Chapter one: Introduction

Why collaborate?

Collaboration seems to be the Holy Grail in schools: everyone talks about the benefits of sharing good practice and yet, in the busy fray of the school environment, very little of it happens. I am interested in exploring the types of collaboration that take place, the benefits and challenges, in order to further understand this phenomenon.

New teachers benefit from the experience of collaboration. The first two years of teaching are a steep learning curve working with others plays a key role in this. However, it is common for established teachers to leave trainee teachers as soon as possible, freeing them up to attack their own to-do list. I am interested by this behaviour and the assumption that experienced colleagues do not benefit from working collaboratively.

For experienced teachers, the most evident barrier that prevents collaboration is the lack of time and opportunity. Although teaching is a highly social and interpersonal profession, teachers find themselves working within highly isolated school structures. However, despite these limitations, some teachers find opportunities to work collaboratively, while others avoid them at all costs. From experience, the busiest of teachers seem to be the ones who make time for it to happen. I want to explore the contributing factors that cause teachers to benefit from collaboration or cause them to resist it.

Context of my case study

These issues are particularly pertinent to my current role. I lead a cross curricular Teaching and Learning Group. Membership is voluntary but contributes to teaching staff's disaggregated training time. In signing up to the group, teachers have chosen to spend time discussing teaching and learning strategies and approaches with their colleagues after school, either because they enjoy this and/or they believe that it will have a positive impact on their practice. Furthermore, in leading a teaching and learning working group as part of the school's improvement plan, colleagues stated that the chance to share and develop practice together would have the biggest impact on the quality of provision.

Nevertheless, when I started to make arrangements for interested colleagues to work collaboratively, above and beyond sharing anecdotes and resources, their anxiety was palpable. While the prospect of peer observation and joint planning was relished by a few, most colleagues were resistant. Time and workload was stated as the biggest barriers and yet there seemed to be a variety of other personal and interpersonal reasons at play; for example, feeling as though they want to 'crack it' by themselves. It seems as though even the most competent of colleagues fear collaborative practices exposing their weaknesses; colleagues appear to have a strong sense of self-preservation causing them to avoid collaboration that takes them out of their comfort zone.

Even acknowledging strengths was difficult. The group agreed that all teachers would benefit from knowing each other's skills and particular areas of interest were so that they knew who to approach for particular expertise or support. However, compiling a list of colleagues' strengths became impossible; individual teachers did

not want to admit to being good at anything, either in fear of seeming to boast or to avoid being caught out. Colleagues did not want to volunteer other's areas of expertise in fear of showing favour. I am interested in understanding more about teachers' motivations to engage in collaborative practice or else resist it, especially the personal and interpersonal factors involved.

Research focus

Since there appears to be a multiplicity of beliefs and experiences about collaboration, I am keen to use my literature review to explore its different forms and how teachers experience them. In addition to finding out about the benefits and challenges of collaboration within schools, I seek to explore and understand the beliefs, assumptions and feelings that teachers have that either help or hinder the process.

I hope that a review of literature on this topic will help me to address my research questions:

- What do we know, from existing research, about collaboration in schools?
- What are the benefits of and the barriers against collaboration?
- What are the conditions for effective collaboration to take place in schools?

Chapter two: Literature review

Popularity and demise: collaboration as the panacea for school improvement

Within the current educational climate, many initiatives such as peer coaching support collaborative practice as a means of improving the quality of teaching: 'Collegiality is hailed as the panacea for school improvement – it has been reified as the answer to solving all problems in schools' (Lieberman, 1993: viii). However, collaboration within the teaching profession has been difficult to sustain. Despite several governmental drives, such as the money invested into team teaching practices in the 1960s, teachers working collaboratively within the secondary sector are the exception rather than the rule.

> 'Working together to accomplish the chief mission of the school is a desirable, even irresistible objective. So desirable that we have to ask ourselves why so little of it appears to be going on at present and, when it has gone on, why it seems so difficult to sustain.' (Little, 1993: 12)

While some teachers make the effort to work with others, many seem to prefer the isolated practice that the secondary school structure affords. Even when structural barriers are removed, such as the move to open classroom arrangements in the 1970s, teachers seek ways of literally or metaphorically reinstating these barriers to maintain their privacy and autonomy.

One possible source of the gap between theory and practice is the contradictions that exist between the rationale for collaboration and the realities of school life. The largest of these being the individualism of teachers' practice; teachers as Independent Artisans (Huberman, 1993) working within fragmented school structures (Lortie,

1975). There is also an inherent tension between the demand for immediate improvement, and the time that it takes to develop collegial relations. The drive for competition and individual performance indicators is also at odds with the principles of collective responsibility. Although government initiatives favour collaborative endeavour, teachers and schools continue to be judged as isolated individuals, thus undermining the incentive to share expertise.

In the face of a general belief that collegiality has the capacity to develop professional practice, in the day to day reality of the classroom, teachers working alone appears to be the most common means of getting the job done. PPA time is allocated to secondary school teachers as part of their individual timetables and teachers are most likely to be found completing tasks in isolation, despite the likelihood of duplicating effort. Since schools have become increasingly careful with staffing budgets, and as teachers are schools' most expensive resource, the prospect of doubling up on teachers' time may seem poor value for money. Teachers may also be reluctant to invest precious time to work collaboratively if the process does not seem as efficient.

In order to explore why relatively little collaboration happens within secondary schools, I will look at the claimed benefits that this form of working has on professional practice. I want to further understand:
- What impact collaboration can have on teachers and their practice?
- Why it is so difficult to develop and sustain collaborative practice?
- How can schools support and develop this way of working?

The emphasis of my literature review will be on the last two questions as I am most interested in finding out why so little collaboration seems to happen and what can be done to remedy this. I will start with an overview of some of the main benefits to establish the context and motivation for my study.

Perceived benefits: personal and professional

Collaboration can provide personal and professional gains for teachers:

'Professional communities that are cohesive, highly collegial environments are also settings in which teachers report a high level of innovativeness, high levels of energy and enthusiasm… a high level of commitment to teaching and to *all* of the students with whom they work.' (McLaughlin, 1993: 94)

By being part of a supportive network, teachers can engage in reflective dialogue about their practice, thus allowing teachers to critically review and plan (James, 2005). Peer support may be seen as a weak form of collaboration but Hargreaves argues it is:

'Central to self-consciously caring school communities where experiments are encouraged, mistakes are forgiven and people's personal and professional concerns are properly addressed in the quest for continuous improvement.' (Hargreaves, 1995: 154)

School leaders should not ignore the capacity that collaboration and peer support has for decreasing teachers' stress levels whilst increasing job satisfaction and ultimately, their ability to do their jobs effectively.

While creating time for staff to work collaboratively can add extra expense, leaving teachers to work in increasingly isolated and potentially stressful conditions is, arguably, going to have much larger ramifications. The report, *The Scale of Occupational Stress: further analysis of the impact of demographic factors and type of job*, published in 2000, found that 41.5% of teachers reported themselves 'highly stressed', while a survey conducted by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in 1999 found 36% of teachers felt the effects of stress all or most of the time (Moore). The pay off for collaboration is difficult to measure, but many teachers and schools recognise that investing resources to support collaboration will have long term benefits. Vescio *et al.'s* research review of professional learning communities found that collaborative

developments between teachers led to increases in student achievement (Vescio, 2008: 86). Sharing expertise increases the productivity of an individual and the whole school: 'Teachers' collective experience composes a rich pool from which new practices or changed conceptions can be fashioned' (McLaughlin, 1993: 99). If a school is to be greater than a sum of its parts, then collaborative practices need to be encouraged and supported. However, a range of barriers can make this practice difficult to develop.

Barriers to collaboration

Professional isolation: individualism versus collegiality

Traditional views of professionalism are founded on the basis of individual expertise and the ability of a professional practitioner to exercise their own sound judgement and skill successfully, such as Huberman's 'Independent Artisan' model (1993).

> 'The press for teachers to work together as colleagues is strong, but so also is the desire or perhaps necessity for teachers to feel that they have the freedom and autonomy as individuals to construct classrooms that make sense to them and their students.' (Lieberman, 1993: vii)

If teaching is seen as the expression of individual personality, collaborative practices can be seen as a threat to personal agency and expertise. However, Hargreaves argues 'autonomy is the polite word used to mask teachers' evaluative apprehension and to serve as the rationale for excluding others' (Hargreaves, 1982: 206) Teachers who view collaboration as a risk to their own professional practice may do so in an attempt to maintain a private way of working.

I believe that school leaders and educators recognise that collaborative practices have the capacity to save time and increase productivity and innovation, but it is the

individual teachers that need further convincing of the benefits of this potentially risky activity.

> 'For the past decade, we have witnessed a virtual campaign to break the bounds of privacy in teaching. It is a campaign waged less often by teachers themselves than by those who would reform their work and work-places.'
> (Little, 1993: 1)

If teachers are used to working in an independent and isolated way, the prospect of working collaboratively can be daunting.

A lack of meaningful professional contact with colleagues can cause 'fragmented individualism' (Hargreaves, 1989). Little acknowledges the potential dangers of such professional isolation:

> 'Isolation feeds the continuous insecurity about one's pedagogical capacity because one's work is wrought alone, never subjected to outside scrutiny, and deflated by fantastic images of better teachers in other classrooms or in other schools.' (Little, 1993: 31)

In this image of perpetual isolation, teachers can become increasingly introverted in their practice; using the excuse of lack of time and a hefty workload to sustain their private and familiar ways of working.

Lieberman acknowledges the inherent irony and tragedy in this scenario:

> 'With so many people engaged is so common a mission in so compact a space and time… so much is carried on in self-imposed and professionally sanctioned isolation.' (Lieberman, 1990: 160)

However, rather than blaming individual teachers for self-imposed isolation, as though a reluctance to collaborate were a deficit psychological trait, it is important to consider the philosophical and sociological factors that have created this

individualised model of teaching, and the role that school structures can play in changing this.

The false dichotomy that has become established between individual and collegial ways of working is an unhelpful one; inherent in this oppositional model is the assumption that all collaborative practices lead to improved teaching and that individual practices are devoid of professional development (Little, 1993: 3). It is important to acknowledge that both models have benefits and drawbacks, and to explore the rationale behind some teachers' preference for individualistic ways of working so that we can fully appreciate how collaborative practice can be developed.

Flinders identifies three types of individualism as a response to work conditions:

- Constrained individualism: 'administrative or other situational constraints that present significant barriers'
- Strategic individualism: 'calculated concentration of effort'
- Elective individualism: 'the principled choice to work alone'

Box 2.1: Flinders' categories of individualism (Little, 1993: 63)

I will be exploring the notion of constrained, strategic and elective barriers to collaboration through the headings of structural, sociological and personal barriers. In doing so, I want to gain understanding and appreciation of the conditions needed within a school to allow for collaboration to prosper.

Structural and sociological conditions that inhibit collaboration

The architecture of school buildings is symbolic of the divisive and isolated working conditions that teachers experience. Being 'prime symbols and symptoms of modernity' (Hargreaves, 1995: 158) due to their size and Balkanised structures, the egg crate architectural design of schools (Lortie, 1975), is still commonplace.

'The cellular form of school organisation, and the attendant time and ecology, puts interactions between teachers at the margin of their daily work.'

(Lortie, 1975: 192)

This physical isolation is further emphasised by the individualised practice of school timetabling: the chance of identifying undisturbed extended time to work meaningfully on a collaborative project is almost impossible.

With a lack of designated time to work in collaborative ways, teacher individualism can be interpreted as an adaptive strategy: 'a rational economising of effort and ordering of priorities in a highly pressed and constrained working environment' (Little, 1993: 58). Preparation time is a way of coping with the immediate workload. 'Teachers may get round to longer term collaboration when everything else is in order – which may be never' (Little, 1993: 28). Lortie contributes this behaviour to short-term gratification which he terms 'presentism' (Lortie, 1975: 212); teachers tend to deal with immediate workload priorities in isolation, instead of prioritising longer-term developments.

While restructuring school conditions to create time and space for colleagues to collaborate is difficult and important, this in itself will not provide the conditions needed for collaboration to happen 'if teachers lack the vision and will to change their professional lives and practice' (McLaughlin, 2001: 125). McLaughlin argues that the challenge is to 'engender norms of inquiry, innovation, and shared accountability' (McLaughlin, 2001: 131). Generating and sustaining a culture of collaboration in which these principles are shared amongst a diverse workforce within a secondary school is arguably a much bigger challenge than creating structures that allow colleagues to collaborate.

