

# The links between collaboration, agency, professional community and learning for teachers in a contemporary secondary school in England

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## Contextualisation

In this paper I have used questionnaire data to look at some of my colleagues' conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning. I have also investigated the connections between the various conceptions of this particular group of teachers. I felt that an investigation into the conceptions of colleagues would be fruitful, based on an assumption that the conceptions of learning held by teachers influence their approach to teaching and learning. In my research I found that colleagues were readily able to tell me about their experiences of working with other teachers but that they found difficulty in describing 'learning' itself. I therefore needed to devise a methodology that enabled me to illuminate the thinking behind the actions of my colleagues.

The data show powerful links between the ways teachers think about their collaboration, teaching and learning. My argument is that conceptions underpin actions, strongly influencing the ways in which teachers work and learn with each other. Collaboration would seem to have the potential to promote agency, professional community (though both appear to be fragile), and learning.

**Abstract:** *This paper reports the results of part of a larger case study by an insider researcher. It draws on qualitative and quantitative data to highlight the links between collaboration, agency, professional community and learning among English secondary school teacher colleagues. The focus is on the learning potential of teacher collaboration in a mutually affirming professional community. It is argued that collaboration promotes agency and the ability to influence the way in which a school operates. The ranges of forces that either promote, or constrain, the agency of teachers are identified. In addition, it is argued that collaboration promotes professional community, qualities of trust, mutual respect, and teacher learning, through dialogue. The processes of teacher collaboration are seen to be important in school improvement and the effective learning of students. Some implications for leadership in schools are also identified.*

## Introduction

This paper gives a contemporary view of teacher collaboration and learning. It highlights the importance of the links between collaboration, agency, professional community and learning for the teachers in my school – a secondary school in England. It originated as a case study on the collaboration and learning of teachers in this type of school.

Although this account is based on a single case study, it is hoped that the ideas and issues arising within one school will be valuable in illuminating processes in different schools, on the basis that teachers are "...knowledge-makers and theory-generators, as well as knowledge-users and theory-translators..." (Cochran-Smith, 1993, p 306).

## **Methods used**

To explore the links between collaboration, teaching and learning, a single case study was undertaken. As the school in question was one that I had worked in since 1988, an insider-researcher perspective, which aimed to articulate the voice, and the story, of the teachers themselves, was adopted. It used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the data, derived from two questionnaires. It also made use of the interviews with colleagues that had informed the framing of the questionnaires. The data from the first questionnaire pointed to the importance of teachers' conceptions of learning and the value of interconnections between them (Appendix 1). Equally, a school's learning capacity seems to depend on its focus on learning and its connectivity. A second questionnaire (Appendix 2) identified strong links in the ways these teachers conceived of their collaboration, teaching and learning. Collaboration was seen as empowering and useful for teaching and learning. The detailed results are discussed later in this paper.

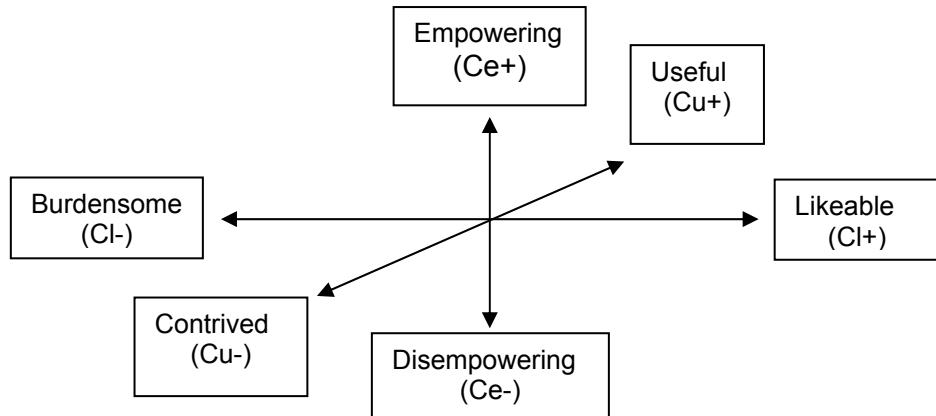
The interpretations and arguments in this paper draw on the large amounts of data that arose from observations, conversations and completed questionnaires with the vast majority of the schools' 54 teachers. These took a number of forms. The first, took the form of conversations with two teachers, who had worked alongside me in the classroom, and focused on our collaboration. The second drew on conversations with five other colleagues, with whom I had worked for several years, about collaboration and learning. A third line of evidence arose from observations of two working groups of teachers: one with about 20 teachers, the other with about 10 teachers. A further source of evidence was based on conversations with nine colleagues, with whom I had worked for at least 5 years; this examined their stories of post-Ofsted improvement and collaboration.

