Facilitating Collaborative Teacher Learning

Network building strategies, strategies for sustainability and capabilities, roles and competences of facilitators; values, attitudes, beliefs; group dynamics

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Abstract

This chapter introduces several aspects of collaboration as seen in the contemporary educational system: 1) teachers' professional development, 2) practices of education complex, 3) networks allowing teachers to collaborate, and 4) different spaces involved in collaborative practices. Through these aspects, we encourage the reader to adopt a strategic approach for collaboration and, to back that up, we provide some guiding questions throughout the chapter.

Keywords:

- professional development
- education system
- strategies
- networks
- spaces of practice

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Domains of teachers' professional development

There are three broad domains of professional development, and collaboration can be built around and in combinations of 1) personal, 2) professional, or 3) social development (Domingues & Hager, 2013; European Commission 2010). Firstly, the domain of *personal* development can focus on issues related to developing teacher identity, supporting well-being at work (including physical and mental wellbeing) and other psycho-emotional aspects. In other words, we are supporting the *person* in the teaching (or educator's) profession, and activities in this dimension are often conceptualised as lateral or linked to peer support (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Secondly, the central themes in the domain of *professional* development are related to teacher's work, such as teacher competences, initial and continual teacher education and practical and theoretical orientations. These themes are related to the *profession* and development of the profession, and this comprises not only the individual's occupational competence (e.g. pedagogical skills and knowledge, content knowledge, use of digital tools) and career progress, but also the abstract and theoretical/philosophical contemplation of the whole teaching profession (e.g. how is teaching as a profession conceptualised, what does it mean to be a good teacher?). Thirdly, issues in the domain of social development can be following: the processes of socialisation (across schools and the profession), features of work community (such as cohesion, school culture) and collaborative work in the school context. Emphasis is on the development of *community* and, again, issues are identified on two different levels: one that is contextual, concrete and existential (e.g. socialisation to specific school/area), and the other that is more abstract, conceptual, and ideological (e.g. belonging to the teaching profession). These dimensions are closely related to teachers' professional development, but within an education system collaboration can encompass an even broader view of collaboration that involves different networks.

The EFFeCT project offered a variety of examples covering collaborative learning concepts from many perspectives of the educational system. In Hungary, Pécs-Somogy Primary school teachers are finding new pedagogical solutions with the help of school management to improve the condition of the surrounding community. A similar kind of example is the Broceni secondary school in Latvia, which is addressing various problems in rural areas through collaboration at different school levels. The example of "Central Finland as a learning region" provides insights into cross municipality collaboration to create synergy and platforms for extended collaboration combining groups of teachers, educational leaders and education providers in a Finnish region. In the Czech Republic, school clubs were used as an example of collaboration that created collaborative flow from both bottom-up (from the experience of practitioners) and top-down direction (the need of a national framework). HertsCam network in United Kingdom can be described as a nested system creating lateral and hierarchical collaboration across several levels of educational system. Ireland

introduced the SCoTENS network which is regarded as a valuable forum for various organisation (colleges, universities, councils, trade unions) as well as for stakeholders to contribute to the development of teacher education. These were some of the examples of practice run within the Effect project, all suggesting how to organise collaborative activities and involve participants from many sides of the educational system. Even though the focus is on teachers' collaborative learning, it does not mean that the collaboration is solely for teachers and that others are excluded. Next we provide some insights into different strategies to promote collaborative learning inspired by the many findings in the EFFeCT project.