Having a shared understanding of the purpose of collaboration is the first hurdle; colleagues may use the opportunity to work with colleagues for very different purposes, depending on their beliefs, assumptions, and personal agendas. They may wish to gloat, moan, pass on their wisdom, learn from others, or they may have a personal axe to grind. School leaders may also have alternative agendas for introducing collaborative ways of working. Smyth's fairly cynical view of collaboration being used as 'a managerial tool in the guise of professional development process to coerce teachers into doing the bland work of economic reconstruction' may help to understand some teachers resistance to the process, in favour of working in more autonomous and independent ways. (Smyth, 2001: 342). Any effective team work involves a clear understanding of goals, values and purposes, but if colleagues meet infrequently this may be difficult to develop and sustain.

Furthermore, 'pre-existing relationships among participants and their beliefs about teaching can shape teachers' interactions in unpredictable ways' (Hindin, 2007:352). Self-preserving cliques are commonplace in many secondary schools. While 'strong subject networks… may provide the collegial context most salient to some secondary school teachers' (Little, 1993: 4), they can become Balkanistic groups that undermine collegial attempts.

In the drive to create collaborative ways of working, schools may be creating contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1992) in place of the genuine collaboration that they seek to support. Grimmet (1990) warns school leaders against 'fulfilling the form of collegiality without regard for the spirit or underlying assumptions of interdependence' (Smyth, 1991:329. Enforcing voluntary collaboration can be antithetical to collegial practice. Colleagues may develop 'pseudo communities'

(Hindin, 2007: 352) as the line of least resistance. If teachers' experience collaborative efforts as 'stilted, unproductive and wasteful of [their] energies and efforts' (Hargreaves, 1995: 155), than they are likely to become even more defensive and reluctant to work collaboratively (Little, 1993: 13). Furthermore, if colleagues have not got genuine collegial relations, their form of collaboration: may amount a sophisticated shell game, with no bearing on what each teacher does ultimately in her classroom' (Little, 1993: 32).

Genuine collaboration is not going to happen between strangers of colleagues that despise one another. This is a sensitive aspect of school life that most leaders would seek to avoid interference in, and yet professional respect and good collegial relations are essential to the success of professional learning communities. However, it is naïve to assume that all collegial differences and gripes could and should be ironed out in the name of collaborative culture. Personal differences are an important ingredient of a thriving community of practice; different personal beliefs about collaboration need to be understood, rather than ignored.

Personal beliefs/fears about collaboration that cause resistance

I would argue that the pervading issue at the heart of teachers' reluctance to work collaboratively is individuals' fear of having their teaching practice judged and exposed. Unspoken judgements, real of imagined, reserved for the sake of professionalism, privacy or positivity, can be even more unsettling for teachers than direct criticism. As lesson observations have become synonymous with judgement, it is not surprising that colleagues are suspicious of and anxious about letting others into their classrooms under the guise of collaborative learning. Power hierarchies and structures in school also add another dimension to the fear of being judged by your own colleagues.

The pooling of ideas and sharing of expertise is considered necessary for those teachers lacking in experience and competence. This deficit model implies that you only need to collaborate with others if you are struggling. Even new colleagues may be resistant to collegial support in order to prove themselves within the 'sink or swim' mentality of the teaching profession. In Lortie's 1975 study of teachers, he observed that 'teachers talk about anything but their practice; being a "good colleague" means not asking for, or giving, advice about classroom practice' (McLaughlin, 2001: 69). Non-interference then becomes synonymous with professional respect.

A personal belief in collaboration and commitment to it stems from the genuine belief that collaborative practices are likely to be 'more powerful and significant that the results of their individual efforts' (Cook, 1992: 8). If teachers are struggling with their workload, they may see collaboration as an extravagance. Many teachers will need to be convinced of the benefits of this way of working in order to sacrifice their personal time and autonomy. Depending on colleagues' beliefs and assumptions about collaboration, they may see it as a one-way process in which novice teachers benefit from their experienced colleagues or vice versa. In order to allay these reservations, colleagues will need to feel as though the benefit of the practice is reciprocal. In addition, collaboration with colleagues must not be seen to undermine teachers' core principle of care. If it involves taking teachers out of their classroom and sharing responsibility for students achievements it may not appeal to teachers' primary motivation: to engage with their own students. Furthermore, as classrooms are unpredictable and dynamic environments and teaching often relies on initiative, intuition and improvisation, then attempting to plan effective outcomes with colleagues outside of this context may be seen as a waste of time.

Having highlighted a range of structural, sociological and personal inhibitors, I will now present a range of conditions that could counteract these barriers, thus allowing collaborative practice to thrive.

Conditions for collaboration: whole school and individual conditions needed to support it

Structural conditions needed for collaboration

Providing regular opportunities for teachers to collaborate is essential. Termly meetings are unlikely to be adequate in allowing colleagues to create productive partnerships. However, while giving colleagues regular time to meet may help to foster collaborative partnerships, it will not guarantee it; it is what happens between the meetings is more important. Flexible structures that are conducive to creating a climate for collaboration are needed to replace the outdated egg crate structure. Quality and quantity of communication is imperative.

Arguably, the most effective examples of collaboration happen organically based on informal decisions to work together. In Lortie's 1975 study, pairing arrangements were based on pre-existing interpersonal ties and friendships. Seemingly non-productive collaboration such as an off-task talk, socialising and offloading helps to forge collaborative relationships. School leaders must recognise that the informal discussion that happens before or after meetings may actually offer the richest opportunities for colleagues to share and develop practice.

Creating a climate for collaboration is central to encouraging teachers to work together. At present, management target setting practices promote individual performance:

'Groups and individuals have vested interests and compete for time, materials, personnel, territory, and career advantages.' (Acker, 1991: 304)

To be successful, the learning community needs to contain certain core features: 'shared beliefs, interaction and participation, interdependence, concern for individual and minority views, and meaningful relationships' (Clark, 2001: 110). There needs to be a climate of trust and it needs to be modelled and promoted by senior leaders if teachers are going to take the risks necessary to work in new, collaborative ways.

Interpersonal conditions needed for collaboration

Effective leadership at school and departmental level will affect the conditions for collaboration; all aspects of school behaviours and decision making will speak volumes about how high collaboration features on the school's improvement agenda (McLaughlin, 2001: 98). Progressive and forward thinking leaders will protect the conditions for collaboration as a developmental priority and make collaboration something that is done *by* teachers *with* teachers, rather than something that is done *to* them.

> 'Leaders of schools and departments where teacher community thrives make conditions of teachers' work a top priority. They do not assume that teacher collaboration and invention are self-sustaining or that they can rely on isolated initiative of individual teachers.' (McLaughlin, 2001: 121)

Relationships between teachers of all statuses need to be collegial. All types of professional and personal exchanges help to build up a culture ripe for collaboration:

> 'They create friendship, tolerance and solidarity, and in so doing, they clearly make it easier to intrude on each other's instructional practices in the name of a larger purpose.' (Little, 1993: 32)

In the desperation to create instant results, schools and individual teachers need to recognise that productive collaborative relationships take time to develop. Likening collaborative cultures to plants, 'rushing their growth is tantamount to pulling them up' (Little, 1993: 33); this may be at odds with the pressure to implement innovation and reap instant results.

Considering the make-up of collaborative groups is imperative: how they are constructed; whether membership is voluntary or imposed. There should be a balance between heterogeneity and homogeneity: 'We ignore the dynamics of the team at our peril' (Thomas 1992; 176). We can't just assume that groups of teachers will get on and have things in common: 'the community in schools can be 'more like a ship of fools… than a gathering of kindred souls' (Little, 1993: 11). Even colleagues that are close friends may find it difficult to work collaboratively without the right structures and conditions. Devoting time to establishing group values and understanding how they will work in practice is essential. While teachers spend a lot of time interacting with students, this does not mean that they are experts in team work. Engaging teachers in authentic group work towards collective goals is crucial; 'not just working *in* groups, but *as* groups' (Hargreaves, 1995; 168).

Personal conditions needed for collaboration
Understanding individuals' needs, as well as the needs of a group, is important in order to appreciate the best way of organising teacher collaboration. Just as schools need to have a trusting, respectful and supportive climate for professional learning, individuals also need to have the personal qualities that will enable them to work successfully together. McLaughlin identifies 'people who can communicate, think and continue to learn throughout their lives'; 'people who can demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours, responsibility and adaptability' and 'people who can work

with others' (McLaughlin, 2001: 69). Some colleagues, arguably, lack the skills such as self-reflexivity and personal evaluation required. James' list of personal criteria needed to collaborate successfully reads as a demanding skill set that even the most experienced, competent and confident of teachers would find challenging to meet.

Individuals in collaborating groups require:
- the capacity to sacrifice some individual autonomy in the interests of collaboration
- appropriate interpersonal collaboration skills and qualities;
- the collective capability to bestow equal valuing and parity of esteem according to roles and responsibilities in relation to the collaborative focus. Inclusive collaborative working can demonstrate this equal valuing;
- the capacity to hold in view the focus of the joint working (the primary task) in order to sustain a work group mentality and avoid tendencies towards basic assumption mentalities;
- individual and collective reflective capacity in order to ensure optimal practice and improvement capacity on the work task and to ensure optimal practice in the practice of joint working and its improvement.

Box 2.2: Individual conditions for collaboration (James, 2005: 8)

Schools have a responsibility to provide the relevant training and development opportunities for teachers to develop these skills in order to become proficient collaborators.

It is also important for individuals to recognise that collaborative practices may be difficult and uncomfortable to begin with; professional resilience and an ability to take stock of the bigger picture are essential. The first few experiences may feel unproductive and unrewarding; it may seem like a waste of time (Little, 1990: 167). The capacity for conflict is high; members should be prepared for this and treat it as a healthy symptom of group formation.

I believe that while much is spoken of the structural barriers and necessary conditions for collaboration, the interpersonal and personal aspects are far more challenging and difficult to change. Perhaps it is the sensitive and thorny nature of the sociology and

psychology of teaching that causes educational policy to shy away from these aspects. However, if contrived collegiality is to be avoided, a holistic view needs to be taken and all of these conditions, structural, social and personal, need to be explored, understood and addressed.

Bridging the gap between theory and practice; individual and group

Appreciating the complexities and challenges of collaboration is central to making it a success.

> 'Reform initiatives have pressed teachers toward collaboration and collegiality with a fervour that far outstrips our present understanding of the conditions, character, and consequences of such relationships.' (Little, 1993: 2)

Collaboration can be a powerful vehicle for professional development but it can be overused and misused. The word 'collaboration' can be misused to represent superficial cooperation or coercive action. Teachers need to have a true sense of its meaning and potential.

Helping teachers to develop the language and reflective capacity to deconstruct their practice, justify their decision-making, and invite others to get involved in their individual pursuit of teaching excellence should be part of this training development. Providing opportunities for 'authentic conversation' (Florio-Ruane and Clarke, 1993) that also allow teachers 'safe exploration of uncharted territory' (Clark, 2001: 12) will be important. There is a general assumption that as teachers are skilled in communicating knowledge to students, they will be capable of sharing practice with their peers. However, in Hindin's *et al.*'s study, one of the most significant findings related to teachers' inability 'to share their experiences in a way that would lead to optimised learning for the other group members' (Hindin, 2007: 372). Talking about teaching needs to be seen as an important professional development task, rather than

merely a social activity as it has the capacity to develop teachers' understanding of their craft as a way of creating meaning (Olson, 1997: 22).

Furthermore, it is important to have the chance to collaborate at classroom level; 'information that is obtained first hand through multi sensory modes is more likely to influence one's judgements and inferences' (Little, 1993: 27). Opportunities for peer observation and team teaching should be made available, as highlighted earlier on in the chapter, but it is imperative that the social and personal conditions are in place before structures such as these are introduced, otherwise teachers will not be ready or prepared to share their pedagogical practice in this intimate way. Teachers need to be given a range of forums in which to share, exchange, and develop collegial relationships.