Two further sources of findings arose from the two questionnaires mentioned earlier. The first questionnaire (Appendix 1) was completed by 34 colleagues and focused on professional development activities. The second questionnaire (Appendix 2), which had been completed by 47 out of 54 colleagues, was directed towards their conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning. The second questionnaire was developed from knowledge generated from the earlier conversations, noted above, and the findings of the first questionnaire (Appendix 1). The data are discussed below and are the basis for my argument in this paper.

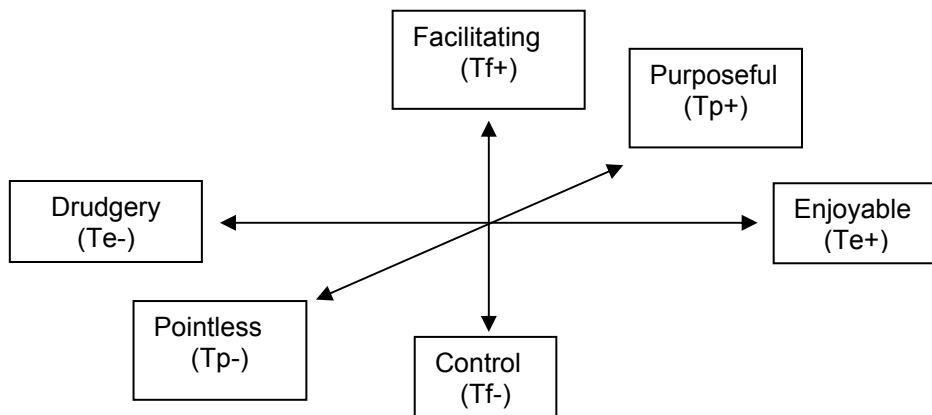
Based on understandings derived from my research I chose three dimensions of collaboration, three dimensions of teaching and three dimensions of learning (Figure 1). Arising from this model, I then devised a list of 36 agree/disagree-type statements, which became my second questionnaire (Appendix 2). My intention was to measure individual colleagues' differing conceptions: for this purpose, each of the 9 dimensions had four statements - two at the positive pole of the dimension and two at the negative pole. I then looked for correlations between the different dimensions of each conception in the hope that patterns linking these teachers' conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning (see Table 1) might be apparent.

**Figure 1.** My selection of dimensions of conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning

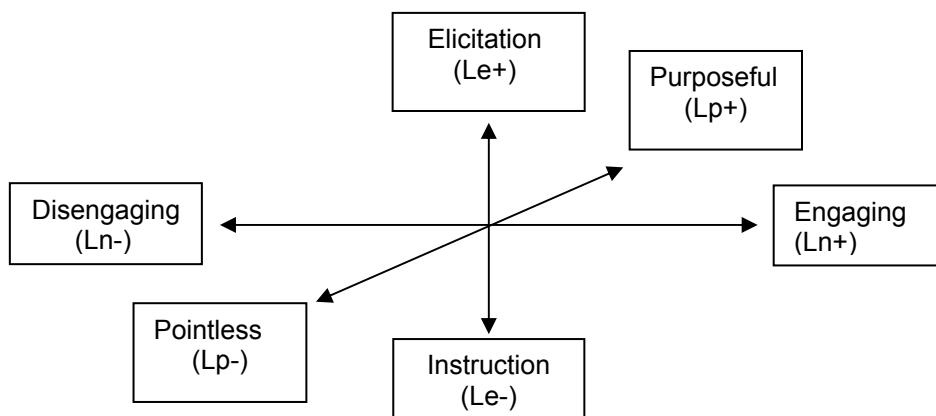
*My selection of three dimensions of conceptions of collaboration*



