

Further education teachers' perceptions on collaboration

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ABSTRACT Constant changes in curricula and education policy has resulted in increased pressure on teachers to continually learn and improve their practice in order to enhance students' success and achievement. Moreover, they are expected to engage in continuous professional development (Ofsted, 2006; IFL, 2013) which includes reflection upon personal practices. Pressure faced by further education teachers include heavy workload, meeting targets and deadlines and catering for the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds and needs. Collaboration and interaction between teachers is seen as a way of achieving reducing these pressures. The increased emphasis on collaboration stems from the concern about the isolating manner in which teachers work. One of the main aims of teacher collaboration is therefore to ensure that pedagogical knowledge is distributed among teachers rather than being held by individual teachers (Horn, 2005). This can be achieved through a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve students' learning "beyond what any one of them can achieve alone" (Carroll, 2009:13). The purpose of this study was to gain an insight into how vocational and Functional English teachers' view collaboration between teachers in these subject areas, and to examine how collaborative practices can be improved. This is because gaining a better understanding of what teachers think and feel about collaboration, and how they can effectively work together can assist in devising effective collaborative strategies. The study was carried out using a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews of teachers in both Functional Skills and vocational departments.

Key Words: Collaboration, interaction, teachers, teams, learning

Background and Research Aims

This research came about as a result of observation of the practice of some teachers in my workplace to work alone and their reluctance to work with others. In order to increase students' success in functional Skills and vocational courses, teachers are encouraged to collaborate especially where they teach the same students. As a Functional Skills tutor and given the drive towards functional and embedded literacy, the need for collaboration becomes imperative. Embedding is associated with higher retention and success rates on vocational programmes (Casey et al., 2006). As a result, Functional Skills teachers are required to embed literacy in vocational subjects while vocational tutors are expected to adapt vocational content and teaching approaches to reflect the key literacy demands and to make it more relevant to the learners (LSC, 2007). In order to achieve these objectives effectively, teachers from both departments need to understand each other's curriculum. This will require them to closely work together and learn from one another. However, from enquiries, experience and discussion with other Functional Skills teachers, it became apparent that they have had little or no collaboration with vocational tutors even when they share the same learners. The main research question is: What is the perception of teachers on collaboration between vocational and Functional English teachers? The subsidiary questions I sought to find answers to are: (a) Do teachers in this study believe that collaboration is useful or desirable? (b) If not, why? (c) What are the barriers? (d) What strategies can help to improve collaboration between teachers?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the assumption that teachers construct professional knowledge through their on-going interactions and experiences in the classroom and with other professionals and that knowledge is situated. Situated learning is described as "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991:31). Therefore, collaboration can be regarded as a social process in which meaning is constructed from discussion among group members (Vygotsky, 1978). This is in line with Bandura's (1977) theory of social learning, which emphasises the importance of learning from others rather than relying solely on the individual's own practices.

Constructivist learning theory views learning as a self-regulated process that occurs as a result of individuals interacting with their environment, organising, reflecting on and integrating new information and experiences into their current cognitive structures (Fosnot and Perry, 2005). Moreover, the socio-cultural theory seeks to understand the

social and cultural practices of people from many different backgrounds and experiences (Lewis et al., 2007). It regards learning as socially and culturally situated in contexts of everyday living and work (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, teacher collaboration and learning can be viewed from this lens as it involves interactions and learning among teachers from different backgrounds pedagogical experiences in their specific workplace: in the case of this study, further education settings. The assumption is that when teachers work and interact together, they learn from each other and develop new ways of doing things which will impact positively on their learners as well as improve their own practices.