Rather than viewing collaboration as the cure-all to school improvement, school leaders need to recognise the importance of individuals' craft skill within a collective group. It is important for teachers to feel autonomous and skilled to apply their professional knowledge to their setting. Moreover, teachers having confidence from knowing that their skills are respected and valued is more likely to make them successful collaborators. Misunderstandings between individualism and individuality cause issues. We need to tackle what Szaz (1976) coined 'the genetic heresy of individualism' in which 'collaboration and collegiality have become powerful images of preferred aspiration; isolation and individualism have become equally powerful images of professional aversion' (Little, 1993: 53).

Losing individuality and eccentricity within teaching would be a shame. Teaching is highly interpersonal and demanding – the chance to plan and assess work in isolation may be the only chance teachers have for solitude and personal reflection:

'If requirements for teamwork and collaboration seem as if they might be eliminating opportunities for independence and initiative, unhappiness and dissatisfaction may result.' (Little, 1993: 69)

We also need to ward against conformist 'group think' (Fullan and Hagreaves); allowing individuals to voice their own opinions and disagree with each other is a healthy aspect of school development.

'Plurality and heterogeneity in teaching [should] be treated as a potential for professional vitality and growth not as a supply for professional destruction.' (Klette, 1997: 256)

The difficult challenge, therefore, is to promote a collaborative culture without jeopardising the value and importance of individual teachers' practice.

Theory into practice

Having completed a review of the literature on the subject of teacher collaboration, I am now interested in finding out whether the experiences and opinions of my colleagues within the Teaching and Learning Group concur with those expressed in the academic readings. There seems to be a huge amount of literature in favour of collaborative practice and yet there is also the acknowledgement that collaboration is at odds with the isolated structure of the teaching profession. I am interested in finding out why teachers in the group make the effort to work in collaborative ways and go beyond the individualistic parameters of everyday teaching.

I am also interested in exploring teachers' experiences of the barriers to collaboration and examples of how they have managed to overcome them. I want to explore whether their experiences tally with Flinders' model of constrained, situational and

elective individualism, and why they may be more resilient and determined to overcome the time barrier than other colleagues.

I hope to be able to discover individuals' motivation to collaborate as a means of identifying the personal conditions that are necessary for collaboration to take place. Having identified factors that the literature signal are important to the success of collaboration such as effective leadership and strong interpersonal relationships, I want to find out whether this has been the experience of Teaching and Learning Group members.

Therefore the research questions at the heart of my case-study are:

- **What do teachers perceive to be the benefits of working collaboratively?**
  Why have they chosen to be a member of the Teaching and Learning Group and what has affected their attitude towards collaboration?
- **What are the genuine barriers to collaboration have they experienced?**
  Which ones have they managed to overcome; how and why?
- **What are the personal, social and structural conditions for effective collaboration to take place?**
  How does each of these factors affect each other and why is there so much diversity within one school setting; what can schools do to create a culture of collaboration?

In my next chapter I discuss the decisions behind my research design and the justifications for my chosen methods. I also address the implications of researching in my own setting: the benefits, tensions and challenges that this posed. My experiences of practitioner research and leading an enquiry group are developed further in chapter four.

Chapter three: Research design and methodology

Collaboration in context

I decided to use the Teaching and Learning Group as a case study; I wanted to study its members over the course of the school year to learn about their experiences of collaboration. I chose the format of a case study as 'it provides a unique example of real people in real situations'. I wanted to 'report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events [and] human relationships' (Cohen, 2000: 181).

The group meet every half term as part of the school's CPD calendar; I planned to use discussions from these meetings at the beginning of the year to identify members that I wanted to speak to in more depth. The group's focus for the year was the topic of pupil engagement – this was a response to the school's SUPER survey research findings. The Teaching and Learning Group identified the development of a relationship-driven approach to teaching and learning as a priority for the year so this was the theme of the cross-curricular meetings. My research involved using members of developmental action-research projects as part of my case study.

As my research questions involve understanding colleagues' opinions and values, I selected a qualitative approach for my research design and decided to use interviews as my main research method.

'Qualitative interviewing is particularly useful as a research method for accessing individuals' attitudes and values – things that cannot necessarily be observed or accommodated in a formal questionnaire.' (Silverman, 2006: 114)

I also decided to use observation notes from the meetings in order to capture my observations about colleagues collaborating.

Benchmark survey

I planned to combine my qualitative research with some initial quantitative data to 'establish the broad contours of the field' (Silverman, 2006: 48). My intention was to gather the group's initial perspectives on the Teaching and Learning Group through a brief survey. I devised a questionnaire consisting of six rating questions and two open-ended questions and invited group members to complete this at the end of the first term (appendix A). I used Survey Monkey, free online survey software, as colleagues in the group are ICT proficient. However, this data collection strategy proved unsuccessful; only one colleague responded out of the 22 I invited.

This early hurdle in my research design proved to be an interesting experience; it made me consider why colleagues did not respond. Time may have been an issue, or ICT know-how. However, these were colleagues that responded to emails instantaneously and regularly complete on-line surveys as part of the school's self-evaluation cycle. I had sent them a direct web link to the survey and had displayed it during one of the meetings so they could see the format and limited time needed (appendix B). I also sent out reminder emails with the link so if colleagues had forgotten about it or lost the original email they still had a chance to respond.

I did not quiz members about their lack of response as I felt as though this would be inappropriate – the survey was a voluntary task to help me with my thesis. I did not want to use my leader status to pressure colleagues to explain their motives. An alternative solution I considered was to hand out a paper copy of the survey at the next teaching and learning meeting, but I didn't feel that forcing teachers to do something that they had opted out of previously was a good idea; furthermore, taking up rare and precious time allocated for peer collaboration seemed counter-productive.

As the quantitative survey results we going to be of limited use to me, I decided to dismiss this data. In hindsight, the format of the survey, an impersonal online tick response, was not appropriate. A survey is typically used to 'scan a wide field of issues, populations, programmes etc. in order to measure or describe any generalised features' (Cohen, 2000: 171). This quantitative questionnaire did not enable me to elicit personal insights; I was just keen to gather some statistical data in the naïve belief that this would somehow make my research more valid.

> 'If a researcher is concerned to catch local, institutional or small scale factors and variables – to portray the specificity of a situation, its uniqueness and particular complexity, its interpersonal dynamics, and to provide explanations of why… a person or group of people… behaved in a particular way in a situation… then a survey approach is probably unsuitable.' (Cohen, 2000: 172)

Although this research method proved unfit for purpose, it was a good learning experience and made me sensitive to the difficulties of securing colleagues' time.

Recording collaboration in practice

One of my data sources for this empirical research was observations from the Teaching and Learning Group meetings. I aimed to record group discussions using audacity software so that I could capture the collaborative interactions taking place. I also kept a research journal to record my own personal observations. I saw this as way of triangulating my research findings; being able to compare interview responses with dialogue from the meetings, thus using a 'between-method' approach (Seale, 1999: 54).

I decided not to record the first Teaching and Learning Group meeting of the year; it was important for group members to gel and talk openly without the added pressure of being recorded. It was also necessary for me to use this meeting to introduce the aims of my research project and secure members' consent.

The practical reality of attempting to record meetings proved challenging and caused me to change my research design. Several ICT blips meant that the recordings from the next two meetings were inaudible or incomplete. Furthermore, it was only possible to focus on introduction and plenary discussions; I could not capture the range of rich and varied discussions happening around the room. I also noticed that the presence of the recording equipment changed the dynamics and atmosphere of the meetings; whilst there was plentiful conversation happening in table discussions, colleagues seemed uneasy with speaking into a microphone. I was unhappy with the impact this had on the quality and ease of discussions and the issues this raised about reactivity (Cohen, 2000: 127). This was antithetical to the collaborative environment that I was trying to establish, so I decided not to use recording equipment in future meetings.

This decision made me more reliant on my notes from my research journal. However, even though this was a more discreet and conventional way of recording observations without impinging on the group's discussions, I experienced difficulties in trying to multi-task. I found it challenging to make notes while 'going native'; there was the risk of 'closing my perspective and becoming blind to the peculiarities that I was supposed to be investigating' (Cohen, 2000: 314). Furthermore, because the majority of meeting time was spent in small groups it was not possible for me to listen to all conversations, despite moving around the tables.

I decided that the most appropriate thing to do was to complete my research journal once the meetings had finished. Although this relied on memory, I felt that this was a less intrusive strategy and it allowed me to lead the meetings more effectively. Despite the risk of self-editing and bias taking place in my journal, I believed that this method was the appropriate means of recording observations for the purposes of my research questions; my journal became a record of my own personal reflections about the process of leading practitioner research. I was also able to study the dynamics of the group and consider its effectiveness as a forum for collaboration.

After abandoning the benchmark survey and changing the focus of my research journal, interviews became my main data source. On reflection, this was the most appropriate method for the purpose of my research questions. Surveys and observation were not capable of exploring colleagues' beliefs and norms of conduct (Seale, 1999: 56).

Conducting interviews

Rationale for using interviews

My motivation for using face-to-face interviews as my main research method, stemmed from my desire to explore colleagues' personal beliefs and opinions on the subject of collaboration. My research purpose matched those identified by King in his criteria for choosing qualitative interviews:

> 1. Where a study focuses on the meaning of a particular phenomena to the participants.
> 2. Where individual perceptions of processes within a social unit – such as a work group, department or whole organization – are to be studied prospectively, using a series of interviews.
> 3. Where individual historical accounts are required of how a particular phenomenon developed

Box 3.1: King's circumstances for qualitative research interviews (Robson, 2002: 271)

All three of these justifications are relevant to my research aims:

1) To uncover teachers' understanding and opinions of collaboration

2) To investigate teachers' perceptions of collaboration in practice

3) To explore the personal, historical factors that affected teachers' beliefs about collaboration.

Brown's experience of qualitative interviewing also convinced me of the benefits of this research method: 'Teachers spoke more expansively…and were more likely to describe what they did and why' (Brown, 1993: 37). While listening to colleagues' conversations during Teaching and Learning Group meetings did allow me to find out about what colleagues had done, I was more interested in discovering the motivations behind their actions; interviews would allow me to probe further into this area of interest.

Selecting my sample

As my case study was an investigation into the conditions that are needed for collaboration to happen, I selected colleagues that seemed to be the most active collaborators amongst the group; people that regularly attended the Teaching and Learning Group and had taken an active role in the collaborative action research projects. I approached these teachers in person to explain my research; all consented to being involved and having the interviews recorded and transcribed for research purposes. Teachers have been given pseudonyms for anonymity purposes. The table below demonstrates their roles and responsibilities, and their involvement with collaborative projects.

Teacher	Responsibility	Collaborative experience	Interviewed
Harriet King	Head of subject	Cross faculty peer observation focused on extended writing (with Helen)	January 2009 (prior to peer observation) May 2009 (post peer observation)
Helen Smith	Head of year	Cross faculty peer observation focused on extended writing (with Helen)	January 2009 (prior to peer observation) May 2009 (post peer observation)
Peter Adams	Head of subject	Subject-based peer planning	March 2009 (prior to peer-planning) May 2009 (post peer-planning)
Melissa Jarvis	Assistant principal	Subject-based peer planning	March 2009 (prior to peer-planning) May 2009 (post peer-planning)
James Collins	Head of faculty	Spreading best practice within the faculty	June 2009 (after the last Teaching and Learning Group meeting)

Table 3.1: Profile of interview respondents

Interview schedule

I devised my initial interview schedule on the basis of my research questions. My first two interviews (with Helen and Harriet) were largely unstructured; I used my three main research questions as starting points for discussion:

1) What do you see as the benefits of collaboration?

2) What barriers to collaboration have you experienced?

3) In your experience, what conditions have helped collaboration to take place?

These initial interviews allowed me to test out my research questions and gave respondents a chance to talk about aspects of collaboration that I had not considered.

> 'Preliminary interviews can probably be placed at the 'completely unstructured' end of the continuum of formality. This is the stage when you are trying to find out which areas or topics are important and when people directly concerned with the topic are encouraged to talk about what is of central significance to them.' (Bell, 2005: 161)

After the first two interviews I revised my interview schedule based on the responses and key findings from my literature review (appendix D). I opted for an 'interview guide approach' (Cohen, 2000: 271) and decided to use open ended questions that would allow me to go into more depth where appropriate and establish rapport and co-operation (Cohen, 2000: 275).