*My selection of three dimensions of conceptions of teaching*



*My selection of three dimensions of conceptions of learning*



## **The findings of the study: looking for connections between conceptions**

### ***Results of the correlation analysis***

Statistically, correlation is the connection between two sets of variables and this connection is measured by the correlation coefficient on a scale between +1 and -1: a complete absence of correlation is represented by zero. The particular form of correlation coefficient used here – the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, is denoted by ' $r$ ', and is used to discover the strength of connection between two sets of data. Data are ranked when calculating the Spearman correlation coefficient, so I totalled the four items, for each of my nine dimensions, with a range of +8 to -8, and then ranked the scores for each of the 47 teachers who completed the questionnaire. Using Excel, I calculated the Spearman rank correlation coefficient for pairs of dimension data. The results of these calculations are shown below in Table 1.

In order to assess the strength of connections, I used a Spearman rank significance computer programme that indicated a minimum significant correlation coefficient for my sample size of 47. This produced values that indicated the likely level of correlation to be regarded as significant, at three levels of significance – 5%, 1% and 0.1%, for my sample size. To be significant at the 5% level ( $p = 0.05$ ), the minimum correlation value would need to have been 0.2876: this meant there was a 5% possibility of a chance correlation. To be significant at the 1% level ( $p = 0.01$ ), a coefficient value of 0.3722 would have been needed (meaning there was a 1% possibility of such a result occurring by chance) and finally, for the result to be significant at the 0.1% level ( $p = 0.001$ ) a coefficient of 0.4647 would have been necessary (suggesting a 0.1% chance of the result having occurred by chance alone).

## **Patterns of conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning**

### ***Commentary on connections***

In this section I will try to ascribe meaning to, and interpret, the patterns of association revealed in the correlation analysis shown in Table 1. To illustrate these inter-relationships I have summarised them in a diagram (Figure 2) using the correlations (significant at the 5% level), derived from Table 1. As shown in Figure 2, strong and multi-dimensional links could be identified between conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning for these teachers. The commentary that follows is supported by statistical data but will, in part, be speculative.

There seemed to be two main clusters of connections apparent in the data. The first suggested 'collaboration' as being 'empowering' and 'useful', with 'teaching as facilitating', and 'learning as purposeful'. The second suggested, 'collaboration as likeable', with 'teaching as purposeful', 'enjoyable' and 'facilitating', and 'learning as engaging' and 'purposeful'. The link between the two clusters appeared to be 'learning as purposeful', because this dimension had a strong connection with all the other dimensions, except 'learning as elicitation'.

**Table 1.** Correlations arising from an analysis of 47 teachers' conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning

*Collaboration*

Empowering –	(Ce)	-							
Disempowering									
Useful –	(Cu)	0.444**	-						
Contrived									

Likeable –	(Cl)	0.245	0.245	-					
Burdensome									

*Teaching*

Facilitating –	(Tf)	0.371**	0.376**	0.376**	-				
Control									
Purposeful –	(Tp)	0.219	0.041	0.396**	0.193	-			

Pointless									
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Enjoyable –	(Te)	0.279	0.104	0.456**	0.182	0.534***	-		
Drudgery									

*Learning*

Elicitation –	(Le)	0.211	0.157	-0.043	-0.078	-0.241	0.090	-	
Instruction									
Purposeful –	(Lp)	0.539***	0.475***	0.476***	0.397**	0.502***	0.397**	0.107	-

Pointless									
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Engaging –	(Ln)	0.263	0.199	0.517***	0.250	0.296*	0.258	-0.172	0.488***	-
disengaging										