Concept of Collaboration

There is lack of consensus on the definition of teacher collaboration. Several terms such as collegiality, congeniality, cooperation, partnership, consultation and collaboration have been used interchangeably. Kochhar-Bryant (2008:7), regard is as a "process of participation through which people, groups, and organisations form relationships and work together to achieve a set of agreed upon results. It is defined by Friend and Cook (1992:5) as "a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal. DuFour et al. (2005:36) defines "powerful collaboration" as a "systematic process in which teachers work together to analyse and improve their classroom practice." He views collaboration of this type as involving teachers working together toward commonly agreed learning goals, addressing common research questions and determining whether instruction is meeting the needs of learners. This shows that collaboration can be structured or unstructured but ultimately it aims to result the improvement in students' learning.

Teacher collaborative activities can involve "reflection, discussion with peers, team teaching, mentoring and coaching" (Poet et al., 2010:14), learning from each other through observing others and being observed, as well as being provided with opportunities to plan, reflect and teach with other teachers (DFE, 2010), and exchanging ideas or experiences, developing and discussing new materials, getting feedback from colleagues and giving each other moral support (Johnson, 2003; Meirink et al., 2007). Hargeaves (1994:186) differentiates between collaborative cultures involving 'spontaneous, working relationships between teachers on a voluntary, unpredictable, development-oriented, and 'pervasive across time and space and 'contrived collegiality' which is regarded as 'administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space and predictable. Little (1982) observed that collegiality exhibits four specific characteristics: teachers talking frequently, continuously, and concretely about the practice of teaching, observing others' teaching frequently and offer-

ing constructive feedback and critiques, working together to plan, design, evaluate, and prepare instructional materials and curriculum and teaching each other about the practice of teaching. Friend and Cook (1992) identifies the following six characteristics of successful collaboration: it is voluntary, based on mutual goals, parity among participants, and depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision making, shared responsibility for outcomes, and sharing of resources among participants. Friend and Cook's (1992) definition was adopted for this study as it involved an interdisciplinary collaboration (albeit a non-structured type) between teachers of equal status, from different departments, working together for the purpose of sharing ideas and knowledge, with the ultimate aim of improving their learners' learning and success.

Impact of Collaboration: myth or reality?

There is a growing discourse within educational institutions about the importance of teacher collaboration. It is seen as an important element in student success. In spite of this perception on the importance of collaboration, teachers often demonstrate a preference for working in isolation rather than with others. A study by OECD (2011) found that teachers rarely collaborate especially in aspects relating to student learning. Yet, studies have found a link between collaboration and students' learning and success (Goddard and Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

Collaboration has also been identified as a way of raising student achievement (Waldron and McLeskey, 2010). Not only is seen as a way to help reduce isolation in the classroom, it can provide opportunity for improvement in teacher practices as well as improve their attitude to work (York-Barr, Ghore and Sommerness, 2007). Embracing conflicting opinions, strategies and values through collaborative activities can lead to teacher empowerment (Levine and Marcus, 2010). Collaboration involves the sharing of knowledge and expertise. Sharing of expertise is seen by Meirink et al (2007:148) as:

“particularly powerful in terms of changing practice, as teachers can use the expertise of colleagues to adjust or improve their own teaching practice or adjust, extend, substitute, or implement the own belief.”

There is evidence that collaboration structured and focused on instruction results in learners' improvement (Saunders et al., 2009). Students' retention and success rates have been shown to improve when teachers plan and work together in teams instead of doing so individually. Working collaboratively in teams is also seen as a powerful strategy for helping students to learn at higher level (Hattie, 2009). More specifically, interdisciplinary collaboration, which is the focus of this study, has been found to benefit teachers through the opportunity to acquire new knowledge in curriculum develop-

ment (Shibley, 2006), course design and teaching (Mavoor and Trayner, 2001), gaining different ideas from experts of other subjects and having a better perception of learners' needs (Jackson, 2004). Research shows that effective collaboration requires strong support and commitment from management, as collaboration at the tutor level alone will be inadequate to fully meet the needs of both teachers and learners (Callan and Ashworth, 2004).