I specified topics and outlined questions in advance but decided on the sequence of questions during the course of the interview, adding further questions as appropriate. I wanted to have the flexibility to select questions that were appropriate for the teacher's experiences and to follow leads as they arose. The semi-structured nature of my interviews allowed respondents to comment on things that I had not anticipated; I wanted to be able to capitalise on any possible new research themes. This did mean

that there was a wide range of responses, reducing the comparability of data, but this was fit for purpose; my priority in designing my interview schedule was to capture the uniqueness of my respondents (Cohen, 2000: 271).

Conducting and recording the interviews

I adopted a commonly used sequence for my interview format:

Intro	Interviewer introduces herself, explains purpose of the interview, assures confidentiality, ask permission to tape
Warm up	Easy, non-threatening questions at the beginning to settle down both of you.
Main body of interview	Covering the main purpose of the interview in what the interviewer considers to be a logical progression. In semi-structured interviewing, this order can be varied, capitalising on the responses made
'Cool-off'	Usually a few straightforward questions at the end to defuse any tension that might have built up.
Closure	Thank you and goodbye.

Table 3.2: Recommended structure of interview schedule (Robson, 2002: 274)

I also tried to adhere to the advice given by Robson regarding interview technique:

- Listen more than you speak
- Put questions in a straightforward, clear and non-threatening way
- Eliminate cues which lead respondents to respond in a particular way
- Enjoy it (or at least look as though you do)
- Take a full record of the interview

Box 3.2: Interview technique advice (Robson, 2002: 274)

I used prompts and probes where appropriate to elicit more detail and keep the flow of conversation. As I became more experienced and confident at interviewing, I was able to accept pauses and avoid interrupting the respondents. In later transcriptions I noticed the speech ratio shifting; I was able to listen more and allowed my colleagues to speak at length.

Data collection and coding

From my negative experience of attempting to use recording equipment, I considered how to make this process less obtrusive. I still wanted to have a full recording of the interviews in order to benefit from being able to replay the interviews and develop comprehensive, accurate transcripts (Silverman, 2006: 204). I considered using a dicta-phone but wondered whether placing this in the middle of a table might have a similar obtrusive effect. As laptops are common place at meetings at my school and they have inbuilt recorders, I decided that this was a preferable piece of equipment. Once I had secured colleagues' permission to record our interviews, they seemed to be unaware of the laptop. It also saved me time as I did not have to download digital recordings onto my laptop, they were stored there immediately.

After conducting my interviews I transcribed them. I did this using Express Scribe software so that I could easily manipulate the recording while I typed. I used punctuation and formatting to demarcate emphases placed by the speaker, and to indicate mood and tone (Cohen, 2000: 282). Once I had finished a transcription I checked through the transcripts in real time.

I identified an inductive coding system based on my research questions. I looked for the following themes and highlighted them in corresponding colours.

Benefits of collaboration

Barriers to collaboration

Structural conditions

Personal and interpersonal conditions

I initially started off by printing off the transcripts and highlighting by hand according to my pre-defined coding themes. I also left space in the margin to add accompanying notes (Cohen, 2000: 283). However, I started to notice other emerging themes and it was difficult for me to demarcate these as I only had one remaining highlighter colour. I didn't want to limit my coding to just the inductive themes and I recognised the limitations of trying to colour code at this stage. I reverted to underlining pertinent quotations that related to any of the initial or emerging themes and added accompanying annotations.

The next stage of my coding process involved setting up an excel spreadsheet that would allow me to systematically collate, store and sort all of the data I had identified from the transcripts. I labelled the columns with the following headings to allow me to create sub themes and keep track of the data sources.

Quote	Source	RQ/meths	Theme	Notes
I wish we could do it more, I'm all for it.	GH March 1	Personal	Motivation	Beliefs/enjoyment

Table 3.3: Extract from data spreadsheet

I copied and pasted direct quotations from the transcripts in column A. In the source column I used the initials of the interviewee plus the month of the interview and the page number. When transcribing my data I found quotes that related to aspects of practitioner enquiry, instead of the research questions; I chose to reflect this aspect in column C.

I stuck to the original inductive codes for the research questions categories but decided to separate interpersonal from personal conditions. I also added the emerging themes of 'practitioner research' and 'definitions'; as I coded the transcriptions I noted that I had made a number of annotations noting how

colleagues seemed to have different perceptions and understandings of the term 'collaboration'. I thought that this was an important consideration for my analysis.

The themes for column D emerged during the coding process. There were some very popular ones that were common pairings across the interviews such as: Benefits – developing practice; Barriers – time; Personal conditions – motivation. There were some instances of overlap between categories and sub themes; I made a note for this for consideration in my data analysis. There were also other themes that were only relevant to one or two quotes but I still wanted to use these to represent the variety of responses. I included a notes column so that I could capture the annotations that I had made during the coding, and any other observations that I noticed while I was sorting the data.

After all 268 highlighted quotations had been entered I sorted the spreadsheet data by research question and theme and this formed the structural basis for my data analysis. I considered the data in the thematic sections and wrote up summaries of the findings; consolidating similar responses and identifying differences. I selected the most representative quotations to exemplify my argument and abbreviated them where appropriate.

In chapter five I present the findings from my data analysis, structured in accordance with my original research questions: barriers, benefits and conditions for collaboration. In the next chapter I reflect on my experience of conducting this case study, and highlight issues pertinent to practitioner research.

Chapter four: What have I learnt about practitioner research?

The challenges of leading an enquiry group and balancing a range of roles

Managing multiple agendas

While leading the Teaching and Learning Group gave me a privileged position, it also posed some issues. In my roles as Teacher Research Co-coordinator and research practitioner I was trying to achieve multiple agendas and was simultaneously trying to:

- observe the group for my own research aims;
- develop a research culture;
- lead school development;
- allow colleagues to satisfy their own professional development objectives.

The tensions that this created is evident from frustrations noted in my research journal, especially in the early stages of the case study.

> Concerns at the moment:
> 1) Being organised and making the most of scheduled T&L meetings.
> 2) Making sure that all members are actively involved in the research project.
> 3) Actions are obvious and able to track.
> 4) Research is captured along the way

Box 4.1: Research Journal 8.10.08

Managing group dynamics became a key theme in my research journal entries; concerns about the productivity of the group and its ability to stay on-task are also evident.

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> Will people complete Survey Monkey? Will anyone actually do anything?...It's
> challenging to make these meetings practical and useful for colleagues while still
> offering the opportunity to capture data.

Box 4.2: Research Journal 23.10.08

My reflections after the last Teaching and Learning Group meeting of the year
demonstrate that the tensions are still present:

> Still lone teachers sharing individual practice? Changing membership and lack of
> concrete projects makes it difficult to go beyond this. Tension between giving teachers
> choices and independence and a focus/being flexible.

Box 4.3: Research Journal 20.5.09

Keeping focused on the research purpose

The challenges of trying to fulfil more than one role are also present in the interview
transcripts. My initial interviews with Helen and Harriet ended up taking on a
secondary purpose; to advise and support them with their own research that they
were about to embark upon. I tell Harriet:

> *So maybe it's worth having a bank of a few questions that both you and Helen could
> ask? (HK Jan 5)*

This is not relevant to my interview schedule; it is evidence of me trying to
suggestions about possible ways to interact with students during their planned peer
observation. I also advise Helen:

> *Don't feel tempted to, at the end of that hour, to try and have two minutes at break
> time where you rush everything and think 'I've got to feedback now'. (HS Jan 5)*

I am adopting the role of critical friend, trying to get them to consider their
observation methods for the planned peer observation, rather than focusing on my
interview focus.

The pressure to try to guide and support my colleagues with their mini research projects, as well as covering my own interview schedule in the limited time available, is also apparent through my interview technique. At one point I bombard Helen with questions about her plans for peer observation *(HS Jan 4).* This is evidence of the speed at which I am trying to communicate. It shows that ideally I would have had a separate supervisory meeting with these colleagues in my role as Teacher Research Co-ordinator so I could have dedicated these interviews to the topic of collaboration.

Being a colleague as well as the interviewer also introduces an element of familiarity which proved to be an advantage as well as a potential drawback. When interviewing a member of my department it allowed her to go into detail about the specifics of the enquiry she was conducting as we shared understanding of the subject matter *(HS Jan 1).* It is useful that I am fully aware of the context that Helen is describing, but being her head of faculty means that she is probably going into more subject-specific detail than was necessary for the purpose of the interview. I also engage in this dialogue by giving suggestions and making reference to specific students. There is also evidence of me adopting a supportive and reassuring role, trying to help Helen feel at ease with being out of her comfort zone:

> *Um, but it's not because you're a bad teacher, or you're not receptive, or anything…*
> *It's just, it is a learning curve… for them and for you, and it's not going to happen*
> *immediately. (HS Jan 8)*

This mentoring stance is evidence of me shifting from interviewer to colleague and demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining an objective stance when researching in your own setting.

Although these were formal interviews in so far as they were arranged in advance with a schedule and recorded for a research purpose, there was an informal

atmosphere created by my professional closeness with the interviewees. This is shown by laughter shared in most of the interviews. One drawback to this informality is that at times dialogue becomes more of a discussion rather than an interview. Because I am at ease with my colleagues and find their contributions interesting, there is evidence of me sharing my own opinions and ideas, rather than just listening to theirs:

> *And I think, in my opinion is that, it's like a cultural shirt, from being an isolated individual in the profession to becoming more collaborative, and it does, I think, it does depend a lot on personalities. (HS Jan 10)*

In this instance I am clearly using the interview as a means of sharing and testing my theory on the conditions necessary for teachers to collaborate, which is not part of my interview schedule. There is also evidence of me incorporating ideas from academic literature I have recently read *(HS Jan 6).* Again, I am shifting from interviewing my colleague to telling them what I have learnt on the topic. This demonstrates the informal nature of the interview set-up, I felt comfortable deviating from the interview schedule to share my own understandings and ideas. Although this was not planned and did not meet my interview objectives, I do think that it helped the interviews to seem more natural. It is worth noting that a lot of these examples are taken from the first two interviews I did when my schedule was less structured and I had less experience. However, that the fact that these sessions ended up more like discussions than conventional interviews helped to generate a shared understanding of the research topic and developed a rapport that made the next set of interviews with these colleagues a lot easier.

The methodological and ethical implications of researching in my own context

Securing informed consent

I was conscious of the fact that my position as a middle leader made the gatekeeper process easier for me and that colleagues may have felt obliged to co-operate with the research: 'research interviews have a power dimension to them, of which the interviewer needs to be aware' (Burton, 2005: 113). In order to avoid power dimensions and collegial relationships interfering with gaining informed consent, I made sure that my invitations to take part in the research were made in person and gave clear and honest information about the purpose for the research and the processes involved. These invitations were voluntary and I was mindful not to persuade or coerce colleagues into taking part; all willingly agreed to participate.

I was also conscious not to take advantage of my position as a senior teacher to take up any more of the teachers' time than was necessary; this explains why I was often trying to meet more than one agenda in meetings. In some instances it took weeks to find a mutually convenient slot. I deliberately did not ask to meet during break or lunchtimes as I would consider this to be an imposition on colleagues; I tried to keep to available free periods where possible to avoid colleagues having to stay after school. The difficulties that this presented are evidenced in the transcript data; interruptions caused by students and other colleagues are noted, as is the interference caused by the walkie-talkie that I had on me while conducting one of the interviews because the only time that we could meet together clashed with me being on-call (HK Jan 6). This highlights the difficultly of securing protected time and space to conduct practitioner research within the constraints of school settings.

Power dimensions

In my interview with Peter and the rest of his department there was definitely the sense that they were trying to justify why they had changed the focus of their collaborative project; they had originally agreed to trial the Research Lesson Study model and had then decided to use the time to plan together for the forthcoming decision making exam:

> *PA: It ticks all the kind of boxes as to what we've spoken about in terms of working*
> *together… (Geog May 1)*

This response made me conscious of the Hawthorne effect: 'Participants may wish to avoid, impress, direct, deny, and influence the researcher' (Cohen, 2000: 156). Since Peter's comment indicated that he was keen to please me and prove that they had done as they were told, I made it clear through my tone, facial expressions and questioning that my purpose was not to judge them and their reasons for changing their collaboration focus. I purposefully did not want to impose my agenda as Teacher Research Co-ordinator.