Ce	Cu	Cl	Tf	Tp	Te	Le	Lp	Ln
Collaboration			Teaching			Learning		

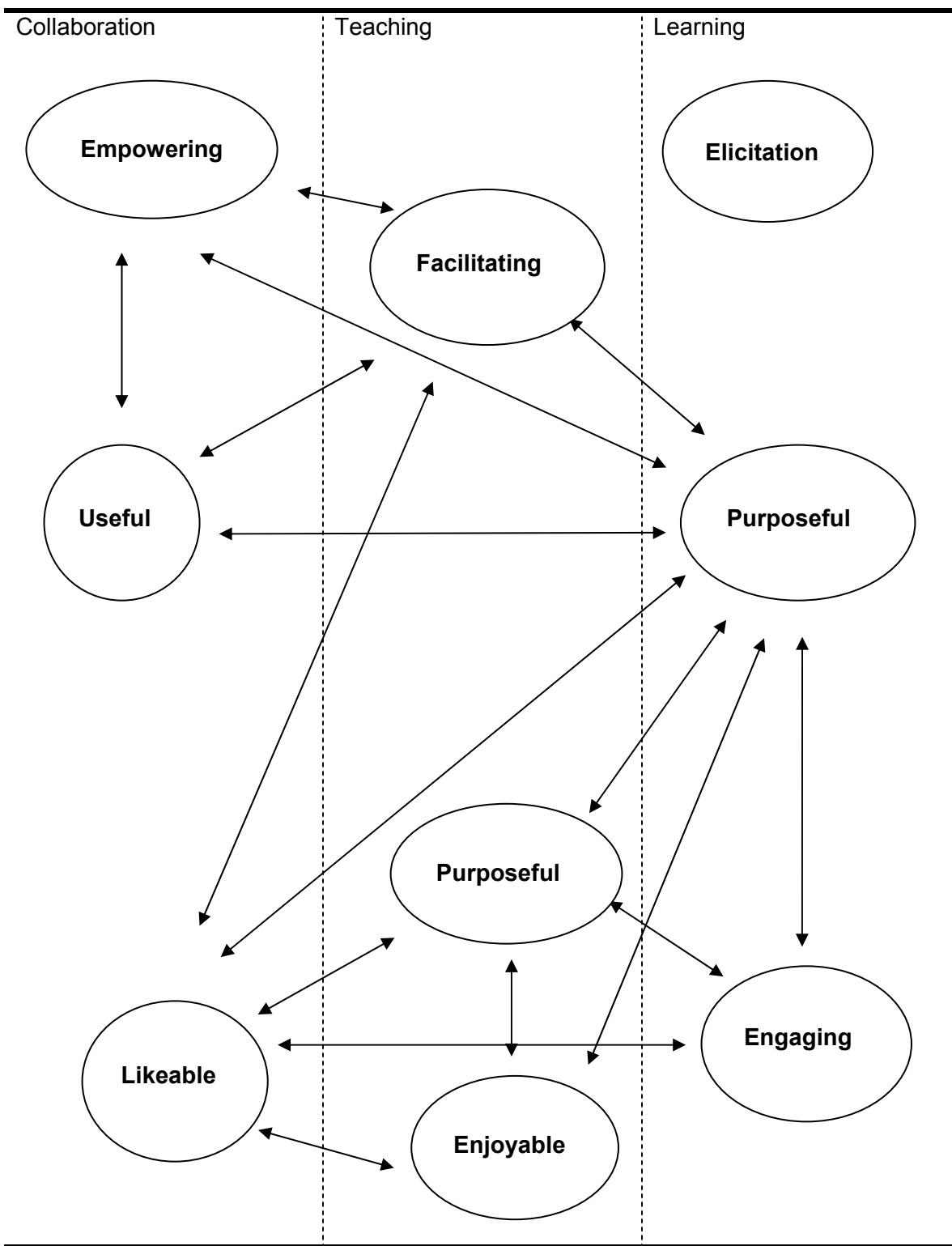
Note:

\* a minimum coefficient of 0.2876 indicates a 5% possibility of a chance correlation

\*\* a minimum coefficient of 0.3722 indicates a 1% possibility of a chance correlation

\*\*\* a minimum coefficient of 0.4647 indicates a 0.1% possibility of a chance correlation

**Figure 2.** Patterns of strong connections summarised.



Note: Arrows represent correlations of more than 0.29, indicating a maximum 5% possibility of a chance occurrence.