Some effective strategies such as sharing resources between institutions (Barton and Pitt, 2003), allocation of time for collaboration, planning and regular information sharing between teachers in the different departments will go a long way in enhancing collaborative practices. Teacher collaboration can be strengthened by means of promoting communities of practice (Levine and Marcus, 2010; James et al., 2007). Communities of practice involve groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 2006). There is evidence that teacher professional community is crucial for building teacher capacity (Horn and Little, 2010; Stoll, 2009), and can serve as a vehicle by which culture for learning can develop (Fullan et al., 2009).

Despite the benefits associated with collaboration, others have questioned the link between collaborative initiatives and student achievement (Joyce 2004). Also, Vescio, et al. (2008) maintain that there is scarcity of data to support the assertion that teacher collaboration improves the learning outcomes of learners. In the face of these contestations, it becomes imperative that we understand what teachers think about the phenomena of collaboration and how it can be improved.

Barriers to collaboration include lack of time (Saunders et al., 2009), teachers workload (Little, 2003), tight schedule (Leithwood et al., 2000), lack of collaborative skills (Friend, 2000), differences in philosophy, pedagogies and (Lynch, 2006), preference of some teachers to work alone due to mistrustful of other staff members, want to protect their "territory," or resist what they perceive as interference from outsiders (DuFour et al., 2004) and possibility of manipulation by managers in a way that does not build collective capacity (DuFour, 2011).

Strategies for improvement to collaboration include provision of adequate time for collaboration, focusing on improving learning outcomes or addressing the hard questions about classroom practice and actively seeking to change teachers' practice (Harris and Jones, 2009), creating 'cultures for learning' that places importance on people learning from each other and being collectively committed to improvement (Fullan, 2009), encouraging a learning organisation, with distributive leadership structure, where "leadership of the many would take priority over leadership by the few" and continuous change through of learning and providing administrative and structural support, official recognition of collaborative work, time release and rewards, setting common goals among parties and institutionalising collaboration (Kezar, 2005).

Data Collection and Analysis

The main purpose of the study was to find out the perception of vocational and Functional English teachers on collaboration between these two subject areas. Data was collected using one-to-one, semi-structured interviews involving 10 teachers (Five Functional English teachers and five vocational tutors). Designed as a qualitative study, the goal was to examine the phenomena of collaboration from the specific context in which these teachers work and interact with others. The overall intention in taking this approach was to explore the specific situation of these teachers in their bounded subject specialisms. This echoes Creswell (2007:21), who argue that constructivist researchers “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” where they can construct the meanings of situations, formed in discussion or interaction with others.

The use of semi-structured interview enabled the researcher to probe, explore and seek for new insights into the subject under study. Semi-structured interviews also allowed for carefully prepared questions probes which ensured that all the areas of interests are covered. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio voice recorder. This has the advantage of making the interview report more accurate than writing out notes. However, one of the main disadvantages of using audio recorder is its inability to capture the visual and non-verbal communication such as body movement or changes in volume or pitch, in communicating information by both the interwar and interviewee (Fontana and Fry, 2005). To guide against this shortcomings, notes were taken during the interview. Moreover, recorded interviews can also become very time-consuming to analyse (Cohen et al., 2011). In order to save time, the transcription was started as soon as each interview data was collected rather than waiting until the end of all data collection.

Data analysis involved the use of thematic analysis which is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006:79) as “A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data.” It involved repeatedly listening to the audio tapes and revisiting the transcription in order to list key ideas and recurrent themes. This method of data analysis enabled the researcher to avoid pre-determinism. This is important in the light of the fact that the researcher shares professional roles, responsibilities and expectations with the participants.

Summary of Research Findings

The research aimed to examine the perception of vocational and Functional Skills (FS) English Teachers on collaboration in a further education college. Interview questions were developed around the research questions aimed at exploring participants’ percep-

tion of collaboration between vocational and Functional English teachers. Five main themes: the need for teacher collaboration, the effect of lack of collaboration, allocation of responsibility for collaboration, barriers to collaboration and strategies for improving collaboration emerged from the analysis of the interviews.