Assuring anonymity

Cohen defines the dissemination of data as 'the ability to match personal information with the identity of the research participants' (Cohen, 2000: 61). I have taken the following actions to protect the identity of my respondents:

- The name of my school has been withheld
- Respondents have been made anonymous by the use of alias names.
- Names of students or teachers mentioned in interviews have been changed.
- Potentially personal comments that have the potential to cause offense of embarrassment of any kind have been omitted

Aggregating data and avoiding all reference to teachers' roles and responsibilities within the school could have provided further anonymity, but I decided that it was

important to contextualise the teachers and their responses; an important focus of my research, after all, is to explore the personal conditions for collaboration.

Respondent confidentiality

This level of familiarity with colleagues interviewed also posed ethical issues to do with confidentiality. Because I was using these interviews as a chance to support their action research projects, there were occasions where I made reference to what other colleagues had told me in their interviews. For example I told Harriet:

> *I know from talking to Helen it's been brilliant, it's kind of changed her mind. To begin with when I said: "Are you happy to, for people to come and observe" she was like: "Well, that group aren't perfect"… (HK Jan 8)*

Although this could be seen as unethical because I was breaking confidentiality by sharing other respondents' views, I think this was a natural thing to do in the circumstances; we were discussing the purpose of the peer observations, clarifying expectations and dispelling traditional judgemental observation styles. Furthermore, my colleagues had already spoken to each other about outcomes from each other's interviews:

> *Yeah, she did email me to tell me what you said. (HS Jan 3)*

Researcher bias

There is an inevitable inherent bias in interviewing colleagues – it cannot be removed, instead I have aimed to recognise, control and account for it.

> 'Objectivity can be approached through a heightened sensitivity to the problem of subjectivity, and the need for justification of one's claims.'
> (Robson, 2002: 314)

I was not able to adopt a distant stance of an objective research in this study – I was an active participant in the case study and it would have been impossible and

undesirable for me to attempt to behave a an outsider. Instead I used my familiarity

and closeness with the respondents and the field to my advantage. Rather than

treating interviews as a chance to merely extract data from my respondents, I used

them as an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with my colleagues in an attempt to

'find out how these people define the world' (Spradley, 1979: 11). I recognised the

relative benefits of my research position and approach using Laing's argument of

intersubjectivity (1967):

> 'Knowledge should be seen as constructed between participants… As such the
>
> interview is not exclusively either subjective or objective, it is intersubjective.'
>
> (Cohen, 2000: 267)

Having discussed my experiences of conducting practitioner research and identified

methodological and ethical issues for consideration, I will now present my findings

from my data in the following chapter.

Chapter five: What have I learnt about collaboration?

In this chapter I present the findings from my interviews, with reference to outcomes from my literature review. I have structured my findings in line with the case study research questions posed on page 21. The sub headings are a product of the themes that arose during data analysis.

What do teachers perceive to be the benefits of working collaboratively?

Sharing expertise and ideas

A predominant theme across the respondents was collaboration's capacity for exchanging ideas and resources:

> *On the whole it's usually for me an ideas base: I come away with something that I can either use or something that will set me off in a different direction. (HK Jan 1)*

At its most basic, it allowed colleagues to pass on resources or teaching ideas. Many of the respondents identified departmental meetings and Faculty offices as forums for this type of exchange. In a more developed sense, colleagues' recognised that working collaboratively was an effective way of solving problems and developing new practice as: *'Two heads are better than one?!' (GH March 1)* Gina also acknowledged that working collaboratively helps to do adapt and broaden your teaching style *(GH March 1)*, which echoes McLaughlin's notion of collaboration developing a rich pool of collective experience (McLaughlin, 1993).

Melissa also identified the diversity of its members as strength of the Teaching and Learning Group:

> *There's been such a wide range of staff, creative, young, you know, staff, newly qualified, and then there's people like me who have been here an awfully long time, I just think that range of people sharing ideas in a forum which is equal... (MJ April 3)*

This comment also underlines the importance of having a sense of equal exchange beyond the normal hierarchies within school.

Developing quality of practice

Colleagues acknowledged that outcomes improved as a result of having a variety of teacher input:

> *I think if we could do more collaboration in terms of what we're teaching… then many of our lessons would improve. (MJ April 6)*

While sharing resources and emailing ideas seemed to be the most common form of sharing practice, due to ease and time, colleagues appreciated that discussions about lessons and the opportunity to plan collaboratively was the best way of developing better practice:

> *When you speak to someone… you go into a bit more depth. When you share using emails, it tends to be content, so you just give resources. Whereas you would discuss how you used it and how it works and perhaps how it can be tweaked. (GH March 3)*

An additional feature of working collaboratively is that it encourages you to strive for better outcomes as it instills an emphasis on development and improvement.

> *It's not allowing you to get away with: 'Oh well, that didn't work!'… It's making you think about it… somebody's asking you the right questions to help you think about it. (HK May 4)*

Both Helen and Harriet recognised elements of their own practice when watching each other teach:

> *It's only when you see someone else doing it and you've got time to go, 'Ok, look at that! That's not working'. (HK May 2)*

Harriet also acknowledged that she benefited from the feedback she received; it helped her to reflect on aspects of her practice that she had not considered previously:

> *It's interesting just to have somebody else's perspective, and actually they're looking at slightly different things to you, which just helps with the messiness of the picture. (HK May 2)*

This comment shows the capacity peer observation has for unpacking the tacit nature of teaching and helping teachers to identify elements of their practice that can be improved; much of this ties in with Hargreaves' model of 'the quest for continuous improvement' (Hargreaves, 1995).

Reduces pressure and workload

What transpired for the Geography group in particular is that working collaboratively had the capacity to reduce stress and boost morale by sharing responsibility for planning high pressure aspects of the curriculum *(Geog May 1 & 4)*. Working together helped to share the burden as well as the workload:

> *There's such a lot to get through, we feel that pressure, so by working together it's taking the worry away from us, I always feel that anyway… (Geog May 3)*

Reflecting on past experiences of doing the same planning process in isolation, Melissa admitted: *'I felt intense pressure – the anxiety of not being able to share and agree and just spin ideas off one another' (MJ April 2).* The Geography team was willing to designate their own time for collaborative planning meetings because they recognised that it cut down the workload in the long term.

Colleagues also talked of the confidence and reassurance that comes from planning something together:

> *I think its primary use on an instant basis is just to have the reassurance that other people are tackling similar issues. (HK Jan 1)*

> *It stops you from feeling frustrated and isolated. (HS June 2)*

This correlation between thriving collegial communities and teacher support and commitment reinforces McLaughlin's argument for the benefits of collaboration, as cited in my literature review in Chapter two.

Job satisfaction and enjoyment

A common theme across the interviews is that collaboration provides them with job satisfaction. Peter acknowledged that the reciprocal nature of collaboration makes it rewarding:

> *If I can take ideas from somebody else…and if I can share the stuff that I do that's good practice then it creates a better environment in my classroom and I'm going to get more out of my job. (PA April 6)*

James also argued that teachers get enjoyment, not only from developing their own practice, but from helping other teachers to do so:

> *By the nature of teachers, I think they do enjoy sharing things and get a kick out of having given somebody an idea and it's worked well. I think that's… because enjoy teaching people. (JC June 7)*

Benefits for students

Harriet and Helen also recognised that collaborative processes have potential to impact on students' learning experiences. They both admitted that the process of

observing each other's lessons one after the other really helped them empathise with their students:

> *I was exhausted afterwards and it made me realise that we expect a lot of them, in terms of how hard we expect them to work and the amount you have to write and it made me realise how they get tired. (HS June 1)*

Harriet also saw wider benefits for students in teachers working collaboratively, especially across subject areas:

> *I think it would be particularly encouraging for them if they know that that sort of collaboration was going on. That we weren't just a bunch of individuals in our trenches desperately defending our own little corner... But actually if we were communicating to them, 'Your learning is this big thing across the whole school… we're altogether, we're all trying to help you'. (HK May 4)*

While there was recognition of the capacity for improved student achievement as a result of collaboration in Vescio's literature review on the topic, most of the literature in favour of collaborative practice identified the benefits for schools and professionals within them, rather than considering the knock-on effects this would have on student learning. The holistic approach that Harriet makes reference to would help to break down the individualistic model of secondary schools, as characterised by Lortie (1975).

What barriers to collaboration have teachers experienced?

Lack of opportunity and time

Consistent with the findings from my literature review, a common theme across all of the interviews was that time was the main factor that prevented them from doing it more:

We spend so much time working with children, talking to children, marking, that

actually time to go and have a decent conversation with someone is limited. (HK Jan 1)

Colleagues acknowledged that designated meetings can help to provide protected time for collaborative conversations, but that they are too infrequent *(JC June 2).* Even within the time provided, Harriet and Gina acknowledged that the time is insufficient to enable colleagues to share everyone's experiences and opinions on a regular basis *(HK Jan 1; GH March 1).* When collaboration moves beyond discussion and requires colleagues to plan collaboratively, securing enough time for this to happen becomes an even bigger challenge.

'Cause realistically you can't just sort of saying: 'well you have free periods so that you

can go off and start planning together' because it just gets eaten up by the general day-

to-day. (GH March 12)

As these teachers have busy and demanding responsibilities in addition to their teaching load, this added to the difficulty of finding mutual free time to work on collaborative projects:

Yeah, you know, Helen, in her role as head of year, she's just constantly got things in

her face, and, I've got practically a full teaching timetable, it's really full-on all day.

(HK May 3)

It became apparent that scheduling meeting time alone was not the answer. Even in instances where colleagues had secured meeting time together it was not adequate for completing the tasks that had been planned. Despite having made time to plan collaboratively, the Geography team could not afford to spare time to conduct the second half of the action research model; timetabling conspired against peer observation *(Geog May 7).* It was deemed most important that the teachers were able to deliver the sequence of lessons that they had planned together so meticulously,

rather than leaving their classes with cover teachers so that they were able to see how their colleagues were delivering the lesson.

Working collaboratively is time-consuming; having the chance to share, discuss and make collective decisions can not be done in designated meeting time, the workload is bound to spill over into extra time *(Geog May 6)*. If colleagues struggle to find the time to work collaboratively and experience a sense of stress and pressure when trying to achieve collaborative goals within limited spaces of time, it is not surprising that, as a rule, teachers adopt individual practice:

> *I think we're all so busy, you do it your way and it's easier and it's quicker and you know it works. (GH March 1)*

Peter also admitted that as time is such a precious commodity for teachers, the time-intensive Research Lesson Study seemed like an extravagance:

> *If I was planning on my own it would be a lot quicker, whereas in terms of the three of us, we'd all have our own things to say about our groups – it could therefore end up being longer. (PA April 5)*

Despite all members of the Geography department being self-confessed fans of collaboration, in practice they did not feel able to commit that amount of time to the planning and evaluation of a small sequence of lessons when there were so many other departmental priorities on their agenda.

Not a priority/do not see the benefit

Harriet acknowledged that many teachers do not make the time to collaborate because it is not viewed as an urgent priority:

> *I think that the problem is that we still tend to... erm; we still fall into the trap of doing what is urgent, not what is most important. (HK May 4)*

A significant barrier, therefore, is not just a lack of time per se, but how teachers choose to spend it. With a complex and diverse work load to manage it is understandable that some colleagues place collaboration low down on their agendas: *Unfortunately, I find that that it's what always goes, the collaboration (HS Jan 9)*. Peter also admits that teaching is somewhat to do with survival and collaboration is more of a luxury than a necessity:

> *If it doesn't happen it's not the end of the world, you're basically still getting your teaching done. But if you've got reports to write by Friday then you've got to get those done and that's your focus for that week so. So, if there was more built in time, structured into the life of the faculty, or of the teachers, then it would be the opportunity to use it more. I just don't think it's our top priority. (PA April 4)*

In reference to Flinders' model of individualism (see Box 2.1), the structural constraints that have led to individual practice in these instances could be seen as examples of 'constrained individualism'. I would argue that these are in fact instances of 'strategic individualism' in which colleagues have applied a 'calculated concentration of effort' by working on their own. However, all of these definitions are subject to subjective interpretation; colleagues could justify their decision to avoid collaborative practices as 'a rational economising of effort' (Little, 1993: 58) while they are actually consciously or subjectively choosing to work alone, as per Flinders' 'elective individualism'. Harriet admission, *'If you're really committed to something you'll make the time' (HK May 3)*, reinforces this point: the teachers did not choose to commit time to these projects because they did not see it as a high priority.