Practices of education complex

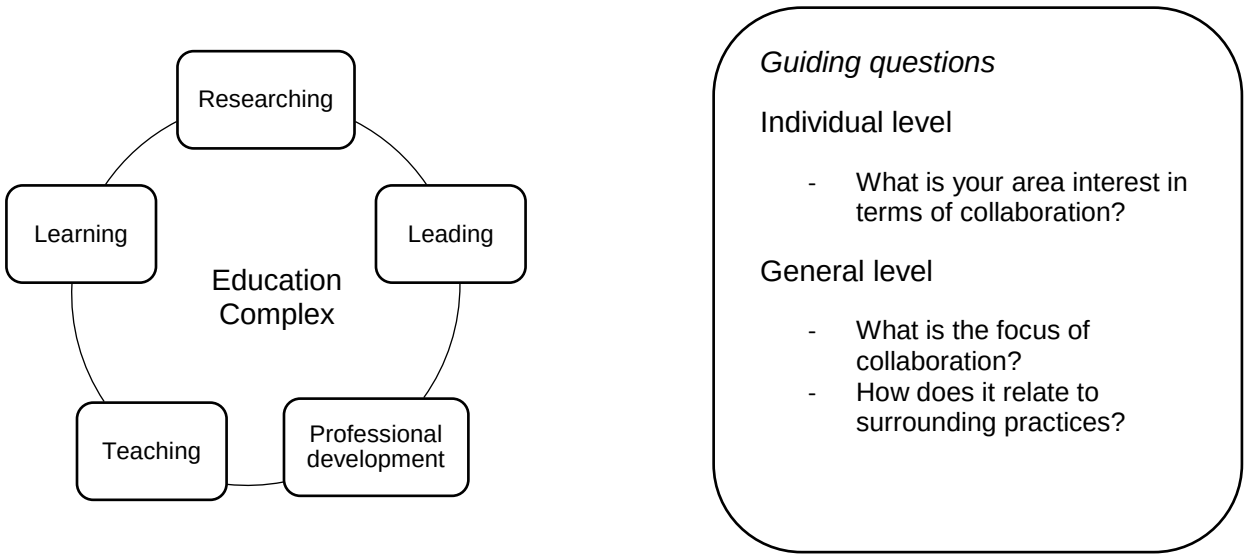

Figure 1. Inter-connected practices in the education complex.

To begin with, we hope to assist you to think about the purpose of the collaboration: why are you interested in collaborative learning? Next to Figure 1 we provide some more guiding questions to help frame the purpose of collaboration. Give yourself a few minutes to think through these questions.

Collaborative teacher learning takes place within the education complex (Figure 1), a system that consists of inter-connected practices: 1) *student learning*, 2) *teaching*, 3) *professional learning* (initial and continuing teacher education, and continuing professional development), 4) *leading* (educational leadership and administration), and 5) *researching* (educational research, critical evaluation and evaluation) (Kemmis et al. 2014, pp. 50-51). The notion of inter-connectedness of the education practices is important as researchers argue that to be realised and to be sustainable, educational change requires the transformation of each of these five dimensions (Kemmis et al.

2014, pp. 51). Schools and education systems rarely encounter just one change at a time and changes might be conveyed through various projects and reforms, which in the worst-case scenario can result in short sighted, scattered and chaotic development of education (Hargreaves, 2000). Through collaboration, this fragmentation can be avoided.

In the *education complex*, we should consider the ways in which collaborative learning can be supported through different practices and how collaboration can be identified in the whole educational system. To this end, collaboration requires strategic work that brings cohesion into the education system. Reformative or governing strategies in education are often described as top-down or bottom-up approaches and actually neither of these approaches provide sustainable strategies for development of an educational system (Fullan, 1994). Instead, for the sole implication of either strategy, system level collaboration benefits from a blend of these approaches, which can be conceptualised as heterarcic. Heterarchy describes organisational structures that are characterised by equality (or non-hierarchic forms), shared knowledge creation, collective decision-making and distributed leadership (Nykänen, 2011). Within systems, heterarchy suggests a shift away from isolated and specified tasks, positions and levels, towards collaborative and networked activities where needs, skills and knowledge of actors at each level are valued and respected (Nykänen, 2011). All levels of the system have fair influence on each other, yet none is dominating another. Thus, we should involve or at least provide opportunities for every network to participate in different levels of a progressive educational system (Figure 2).