### ***Cluster 1: working with colleagues to get the best out of others: striving for agency and learning***

The conception of 'collaboration as empowering' had powerful links with that of 'collaboration as useful', 'teaching as facilitating' and 'learning as purposeful', the implication being that mutual support is at the root of the work of my colleagues. 45 out of 47 colleagues agreed that they should help "...all pupils and colleagues do their best..." (Appendix 2), 43 teachers conceived of collaboration as helping teachers "...focus on what really matters..." (*ibid*), and all respondents felt that the "...support of colleagues is essential to teachers..." (*ibid*). The correlations between conceptions of 'teaching as facilitating', and collaboration, as both 'empowering' and 'useful', are strong, indicating that these teachers saw the facilitating part of teaching as central to their work.

By my interpretation, collaboration, within and between groups, appeared to be linked to agency (a concept I define below). The link between collaboration, as both 'empowering' and 'useful', and 'learning as purposeful' is also strong and unequivocal. The strong links between 'learning as purposeful' with 'teaching as facilitating' may indicate that these teachers wanted to get the best out of others and appreciated any learning opportunities that helped them to achieve this. My interpretation is that colleagues provide essential support and encouragement for developing learning in the classroom. This group of conceptions might be called "...getting the job done..." (Appendix 2), or what Evans calls "...a sense of achievement..." in her view the, "...fundamental source of job fulfilment..." (Evans, 2001, p 110).

### ***Cluster 2: enjoying collaborating, teaching and learning and seeing teaching and learning as worthwhile: striving for professional community and learning***

There were very strong connections between these teachers' conceptions of learning as 'engaging' and 'purposeful'. There was a similarly strong pattern of responses between the two dimensions of 'teaching as purposeful' and 'learning as purposeful'. In addition, if colleagues saw a purpose to their teaching they also saw their own learning as engaging. There was a strong connection between the way in which colleagues conceive of 'teaching as enjoyable' and 'collaboration as liking', indicating that these teachers enjoyed the social interaction aspects of their work with both pupils and colleagues. Conceptions of 'collaboration as liking' and 'teaching as purposeful' were strongly linked too. The very powerful links, apparent in the correlation results, between conceptions of 'collaboration as 'liking' and 'learning', as both 'purposeful' and 'engaging', again underline the connection between collaboration and learning. The very strong links between 'learning as purposeful' with 'teaching as enjoyable' may indicate that those teachers enjoyed getting the best out of others and any learning experiences that supported them in achieving this. One of the strongest connections was between the conceptions of 'teaching as purposeful' and 'teaching as enjoyable': it seems that these teachers liked teaching because they saw their work as worthwhile.

My reading of the second cluster of connections was that it connected the 'enjoyment' of collaboration, teaching and learning with the 'purposefulness' of both teaching and learning. In my view these dimensions are about professional community, a type of collegiality that is based on good relationships and that focuses on effective teaching and learning. This group of conceptions also seems to centre on teaching as a purposeful and worthwhile job. Teaching is seen as worthwhile, perhaps because it is aimed at getting the best out of others, and this gives a purpose to professional development that may lead to improvement. Wrapped up in this purposefulness is a sense of enjoyment, perhaps also defined as a kind of engagement, a commitment to a community of colleagues and pupils. "What motivates

people...is the opportunity to experience a sense of achievement...Some will derive a sense of achievement just from teaching a class and feeling that they are making a difference to children's lives...others will want to lead and manage other adults..." (Evans, 2001, p 111).

## ***Linking the two clusters: collaboration promotes agency, professional community and learning***

The conception of 'learning', for teachers, as 'purposeful' had strong links with 7 of the other 8 dimensions in my model: illustrating again the close links between learning, teaching and collaboration. There was also a strong pattern linking the 'facilitating' aspect of teaching with the 'enjoyment' of collaboration so these teachers seem to enjoy the engagement of working with colleagues in order to get the best out of themselves and their pupils.

The discussion that follows will argue that, in this specific context, collaboration promotes teacher agency, professional community and teacher learning. At the same time, a context of controlling pressures, acting on teachers, means that agency and professional community are fragile and such fragility can undermine collaboration, teaching and learning.

## **Discussion**

The data presented earlier in this paper point to strong links between collaboration and, both professional community, and teacher learning. I shall discuss these connections in the next few pages. The powerful links between colleagues' conceptions of collaboration as 'empowering' and 'useful', and teaching as 'facilitating', seem to indicate that collaboration can promote agency in spite of unfavourable contextual forces within, and outside, the school. This represents a new conceptual analysis and synthesis. This will lead me to illuminate specific issues in my own school and to offer insights into broader issues relevant to other schools.

