviewed teachers were aged between 35 and 42 and hold about 12 to 13 years of professional experience.



3. Presentation of results

As regards the design of collaborative work, the participants are unanimous to consider it an group help between colleagues in the disciplinary group and with the rest of the school community. It is considered a group help in the context of the preparation of the school activities and, in addition to these, particularly with regard to an exchange of knowledge, sharing and learning in common. Nevertheless, they highlight the exiguity of collaborative work in their work contexts. In the dimension related to the promoters of collaborative work, these teachers report that the good environment, friendship between colleague, the confort, the absence of negative criticism, the group help and sharing of experiences and difficulties are facilitators of collaborative work practices in the organization.

Regarding the constraints to the development of the work, these are referred to the practices of individualized work in the teaching class, the fear of criticism and its impact on the person of the teacher, the inhibition in asking for help, fear of public exposure, the fear of being exposed, the difficulty to assume an error, the creation of a bad image and the consequences that this bad image can have in the performance of the evaluation of the teacher.

4. Conclusions

Teachers are unanimous to agree about the advantages of collaborative work. Nevertheless, they consider reducing work initiatives in conjunction with the involvement of this type of practice and identify as a major constraint the presence of decades of individual work cultures in the professional class and the fears of public exposure and deterioration of their image. Likewise, they point out the difficulties in managing the times resulting from intensification and bureaucratization of the teacher's work. Teachers need time to dialogue, express opinions, contrast experiences, reflect on what is done.

For this purpose, the existence of structures and pathways that enable the realization of collaborative work between peers and at school are important. In this way, it will be up to the school, having the necessary resources and incentives to motivate this type of practice and promote and consolidate collaborative relationships among teachers. In this way, the school must have the resources and incentives necessary for motivation of this type of practice and promote and strengthen collaborative relationships among teachers.

In this regard, [5] argue that the dynamics of professional collaboration in individual capacity are anchor designating a *relational agency*, namely, the ability of each element of a given group to align your thinking and your action with the thought and the action of its collaborative partners, in the expectation of a better understanding of the reality and about her acting.

Accordingly, the collaborative practices present great potential, once that born of interaction between people, the sharing of knowledge and experience, providing the reconstruction of knowledge by doing change of practices and the personal and professional development of each person.

In the document *The future of Learning: Preparing for Change*, published by the European Commission [6] is presented a vision of what will be the education in the future, highlighting three aspects that will feature: in addition to personalising (person-centered learning), and informality (lifelong learning including informal), the collaboration (learning in social context) also takes leading role. In short, it will be through collaborative processes that we can access professional development as a systematic process of deepening and rebuilding of knowledge for improving practice [7].

This process comprises a learning that requires great personal investment, self-will, effort and commitment with the profession in where the professional development should be seen as a process powered by experience collaborative of learning and training throughout life.

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