Melissa questioning whether using other people's ideas or resources necessarily led to better practice is an example of some of the assumptions and beliefs that may lead to elective individualism.

> *We put so much in… I think people would struggle to produce stuff as good as ours.*
>
> *(Geog May 5)*

While this shows pride for the outcomes produced by the Geography department, it also expresses doubt towards the premise that working with others will develop improved outcomes.

Another argument that emerged from the interview data is that if teachers don't have a great deal of freedom or flexibility awarded to them in the delivery of the curriculum, they may not feel the benefit from working in a collaborative way. Gina had some experience of this way of working at a previous school:

> *At my last place it was very much more governed by you follow this scheme of work, like they photocopied all of the resources for year 7 every term so you… if you wanted to do something of your own, you know, it was a waste. (GH March 6)*

In conditions where practice is prescribed, there is not much of an incentive for collaborating to develop practice.

One issue raised by Melissa that can act as a barrier to collaboration, is a sense of protectiveness. On the topic of working collaboratively with colleagues from other schools, she acknowledged: *'I think that's what can be frustrating; it can all be one way…'* *(Geog May 6)* She also admitted reluctance to sharing in public forums: *'I don't really just want to put that on the net for everyone to take our hard work, especially if we don't get anything back!' (Geog May 5).* One benefit of sharing with colleagues that you interact with regularly is that you are more likely to receive something in return, making your original generosity worthwhile; less regular contact might make reciprocity less likely.

Another perceived limitation to working collaboratively is a lack of shared context. Even within the same school setting, different subject specialisms and ability groupings can be viewed as limiting factors for teachers' ability to work collaboratively. When discussing the nature of the groups involved in the peer observation project, Harriet identified:

> *This is where it possibly might start to fall down slightly, in that er, she's obviously got a set three class, History are no setted so although we do share a number of children, I've also got very very intelligent set one kids in my group, and so that I think will have a different impact on it. (HK Jan 3)*

Inherent in Harriet's concerns here seems to be an in-built assumption that it is only possible to learn from each other's lessons if the make-up of the classes is pretty much identical. It seems to infer some kind of scientific model in which there are constant factors to judge against. I wonder whether this is why most collaboration tends to happen within subject areas and why there is more capacity for collaboration between primary colleagues if they are teaching identical syllabus and year groups. Reflective of the issues raised about the unpredictable nature of classroom practice in my literature review, Helen identifies classrooms as very volatile environments based on a multitude of complex factors:

> *One little thing can change things… one little conversation with a student, or the fact that you know so-and-so about them… (HS June 3)*

Inherent in Helen statement is the idea that only individual teachers are in a position to manage the complex environment within a specific lesson. This argument for independent expertise chimes with Huberman's model of the Independent Artisan and teachers' conditioning to deal with professional challenges in isolation.

Professional isolation

Melissa referred to the isolated nature of the teaching profession as one possible barrier to collaboration:

> *Because it's such a danger when you leave college… you've had all of that input, and then for someone like me, coming almost towards the end of their teaching career, you can become very stale and very entrenched and embedded in what used to be. And not actually move on, learn. (MJ April 6)*

It is interesting that Melissa acknowledged that becoming entrenched in isolated practice is common for experienced teachers however it is not something that has appeared to have happened to her. I will explore potential reasons why some seek collaborative ways of working in place of becoming increasingly isolated in the personal conditions sections of this chapter.

Departments and groups working in isolation from each other were also identified as a potential inhibitor for cross-curricular collaboration. Reflecting on her experience in a previous school, Gina shared:

> *[We had] individual faculty offices so we had History, Geography, RE in our little… cubby hole. Erm… and I'm struggling to think of a time when we collaborated across subjects and I was there for two years. (GH March 5)*

Within the school, Gina also identified that the Teaching and Learning Group might have limited as a result of developing a reputation as a clique *(GH March 4).*

This view is supported by Helen's comments about other colleagues' perceptions of the Teaching and Learning Group:

> *I think people might be scared off by it… the word on the grapevine is that people think that if they're there they are kind of on trial…because you're exposing yourself… or you're saying 'I need help'… I know that isn't the case because I'm part of it but the perception is that it might be a bit like that. That the impression that everybody is under is that there will be more additional work than if they just went to another normal session... amongst some people, it's those people that think 'oh it's just for the brilliant teachers' or… 'I'll be asked to do some more' or 'I don't want to be involved in any more observations'. (HS June 4-5)*

Creating a self-selecting group of staff that work collaboratively in isolation is not what I, or the school, had planned for the Teaching and Learning Group. If a genuine collaborative culture is to be spread across the whole school staff it is important to address these assumptions and reservations, otherwise the Teaching and Learning Group may inadvertently become a divisive clique characteristic of the Balkanistic profiles that I outlines in my literature review.

Sense of judgement/defensiveness

Many of the respondents made reference to teachers' sense of threat about being judged as a significant personal barrier to collaboration. A lack of confidence and a fear of being shown up were identified by a number of colleagues:

> *I think some people feel quite defensive about their teaching and don't like to get involved in observations… they feel slightly threatened by anybody observing them, or even observing someone else threatens them in some way. I think it's very difficult to get across those barriers that some people have. (JC June 2)*

James makes reference to how the performance culture within schools might be responsible for instilling this sense of fear, particularly in relation to peer observation.

I think there is a bit of a thing about performance management still where people see it as Big Brother keeping an eye on them and making sure they're doing their job.
(JC June 4)

While being observed regularly may help to make colleagues more comfortable with this practice, it may actually make teachers more suspicious of peer observation in the name of collaboration.

This reference to an anxiety of having your performance judged was mirrored by other colleagues that I interviewed:

The best teacher you are sometimes, the more defensive are of people seeing you – you want to be good. You don't want to display your weaknesses. (HS Jan 9)

This admission shows that even the most competent of teachers can be afraid of exposing their teaching methods; in fact they have more to lose from doing so. The rationale for this fear concurs with Little's model of teachers 'deflated by fantastic images of better teachers in other classrooms' (Little, 1993: 31):

Part of it is me thinking 'Oh god, she's going to come and see my lesson, I'm going to see hers and she'll be amazing'. (HS Jan 9)

I think that one of the reasons for the perpetuation of such complexes is the lack of discussion about this barrier. Helen followed up that admission with:
'I don't know… or maybe that's just me?' (HS Jan 10), which reinforces how little colleagues talk to each other about their fears and insecurities in the attempt to keep their guard up and their practice private. Despite being a member of a collegial group, Helen's honest comments indicate evidence of Hargreaves' 'fragmented individualism' (1989) in which teachers become increasingly isolated and alienated from each other.

While time remains a significant barrier to collaboration happening regularly in secondary schools, my interview data has helped to reveal that much of what prevents colleagues from engaging in collaborative ventures is dependent on their own feelings and beliefs about collaboration; it is clear that there is potentially a lot to lose from working with other colleagues: time, individual autonomy, privacy. If teachers are going to make sacrifices in these areas to allow collaboration to take place they must believe in the net gain.

What are the structural, social and personal conditions needed for effective collaboration to take place?

Raising the profile of collaboration

Reflecting on the barriers cited by my respondents suggests how school structures could be changed to support collaborative practice. Proving ample time and space for teachers to collaborate is paramount – it is necessary for them to have regular opportunities to work together. However, the responses demonstrate that time on its own is not sufficient to create a collaborative culture; Gina admits that despite having tiny desks next to other members of her Faculty at her previous school, very little collaboration happened *(GH March 5).* All of the teachers I spoke to talked of the need for timetabled meeting slots that were purposefully designated for collaborative projects. The Teaching and Learning Group was acknowledged as *'an excellent forum, it's a great starting place' (GH March 4)* by Gina and others. However, there is an interesting tension between making collaboration formal and structured enough for it to happen, while keeping individual contributors motivated to actively engage in this process.

Personal and professional incentives are central to making structural initiatives a success. Namely a shared belief in the purpose, process and benefits of the collaborative project:

> *It is voluntary, you know, and… people might be well over their CPD six hours or whatever it is, but they, they still come because it is a really good environment. You've got teachers there who… want to be there, who want to collaborate, who want to share… (GH March 4).*

At the crux of this debate are priorities; the school's priorities and individual staff members'. All of my respondents alluded to teachers' need to juggle a complex workload. A number of them admitted that collaboration is low down on their to-do list unless it has immediate tangible benefits for them and their own teaching. The Geography department makes the time to plan a new course collaboratively and James is prepared to make time to work with individuals or departments that he can learn something new from. Whereas Peter admits that on a day-to-day basis collaborating with other teachers is a periphery activity that only gets done when there is time after everything else, which Little would argue is never (Little, 1993: 28).

Creating a culture of collaboration

If schools want to harness opportunities to collaborate and encourage teachers to do so, then collaboration needs to become an expected part of professional school life. An existing collegial culture is the necessary bedrock for collaborative projects:

> *Our faculty has always shared, we've always had a fairly open door policy, it's been ok to go in and out and pop in and out of each other's lessons, sharing resources. We don't keep things close to our chest, we share. (MJ April 2)*

Respondents also acknowledged that the initial experiences of sharing gives them more of an incentive to work together again.

Schools need to help teachers to overcome barriers by scheduling protected meeting times within the school calendar and organising shared PPA time so that teachers are expected to plan collaboratively. They also need to help teachers to engage in peer observation by making sure that individual timetables and school cover policy is conducive to this. Arguably the strongest form of teacher collaboration happens organically, as exemplified by Lortie (1975). However, school leaders must provide the structural support for this to be developed and sustained across a wider range of the staff body, as espoused by McLaughlin (2001). There needs to be a level of expectation if schools want collaboration to become widespread practice but this will inevitably come at a cost.

Developing leadership, support and training

Time and space is an important but expensive condition, as is staff training and development. Even the most enthusiastic and motivated of teachers will not necessarily have the tools and know-how to be able to collaborate effectively and, as Little (1993) identifies, even close colleagues may find it difficult to work collaboratively without the right support. As Helen acknowledges:

> *When we met afterwards, it was difficult to… focus on the positives of what we'd done…rather than just talking about how negative our… aspirations were for those students. (HS June 2)*

Helen and Harriet were unfamiliar with this form of peer observation and feedback and as a consequence were quick to resort to regular judgmental forms of feedback. The issue of lack of experience and expertise needs to be addressed if teachers are going to be confident and competent in collaborative endeavours. While the literature I reviewed identified the need for teachers to develop the language to discuss their practice, it did not recognise the range of other possible training needs.

James and Gina both cited NCSL courses as influential factor in developing their beliefs in the benefits of collaboration and their capacity to develop collegiality within their respective departments.

> *Leadership Pathways… actually going on a course that open your eyes a bit more to how, actually if you can get a really good team together then you can produce a lot more than just living day to day. (GH March 7)*

This comment from Gina alludes to the links between strategic leadership and collaboration. It is also an example of the belief that collaborative team efforts will be 'more powerful and significant than the result of individual efforts' (Cook, 1992: 8). Schools will need to provide appropriate training for colleagues beyond senior and middle leaders if collaboration practice is to spread effectively across the school.

James' leadership behaviour signals his belief in collaboration; his personal enthusiasm and promotion of collaborative practices within his team helps to develop this way of working in his department.

> *I've tried to encourage people to collaborate more outside of the department… and have an open door policy where people, during their free lessons, just wonder into each other's lessons. (JC June 3).*

However, James admits that his attempts are not equally successful with all members of the department:

> *Some people are very happy to do it and some people aren't. You've just got to make them aware of the benefits and they've just got to try it out, because there are huge benefits from it... (JC June 3)*

The language of choice and suggestion in James' comments highlight the voluntary nature of collaboration in this context. While he is sold on the idea it seems that some members of the team need further training, persuasion, or possibly coercion, in order for everyone in the department to become involved. The lack of interest from some

individuals could be caused by a variety of factors, least of all the fact that informal peer observation and other collaborative practices are not a required part of their job description. However, as Hargreaves (1982), Cook (1992) and Little (1993) warn against, enforcing collegiality is likely to cause counterproductive defensiveness, resentment and superficiality.