Previously we asked you to think about the areas of collaboration, and now is the time to identify your position in the education system and also to consider ways to involve different networks in the collaboration. Use questions in Figure 2.

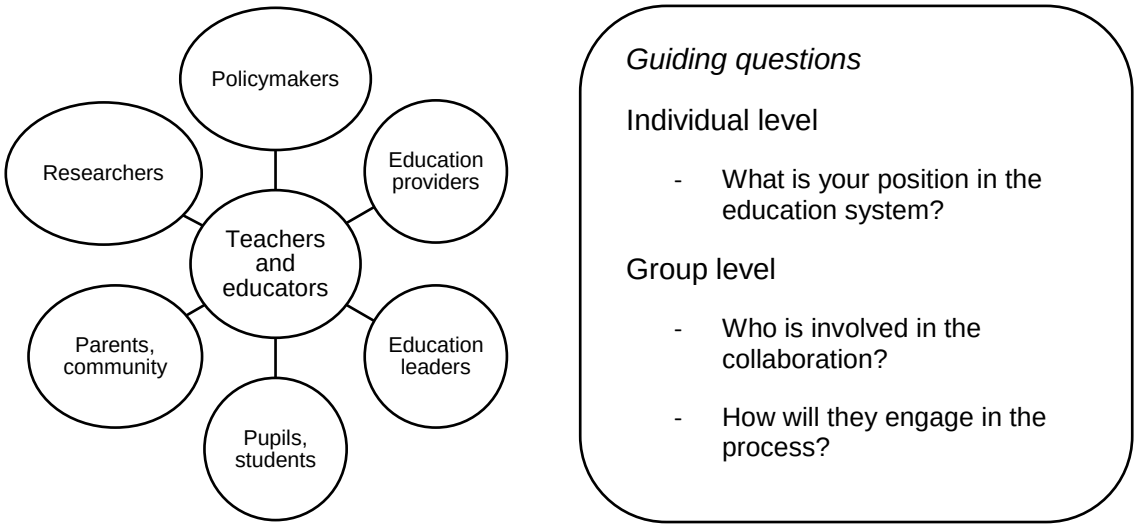

Figure 2. Networks in collaborative teacher learning

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Spaces of collaborative practice

Involvement of people can be facilitated by activities that unfold in particular circumstances. Various practices involve different spaces in which participants encounter one another through *language* (words, thoughts, ideas), activities (work, actions in physical environment), and in *'relatings'* (social relationships, power, solidarity; read more about theory of practice architectures in e.g. Kemmis, et al. 2014-b).

Using ranges of language, participants can express their ideas and share their thoughts and describe their activities and anything that is possible within the arrangements that enable and constrain discussion, discourse and utterances. Intersubjective space of language also entails the subtle and implicit meanings in sayings, such us connotations. Meaning is not always about what we say, it is also about how we say things and in which contexts: e.g. it makes a difference whether a student teacher in a training period is called as a co-teacher or a trainee. What became apparent in the Effect project was that language usage has its own restrictions and possibilities to deliver ideas through concepts. For example, the idea of advancing social justice was discussed with the concept of equity, and immediately project members realised the difficulty of finding exact translations in their native language. In addition to this vocabulary problem, the concern of interpretation was expressed: what does equity mean, and how is it understood in different cultures and perceived individually? In the seeking of consensus, dialogue is a powerful method in use. Dialogical interaction is conceptualised as reciprocal exchanges of ideas and joint construction of knowledge, ones in which participants learn from each other and in collaboration based on the shared understanding. In this way, participants' views are equally appreciated and no one has a better or more correct view of reality as participants realise the incompleteness of their visions and thinking (Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 14). In dialogue, it is important to make participants feel heard, to respect their view of reality and to help them reflect the meanings and interpretation made by others. These are a few key ideas for a facilitator to keep in mind.