Need for Teacher Collaboration

Majority of the participants acknowledged the importance of teacher collaboration. They have all engaged in collaborative activities in some form but there was mixed feelings about their experiences. Majority of them however viewed working collaboratively in a positive manner.

"It's good if the teachers working in the two departments have good working relationships." They can discuss students' issues and try to see where they can both work together to help them."

"Collaboration improves understanding of individual learners' needs."

This supports the view that collaboration helps to serve learners' interest as well as improve their learning (Stoll and Louis, 2007; Palmer, 2007) and enables teachers to have a better perception of learners' needs (Jackson, 2004).

Teacher collaboration was also seen by most interviewees as enabling learners' success and achievement. Drawing from their experience, they said:

"If teachers work together to see how we can help the students, I think we can improve their results."

"It will allow them to pass their exams and complete their coursework successfully."

"When students pass their exams or their coursework, both teachers will become satisfied and happy."

"Regarding the one that I have a good relationship with, the impact on learners was very positive. We've just finished Unit 13 for example and they've all achieved because they had better understanding."

This is in line with the findings in the literature which established a link between teacher collaboration and student achievement (Goddard and Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Waldron and McLeskey, 2010) and the role of collaboration in helping students to learn at higher level (Hattie, 2009).

However, not all participants saw the need for collaboration. A small number of participants viewed collaboration as unnecessary.

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“My honest opinion is that I don’t think it’s necessary because we have a curriculum to follow.”

“I think teachers should teach what they are supposed to teach and that’s it!”

The above statements support the view that teachers might see collaboration as detracting from classroom activities (Little, 2003). As they are expected to deliver programmes and meet set targets by given deadlines, teachers may view the time spent on collaboration as getting in the way of meeting those targets.

Effect of Lack of Collaboration

Majority of the participants viewed lack of collaboration as having negative impact on learners. They believed that it would result in less understanding of learners’ needs hence, the inability to cater for these needs adequately.

“When teachers don’t work together properly, it will affect students’ progress”

“When that relationship is not there from the beginning, or the time schedule is so tight or we are busy and we don’t have time, it can have a great impact on the learners.”

“If a teacher doesn’t know what the other one is doing and they are teaching the same students, it will not benefit the students in the long run.”

Some other participants were of the view that FS English teachers and vocational tutors need to understand each other’s curriculum requirements. Without effective collaboration, this understanding will be lacking. In their opinion:

“There will be no understanding from the Functional Skills point of view about what needs to be done if they don’t work together with the vocational teachers.”

“Lack of collaboration means that there will be lack of curriculum knowledge by both sides.”

“If she doesn’t have an understanding of what the units are in the vocational curriculum she wouldn’t know how to support the learners and there will be problem.”

This indicates that where teachers from different departments work together to teach the same learners, there is a need to collaborate in order to understand each other’s curriculum. This will enable them to have a better understanding of their learners’

needs in both curriculum areas and help adapt their teaching to meet these specific needs.

Responsibility for collaboration

The question of who has responsibility for collaboration emerged as one of the areas of contention among the respondents. There were differing views about who has the responsibility for collaboration. Interview data showed that whilst some vocational teachers tried to pass the responsibility onto Functional English teachers, the Functional English teachers also attempted to pass responsibility for collaboration the vocational teachers.

"Vocational teachers always want to pass on their responsibilities to Functional Skills teachers."

"Functional Skills teachers need to be told that this is their responsibility rather than us having to do it".

"Functional Skills teachers need to understand the vocational curriculum."

"There will be no understanding from the FS point of view about what needs to be done unless they talk to us."

A number of vocational tutors referred only to what the FS teachers should do and not their own responsibilities as vocational tutors. This suggests that the vocational tutors regarded themselves as the main teachers and the FS English tutors as the junior partners in the collaborative activities. This may be due to the fact that learners' main qualification is the vocational one while the Functional English course may be seen as an "add on" which does not carry the same weight as a vocational qualification.

One important issue that emerged from the data was the role managers in ensuring clear definition of responsibilities for teachers where collaboration between curriculum areas takes place. Some interviewees said:

"I think its managers' responsibility to ensure that everybody know what their responsibilities are."