Identifying relevant purposes and opportunities for collaboration

A key contributor to making the process of collaboration a genuinely beneficial one is having a sense of the need for the collaboration: *'I thought it suited what we were doing' (Geog May 2).* It was clear that these busy colleagues did not just collaborate for the sake of it; they identified the benefits before embarking on it. A common theme that arose was identifying a shared issue, problem or teaching method to collaborate on. For example, James asserted:

> *In Science we would benefit a lot from having collaboration in Maths 'cause there's a lot of cross over in data analysis and how to go about calculations and there's cross over in PE in terms of the Biology there and Humanities and English in terms of discussions. (JC June 1)*

In these suggestions there is a clear sense that common teaching content provides ample opportunities for collaboration. Helen also acknowledged that sometimes it is good to collaborate with different subject areas because:

> *It makes you realise that it's not a subject specific thing… it's more to do with, their approach to a particular thing regardless of the subject. (HS June 3)*

Another common theme was that collaboration is most useful with the development of new courses and curriculum; teachers benefit from being able to plan collaboratively and get their heads around new criteria and teaching methods *(JC June 6); (Geog May 8).* Inherent in these comments is the sense that teachers benefit from being able to tackle something new together, rather than in isolation. More

discussion needs to take place in schools to identify useful forms of collaboration; schools need to listen to teachers in order to identify appropriate opportunities for collaboration, rather than impose collaborative practices that are seen as 'stilted, unproductive and a waste of energies and efforts' (Hargreaves, 1995: 155).

Developing the quality of relationships and communication

Both James and Harriet spoke of how pre-existing relationships with colleagues helps to develop capacity for collaboration.

> *It happens a lot but it's partly because he and I get on very well… we're the same kind of people and are happy to put in tones of time. (HK Jan 2)*

James points out the need for time to develop collegial relationships informally.

> *I think people like to have a good gossip [in the staffroom] about other things and try and keep the teaching away from it, which I think is good. I think you need both, don't you? You need opportunities to just try and talk, just get to know people on a personal level. (JC June 7)*

James' opinion resonates with Little's argument for a range of personal and professional exchanges to create the foundation of friendship, tolerance and solidarity necessary as the basis for successful collaboration (Little, 1993: 32). Harriet also identifies how relationships strengthen and develop through the experience of working collaboratively:

> *I'd be happy to work with Helen again on something. And that's partly it, isn't it? That when you actually open up and allow someone into your lesson…I mean I'm very used to that, in my various roles, I've got people in the back of my classroom all the time, but for Helen it seemed like quite a big deal, certainly she seemed a little more nervous about it. Um, but that relationship has been built, in terms of trust levels, I feel that we could do that kind of thing again. (HK May 5)*

Harriet touches upon a number of important factors in this particular comment such as the capacity that initial experiences of peer observation have for building up trust, confidence, and relationships with colleagues. It also appears important for teachers to respect and think highly of each other's practice in order to venture into collaborative work together in the first place *(HS Jan 9)*.

Conducive codes of behaviour

The responses from the interviews identified a subtle balance of tact, modesty and honesty that was necessary for respectful and productive peer relations to develop. Helen admits that if teachers gloat about their own successes with an issue that you are struggling with, it can make you defensive and less receptive to their advice or support:

> *It's difficult because one of the worst things you can hear, this happened to me yesterday… 'Well, you know anyone that has problems with this student should just come and see them in my lessons because they are just wonderful in my lessons' and… all that does is make you feel angry because you can see the sentiment behind it because it's valuable seeing how another member of staff deals with a student, but it needs to be done in the right way, otherwise your initial response is: 'It's a different subject', and in the moment you don't need to hear that. (HS June 3)*

Conversely, Helen seems keen for Harriet to make frank and honest comments about what she sees during the peer observation:

> *If she comes up to me and says, "Look Amy just doesn't understand" that might not be something that I had picked up on… (HS Jan 4)*

The right conditions, relationships and a common understanding of the process need to be in place for teachers to be receptive to each other's observations and advice. Harriet suggests that the conditions within the Teaching and Learning Group help to make this happen:

The Teaching and Learning Group's great strength is honesty – people are honest and you know they will say: "I've got real problems with this" and will start ranting about 9Z, or whatever!... People are honest when they feel safe, it is place where people feel safe to say "I'm not doing so well" or "I'd really appreciate it to see blah, blah blah" so that works well. Would it happen without that? Probably not. (HK May 6)

This model of sharing imperfections and advice challenges Lortie's model of the 'good colleague' (1975), suggesting that the Teaching and Learning Group is helping to change the nature of tradition of professional respect entailing non-interference and self-imposed privacy.

Sharing a common purpose

Part of the success criteria of the Teaching and Learning Group is its shared goals and purpose amongst its members. The group is seen as a forum for problem solving and discussing mutual concerns and issues.

We struggle with the same thing and……. I've had conversations with them, she's had conversations with them and neither of us has really got to the bottom of it…
(HS Jan 6)

I would have known that my year 11s were struggling, but I wouldn't have stopped to consider that that might have been a bigger problem. It's when Sam started talking about the same things when I thought: 'Oh, look at that!' And the whole project started there. (HK May 6)

These comments suggest that mutual queries and commonly identified issues provide teachers with the motivation to embark on collaborative endeavours.

Personal attitudes and motivation

The responses illuminated factors beyond shared problems as a necessary condition for successful collaboration; teachers need to see a direct and tangible benefit in order to commit to it: *Collaboration works best when you are motivated to do it because you want something out of it (MJ April 4).* Many of the respondents alluded to the idea that teacher attitudes towards collaboration vary amongst staff and that it is necessary for individual teachers to see the benefit in the process and commit to it.

> *You get different categories of people: some of them would just love the opportunity to go and observe other people or have discussions with other people about how they deal with kids or with how they teach ideas, teach methods. Some people like the idea of it but they think it's going to use up their time so they are not so willing to get involved with it. And some people, well, you can see their faces change when you mention collaboration with other teachers because they just see 'I'm doing my job and I want to be in here, I want to do my own thing and not be… Well to some extent it's just a natural personality thing, I think…… (JC June 2-3)*

Gina attributes this different in attitude and motivation to individual teachers' approach towards the profession; their attitudes, ideals and experiences:

> *I think being sort of being, sort of younger teachers as well. You know Peter and I, for example, have come from similar training backgrounds and… that makes it easier when you are talking about the same sorts of things. And if you, um, maybe that helps as well. And of course we've got Melissa in our Geography department who's been a teacher for a number of years but she's really open and receptive to updating what she does and she quite often is the one that spends hours on youtube finding clips.*
> *(GH March 3)*

While Gina initially uses similar age and teaching experience to account for their ability to collaborate easily, the end of her quote suggests teachers' values and approach to their job that is what is fundamental to this. This is supportive of James'

definition of successful collaborators as reflective, relentlessly self-improving practitioners (James, 2005: 4). I am interested in exploring whether these values and attributes are as James believes, personality traits, and how these attitudes have evolved and developed.

Professional experiences

All of the respondents acknowledged personal, professional experiences that have potentially influenced their opinion of collaboration. Many of them acknowledged that frequent, positive experiences of the benefits of collaboration had shaped their views of this practice. Melissa accounts for her attitude on the basis of '*lucky experiences' (MJ April 4),* while Peter reflects on his exposure to collaboration at an early stage in his teaching career:

> *When I did do my PGCE, I was on a team-teaching placement for about four weeks. Having two of us there did mean we planned stuff together, we did various things at different parts of the lesson, you know, we had different roles. And that was kind of useful. (PA April 7)*

James also argues that exposure to, and experience of, peer practices is likely to affect your attitudes and opinions of collaboration.

> *I mean it's bound to be your experiences over the years of things like performance management and how they've been carried out and… how much observation you've had. I mean recent teachers have been observed so many times that they'd be more open about it, I think, and feel relaxed about being observed and having feedback about their teaching. (JC June 3)*

James' argument for increased exposure and experience is consistent with other respondents' experience of collaboration. However, different colleagues are likely to respond differently to this process, especially if they are suspicious or the motives or uncomfortable and defensive about sharing their practice. Schools need to consider

ways of making their staff more comfortable with peer observation and other forms of collaboration, without alienating them. Reviewing performance management practices may be necessary to make colleagues feel more at ease with the process.

Confidence and positivity

Teachers need to feel confident in their own ability in order to feel comfortable with the prospect of collaboration: *We are highly confident in what we do and therefore we can share it (GH March 3)*. Insecurities will lead to colleagues protecting their privacy to avoid the risk of exposure in 'closer to the bone' practices (Little, 1993:31). Melissa acknowledged that this is a two-way process; that working collaboratively is *'a huge confidence boost' (MJ April 1).* This suggests that confidence is a central factor in collaborative partnerships.

A can-do, progressive attitude was a common thread amongst the respondents and is consistent with the 'positive attitudes and behaviours' that McLaughlin identifies as requisite personal conditions for collaboration (McLaughlin, 2001: 69). Collaboration seems to work best in environments lacking cynicism and negativity:

> *I've been very lucky that all of the people that I've worked with [here] have actually been… encouraging. All of our meetings are very, very focused… we agree times to finish and we actually, we do masses of work. (MJ April 4-5)*

Even the vocabulary used by colleagues within the interviews is evidence of their enthusiastic and constructive attitudes: *'I love it' (GH); 'I can't wait' (HK).*

Focus on the bigger picture

Almost all of the respondents made reference to 'the bigger picture' and the long term benefits of collaboration. While all of them were busy with day-to-day

workloads, they were able to step back from the minutia of school life to consider overarching priorities.

> *In terms of a bigger perspective, it's certainly made me think more about why is it that children don't write. (HK May 4)*

> *It's got to be a teacher that can see the benefits for the school, the pupils outside their classrooms that would spend time on it. (GH March 13)*

The responses indicated a level of personal choice to sacrifice time spend working alone for the sake of the longer-term benefits of collaboration.

However, even colleagues with similar teaching experience and levels of responsibility seem to have different attitudes towards collaboration. Melissa advocates collaboration as a means to keep in touch with what she considers to be her 'primary job' of teaching:

> *I could not manage to keep up my teaching skills and keep on top of the teaching and the lessons if I didn't collaborate with the others, because as an Assistant Principal, you can so easily get sucked into all of the management things you have to do, and the deadlines you have to meet and if you're not careful, the lesson planning and the teaching becomes second to all of that. (MJ April 1)*

However, colleagues of the same experience and levels of responsibility would appear to decline opportunities for collaboration:

> *I mean I have two senior managers in my department who haven't got time. And therefore they are very, we do very little collaborative work with them because they are just, they are busy writing reports or whatever else. (HK Jan 2)*

This problematises the 'bigger picture' as open to subjective judgment and returns us to the notion of differing priorities amongst school colleagues.

Eager to learn from others

What these respondents seemed to possess was a thirst for self-development and a belief that they could learn from their colleagues.

> *We've always had very skilled practitioners and I just feel that I would be foolish not to learn from them. (MJ April 1)*

This desire to benefit from colleagues' expertise, ties in which McLaughlin's profile of effective collaborators as life-long learners McLaughlin (2001).

Respondents cited curiosity and ambition as motivating factors for colleagues choosing to work in collaborative ways. Harriet's motivations stem from a curiosity about other's practice and the belief that she has something to learn from other teachers' successes.

> *I'd really like to get into the Science department, I've been hearing rumours about what's going on in there from students and I think 'I need to be in there! You're not sharing! (HK May 5)*

Gina identifies ambitious teachers with leadership qualities, not just managerially but in the classroom, as those who see the benefit of collaboration:

> *Leadership in terms of… even in their own classroom… they want to be better. (GH March 12)*

It seems that even the busiest people will make the time for collaboration if they believe it will benefit their students, and ultimately themselves.

Having presented the data from my interviews, in my next chapter I will consolidate my learning and reflect on the key implications of this study.

Chapter six: Reflecting on my findings

Defining collaboration and recognising misconceptions

The way in which colleagues spoke about collaboration made me realise that the respondents did not have a shared understanding of the term. Among the same department Peter admitted that collaboration happened very rarely *(PA April 6)* while other members of the team told me that it happened all the time. Rather than this being an issue of respondent honesty, I think it has more to do with the different connotations of 'collaboration' and the way it is used interchangeably with 'co-operation', 'sharing best practice' and 'collegiality' within school settings.