Another dimension of practice is the physical space, where actions take place. This dimension comprises the issues of what, when, how, by whom and where something can be done. It guides us to consider the division of labour, resources, tools, and physical environment where activities take place. Greater focus on actions is particularly interesting in the field of collaborative practices as one concept might be used to designate different kinds of activities. As an example, it is well-recognised (e.g. Kemmis et al. 2014a) that mentoring is used as a term to describe distinct activities that differ in terms of, for instance, compositions (pairs versus groups), mediating tools (learning logs versus evaluation sheets), or community (workplace mentoring vs. informal mentoring). To promote collaboration, it is important that the activities reflect the ideas that are

formed in abstract thinking and shared consensus, i.e. discussed and agreed concepts of joint work are also supported by actions that reflect the idea of joint work, with these efforts not turning into individual or isolated tasks.

The dimension of *relatings* characterises the space of values, social relationships, affective and emotional aspects, social norms and rules, as well as power and solidarity; in other words, the ways people relate to each other. On an individual level, social space draws attention to issues such as identity, emotions and feelings and personal values. In particular emotions have moved more into the spotlight in teaching/educational research (Uitto, Jokikokko & Estola, 2015), and cannot be ignored in collaborative teacher learning. Whenever dealing with topics that can raise strong emotional responses, it is worth considering various methods for participants to express their thoughts so that their personal space is respected. In such situations, arts-based methods such as metaphors or fictional stories can be utilised as alternative methods for straight discussion.

Another level of social space is the relationship between participants. Interpersonal relationships can be formed on different levels, as was recognised in the EFFeCT project:

> *In the existential level, every individual is seen equally as important as others and no person is in priority to exist or to be perished. Without any presumptions, every human has the same rights to exist and therefore to be equal to others. In the epistemic level, asymmetry is formed between participants by their unequal distribution of knowledge. It is difficult to say that two persons are equally knowledgeable or that their competences are exactly the same. The asymmetry in the epistemic level should not be viewed as a negative aspect. Asymmetry is needed to form the mentoring relationships; an experienced person advising another less knowledgeable person. Juridical responsibilities are defined by the legislation and regulations, which forms the asymmetry between participants based on the juridical aspect being examined. (Case study of Paedeia café, Finland; Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012, 19)*

These levels are just one example of the ways in which interpersonal relationships can be identified and we encourage others to think of the relevant levels of interpersonal relationships in the collaboration. Moreover, social space is not only constructed from person-to-person relationships, but they also relate to system level personal arrangements (Kemmis & Heikkinen, 2012, 154). Resources, infrastructure and policies can also raise strong feelings for and against, and these feelings aren't targeted to any specific person. Globalisation, digitalisation and neoliberalism as phenomena are a few contemporary examples that create emotional tension through the system level arrangements and serve as a reminder that social relationships are also affected by non-human factors.

As a final task for this chapter we offer some questions to consider concerning collaborative practice space. You can go through the list and also add your own questions.

Semantic space	Physical space	Social space
What concepts are used? What kind of interpretation can be found?	How is the division of work organised? What kind of tools are used? What resources are allocated? What is the environment where activities take place?	What are your personal values? What kind of feelings are involved e.g. in collaboration? What kind of roles can be found? What are the things that raise emotions (both positive and negative)?

Collaborative practices consist of different spaces and these spaces need attention when facilitating the activities and considering the arrangements that enable and constrain the activities. Each of these spaces are useful yardsticks when examining the many aspects of collaboration. As a summary, it is easily observed that collaboration includes practice of various kinds and the strategies for building collaboration are equally diverse. We conclude this chapter with these key-points:

- Teachers' professional development comprises different domains and issues, and that collaboration can be addressed; personal, professional, and in social domains.
- Collaboration should be considered in relation to education systems as a whole including the practices of learning, teaching, professional development, leading, and researching.
- Collaboration should strategically base itself on heterarchy
- Collaborative teacher learning should identify and activate the relevant networks: e.g. policy makers, education providers, education leaders, students, parents, and researchers.
- Collaboration as a practice constitutes different spaces for semantic, physical and social space.

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