"I think it should be made clear to them by managers- who's doing what- the boundaries?"

These views do not suggest a voluntary collaborative approach. Rather, it suggests that some teachers prefer a structured type of collaboration where managers decide the type of collaborative activities to be undertaken and who participates in them. Teacher collaboration should develop beyond this. Although managers and administrators should

be involved in creating positive atmosphere for collaborative activities, teachers should also take their own initiatives for voluntarily collaborating with colleagues. They need to become aware that this would not only benefit their learners but it is likely to improvement in their own learning and teaching practices.

Barriers to Collaboration

Data analysis revealed a number of limitations to teacher collaboration. Most participants identified time as the major problem for effective teacher collaboration. This lack of time was linked to various factors such as overloaded time-tables and paperwork. Most expressed their common concern about lack of time:

“People just don’t have the time because they have a lot to do.”

“The time-table is so full and we have to do a lot of paperwork that little time is left for other things.”

“As a tutor, having a busy time schedule and liaison with tutors from another department....the time is not just there.”

Leithwood *et al.* (2000) identified tight schedules and insufficient time as barrier to developing collaborative relationships. Sharing has been identified as a critical component of learning communities (Leo and Cowan, 2000). However, unwillingness to share ideas and resources was identified as one the barriers to collaboration.

“I think teachers spend a lot of time developing materials like schemes of work and they are kind of reluctant to share. I personally feel the same way sometimes.”

“People ask you for things, you don’t want to share because a lot of teachers don’t return the favour.”

Trust is regarded as an important element of a successful collaboration. The reluctance to share resources may be due to lack of trust from other teachers or the fact that some teachers may resent sharing with others, resources which they have devoted a lot of their time in creating. They might resent the fact that some teachers do not invest the same amount of time as them in creating new resources.

Some participants noted that some teachers prefer to work alone or have no skills in working with others (Friend, 2000:132).

“Also I think some people are just not good at working with other people. They just like doing their own things.”

"It's very difficult to cooperate with other teachers because everybody wants to do their own things."

This tendency to work alone has been described by Hargreaves (1994:425) as a 'culture of individualism' whereby teachers exercise autonomy within the privacy of their classrooms.' DuFour and Burnette (2004) also gave reasons why some teachers prefer working alone as mistrustful of other staff members, protection of their "territory," or resistance of what they perceive as interference from outsiders.

Strategy for Improvement

All the participants suggested the creation of more time for collaboration. This includes time for meeting other teachers as well as on the time-tables.

"I think the first thing is that at the beginning of the academic year, it is very important and essential for the two departments to meet."

"If they want people to work together, they need to create the time on the time-table."

"Maybe if they create special days when we are not teaching so that we can meet teachers from the vocational departments, then it might work."

Kezar (2005) suggested that constraints to collaboration can be overcome by providing administrative and structural support, official recognition of collaborative work, time release and rewards, setting common goals among parties and institutionalising collaboration.

Conclusion

The study examined the perception of vocational and functional English teachers on collaboration. It found that most participants had engaged in a form of collaborative experience with teachers from other departments. Most participants also viewed collaboration with colleagues as a positive thing. However, there were a few who believe that collaboration is unnecessary. For collaboration to be successful, both teachers and their respective departments need to be committed to working together. There needs to be a change in culture in a way that will serve the interest of learners and not just the individual departments or teachers. It should involve the vocational teachers and Functional English teachers working very closely together when planning their courses and during the delivery of these courses. Finally, a whole organisational approach is advocated for effective collaboration to take place. As indicated by (Fullan, 2010:96) "there is no way to make whole-system reform work without the entire teaching profession

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and its leaders working together for the collective good.” Without this approach, collaboration is unlikely to work successfully. Finally, Lee (2000) opined that cooperation or collaboration will be unsuccessful if there is a lack of willingness to cooperate, patience and open attitudes from both sides.

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