I made an assumption that teachers would recognise collaboration as 'joint working in a reflective way on a primary task' (James, 2005: 2). However, when referring to the benefits of collaborating Gina and Melissa were actually describing individualistic approaches:

> GH: I found it fairly easy to sort of say 'This is the bit I'm doing, and you're doing that and you're doing that'. (Geog May 6)

> MJ: Having the chance to do your own bit properly… (Geog May 6)

These examples are more characteristic of co-operative labour division rather than collaboration.

Teachers also seemed to believe that collaboration meant doing things in an identical way. When talking about a past experience of working collaboratively, Peter acknowledges: *'We all used the same power points, the same resources to teach from…'*

(Geog May 2) This image of collaboration as identical practice amongst teachers was reinforced by other members of his team. Gina recognises that teachers enjoy having personal preferences and interests and this may be at odds with collaboration *(GH March 10).* Peter also admits that he values being able to put his own slant on his lesson preparation:

> *I think 75% of the time I think it's very good, I think the 25% extra is when you put your own spin on something so if you've got something that you've prepared and that you know will work well for your group… there's that bit of a personal touch. (PA April 1)*

His desire for personal autonomy and decision making based on individuals' expertise and lesson context is repeated later in the interview. This theme is also raised by Melissa *(MJ April 6).*

This need for teacher independence and ownership leads me to question whether teachers in my case study are genuinely collaborating, or instead merely co-operating, communicating and co-ordinating.

> Materials may be shared and discussed, tricks may be traded, but even within the most closely knit departmental group the autonomy of the teacher's classroom judgement usually remains sacrosanct.' (Hargreaves, 1992: 232)

While colleagues are keen to discuss, share and plan in the way that Hargreaves describes, it seems as though they are keen to 'keep the boundaries intact when they actually worked with students' (Lortie, 1975: 193).

Moving from functional to effective collaboration

A spectrum model of collaboration offered by Head (2003) may help to define the different forms of collaboration I found within my case study. He argues that at its

simplest level, collaboration involves staff working together in the co-operative way described above. To move from 'functional collaboration' that helps individual teachers to fulfil their own roles, to 'effective collaboration' that has more substantial benefits, Knights *et al.* argue that there needs to be 'a mutual commitment not just to planning but to dialogue in which all elements of the teaching are up for question' (Knights, 2006, 6).

James' model of effective collaborative practice has also helped me to reflect upon my case study and the conditions that were present or missing from the collaborative projects.
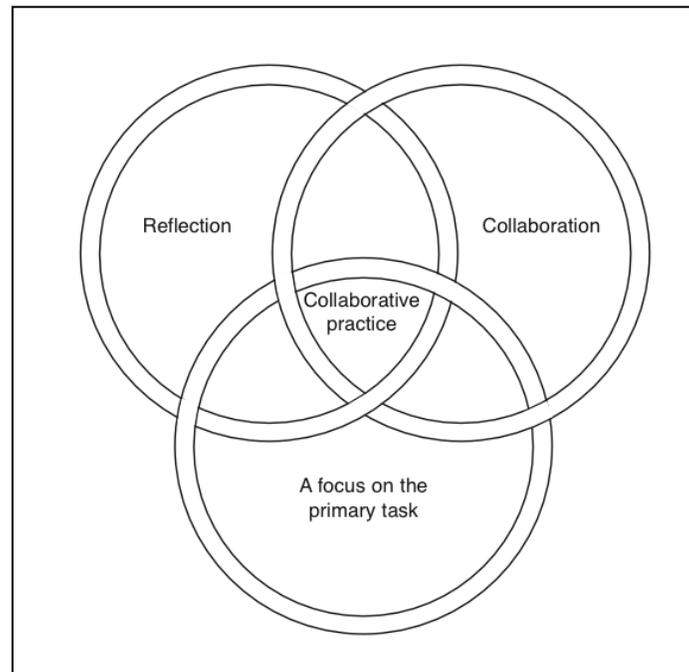

Figure 6.1: Conditions for successful collaborative practice (James, 2005: 11)

In hindsight, while all of the projects had a focus on the primary task and elements of collaborative practice, they all lacked collaborative reflection. In the Geography example the initial planning was done jointly and then teachers reverted back to individual practices. In the cross curricular project the teachers had initial discussions

about the primary task and then observed each other's lessons but then did not make time to debrief properly and reflect on their learning.

> If there is collaboration and a focus on the primary task with no reflection, practice both in relation to the primary task and to the practice of collaboration may not be appropriate and will not improve. (James, 2005: 10)

Conditions necessary for a genuine collaborative culture

This exploration of the distinction between superficial and significant collaboration has helped me to recognise that much of what happens at school is at the lower end of the collaborative spectrum. Many of the examples included in my case study are characteristic of what Nias described as feeling together but working apart (Nias, 1989). On reflection, the school still has a lot of work to do to develop the conditions for functional collaboration, before the personal, social and structural conditions will be ripe for effective collaboration.

In essence, my study shows that for the majority of staff, little has changed from Lortie's 1975 profile of teachers and their concern for individual boundaries, uninterrupted teacher autonomy and the 'preoccupation with potentially productive time [which] assumes that the individual teacher is the critical ingredient in student learning' (Lortie, 1975: 211). The most significant condition for collaboration is the belief in the process and its capacity for increased productivity and success than isolated teachers' individual efforts. At present, little is done to challenge the individualistic model of teachers. While few teachers volunteer and create opportunities to work collaboratively, most seem keen to maintain the status quo under the guise of constrained or strategic individualism.

While I have demonstrated that collaboration is not appropriate or desirable for every aspect of teachers' work, I have also shown that one-off collaborative projects are unlikely to be successful unless teachers are practised in collective ways of working.

> 'Collective work consists of more than just incidental interactions between co-workers or team-members; it integrates work flows within a wider network or brings together agents to participate in projects or shared goals.'
>
> (Grangeat, 2008: 178)

Grangeat's model of collective work demands a change to the traditional 'fragmented individualism' (Hargreaves, 1989) inherent in the teaching profession if collaboration in its truest form is possible. This is a big challenge that goes beyond the introduction of disparate individual changes to school structures. The fundamental and intangible nature of many of the personal and social conditions identified in my data such as trust, positivity and motivation makes the creation of a collaborative culture in schools a gargantuan and highly complex task.

> 'Cultures of collaboration are not formally organised or bureaucratic in nature; nor are they mounted just for specific projects or events…Cultures of collaboration are constitutive of, absolutely central to, teachers' daily work.'
>
> (Hargreaves, 1992: 226)

The main barrier to collaboration found in my case study is that it is at odds with teachers' daily work, rather than part of it. Teachers currently still see collaboration as a periphery to their day job; either as a needless obstruction or a luxury that they cannot afford to commit to fully.

In my final chapter, I draw together conclusions, recommendations and implications for further research and policy on the topic of collaboration.

Chapter seven: Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

Answering my research questions

What do teachers perceive to be the benefits of working collaboratively?

By enabling teachers to share expertise and ideas, collaboration helps them to develop the quality of teaching practice. This not only has benefits for student achievement and school standards but teachers' own enjoyment and job satisfaction. Collaborative practices also help teachers to reduce their stress levels and pressure by offering them a supportive, collegial working environment. The opportunity to work smarter through joint endeavours also enables teachers to reduce and prioritise their workload.

What are the genuine barriers to collaboration have they experienced?

A lack of opportunity and time was identified as the most substantial barrier. Underpinning this issue was the school's and individual teachers' priorities; if they did not deem collaboration as an essential part of teachers' work then it was unlikely that adequate resources were committed to the process. The established isolated practices of teachers were identified as a fundamental barrier to changing the fragmented nature of the teaching profession. Furthermore, the increasingly performance-related culture of schools was seen as a competing and destructive competitor to collaboration.

What are the personal, social and structural conditions for effective collaboration to take place?

Structural factors such as time, leadership, and training were needed to raise the profile of collaboration within school and provide teachers with the incentive and skills needed to work in this way. Providing opportunities for strategic and relevant collaborative projects is crucial but more importantly, schools need to develop a culture of collaboration that permeates the life of the school.

Interpersonal conditions were central to creating a collaborative climate. Colleagues spoke of the need for strong communication and social behaviour such as trust, respect, tact, and honesty as the foundation for collaborative relationships. A shared sense of purpose is important, as is an appreciation of the long term benefits.

Personal conditions such as confidence, positivity and a willingness to learn from others were identified as key ingredients for successful collaborators. Individuals' motivation to collaborate was paramount; their attitudes, beliefs and opinions towards collaboration were based on their own professional and personal experiences.

The significance of my findings

Teachers in my case study identified substantial benefits for schools, teachers and students but acknowledged that the current conditions in schools made it hard to achieve these. The potential for increased job satisfaction and productivity cannot be ignored by school leaders. The lack of opportunity for teachers to talk about their teaching and develop their practice collaboratively needs to be addressed, but merely

changing school structures, will not be enough to create the conditions for thriving collaborative practice.

The paradox between colleagues' theoretical beliefs about collaboration's capacity for improvement, and their personal experiences of collaboration creates a central tension. Beyond the structural changes that need to be made to support collaborative practices, there is the bigger challenge of shifting priorities, work practices and mind sets. Social interaction and personal beliefs are fundamental factors that need to be addressed in order to develop a culture of collaboration.

The quality of my research design

This qualitative study into collaboration has enabled me to explore the highly complex nature of this phenomenon. I became increasingly interested in the social and personal conditions needed for collaboration throughout the course of my study as I began to appreciate that attitudes towards structural constraints differed amongst colleagues. My literature review helped me to revise my initial research questions and develop a larger focus on the sociological and psychological factors involved. The interviews allowed me to gain an in-depth insight into colleagues' motivations, opinions and beliefs.

My initial plan to use a variety of research methods was not successful; I abandoned the benchmark survey and attempts to record Teaching and Learning meetings after poor responses. This was the right thing to do – interviewing was the most appropriate means of addressing my research questions.

Being an active participant assuming a range of roles posed methodological implications such as respondent confidentiality and researcher bias, however being close to colleagues provided me with the rapport needed to speak candidly with them. It would have been better to have scheduled separate critical friend meetings so that my interviews were not trying to achieve multiple agendas. However, talking through the practicalities of the collaborative projects with colleagues did add another dimension to their responses.

The size of my interview sample and my decision to conduct repeat interviews with colleagues engaged in collaborative projects worked well; this gave me the chance to pursue points raised in the initial meetings and to track and follow the progress of their projects. My one attempt to do a joint interview flagged up the difficulty of listening to multiple voices and avoiding group speak so I reverted back to individual interviews for the other group. Issues to do with different interpretations of the term 'collaboration' made me realise that I should have spent time defining the word at the start of the interview process. However, the fact that colleagues spoke about collaboration in such a range of ways provided an interesting variety of assumptions and beliefs. My data collection methods and process for analysing data proved to be rigorous and comprehensive; the use of scribing software and a database helped to store and organise my data.

The implications of my research study

Despite being a localised and small-scale study, I believe it holds relevance and significance for policy makers, school leaders and practitioners at my school and beyond. It provides a real account of the complex nature of collaboration and the multi-faceted factors that are required to develop and sustain it and calls for a

through consideration of the personal and interpersonal conditions that are fundamental for collaboration to succeed.

While personal conditions for collaboration could be seen to be reliant on individual character and motivation, this study demonstrates an overlap between the structural, social and personal conditions; institutional values and working conditions undoubtedly affect teachers' beliefs and feelings, as do the interpersonal exchanges that teachers experience on a daily basis. Policy makers and school leaders need to address the complex interplay between these issues if they are serious about developing the conditions necessary for effective collaboration. Teachers also need to have a proper understanding of how collaboration works and how it can benefit them.

Further research questions

Having explored the requisite conditions for collaboration and identified the integral importance of personal and social factors, further research needs to be done into how these conditions can be developed, supported and sustained. While a great deal of research has been done on the subject of change management which could support the implementation of structural conditions for collaboration, more enquiry focusing on how schools can improve interpersonal relations and influence personal motivation needs to take place in order to engage a whole teaching staff in a culture of collaboration.

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