### ***(1) Collaboration promotes agency***

My argument is that through working together, teachers can act in a way that influences the organisational structure in which they work. Senge (1990) highlights the power of structure as:

"...key interrelationships that influence behaviour over time. These are not interrelationships between people, but among key variables, such as...engineers' product ideas and technical and managerial know-how in a high-tech company" (p 44).

Crucially, for my argument about agency in a *school* setting, Senge then underlines the importance of the behaviour of people as part of the organisational structure:

"The nature of structure in human systems is subtle because we are part of the structure. This means we often have the power to alter structures within which we are operating" (*ibid*, p 46).

For Senge such actions are rare because people in organisations do not realise that they have such power. From my standpoint collaboration promotes agency through a collective realisation that teachers can make changes to the structure within which they operate in order to enhance teaching and learning. Such alterations to structure might, for example, mean leadership outside the formal leadership structure and a focus on students, and their learning, rather than administrative practices.

My argument is also supported by data from Berliner (2001) who links the development of teacher expertise to an increase in teacher agency whereby the learning of the expert

teacher becomes "...increasingly self-controlled, self-monitored and self-reinforced..." (p 479). Berliner also points to the link (p 471) between teacher expertise and more effective student learning, so the connections between collaboration, learning and agency seem particularly important. In the next section, therefore, I discuss the significance of agency, and the forces that operate on it, but first of all I want to clarify the meaning of the concept of agency.

### **The concept of agency**

Dietz and Burns (1992) define human agency as having a number of characteristics: the power to make a difference; the ability to act intentionally; the making of choices and the monitoring of actions and their effects. In contrast, a *lack* of agency is indicated when a person behaves without power, intention, volition or reflexivity.

Bandura (2000) adopts a different emphasis when he argues that the core element of human agency is personal efficacy:

"Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act" (p 75).

In addition, groups can exert collective agency in order to achieve what individuals "...cannot accomplish on their own..." (*ibid*, p 75) Such a notion of collective agency, highly relevant to my argument about the impact of the collaboration of teachers in this case study, results from people's "...shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results..." (*ibid*, p 75). The attainments of a group with collective agency, Bandura further argues, are dependent not just on the skills and knowledge of its members but also on the way they interact:

"...it is not uncommon for groups with members who are talented individually to perform poorly collectively because the members cannot work well together as a unit...perceived collective efficacy is...an emergent group-level property..." (*ibid*, p 76).

Crucially, individuals' perceptions of collective efficacy influence their contributions to the group effort. These include their:

"...staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that can beset people taking on tough social problems" (*ibid*, p 76).

From a professional development standpoint, agency for teachers might be defined as the ability to better achieve their aims; it is the scope that teachers have for making decisions and taking actions that can improve teaching and learning. Harris and Muijs (2003) suggest that it is: "...where teachers are empowered to lead development work that impacts directly on teaching and learning" (p 2). In terms of the focus of my research – my school and its practices – my argument is that teachers in that school generally conceived of collaboration as empowering and useful, and that they therefore saw collaboration as promoting agency, in the context of controlling pressures, both inside and outside the school. They seem to "...believe they can achieve desired changes through their collective voice" (Bandura, 2000, p 78). However, this is occurring in a low agency context, as I will now describe.

### **Forces acting on agency**

Teachers in my school were subject to powerful contextual forces, exerted on them by, for example, government and local authorities. The latter are understandably keen to raise standards but often seem unaware that excessive control may be counter-productive, as highlighted by a number of writers. Gleeson and Gunter (2001) chart the changes for British

teachers from 1945 onwards as "...a transition from a high- to a low-trust economy" (p 141), beginning with a situation in which "...teachers enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, and trust, in terms of knowing what was best for the pupils in their care" (p 140). By the 1990s, "...rational and linear development planning..." meant that the teacher was an "...object to be integrated and managed..." This approach found expression in the rhetoric of intolerance of '...incompetent' teachers..." (p 140): a standpoint that isolates teachers and threatens their agency.

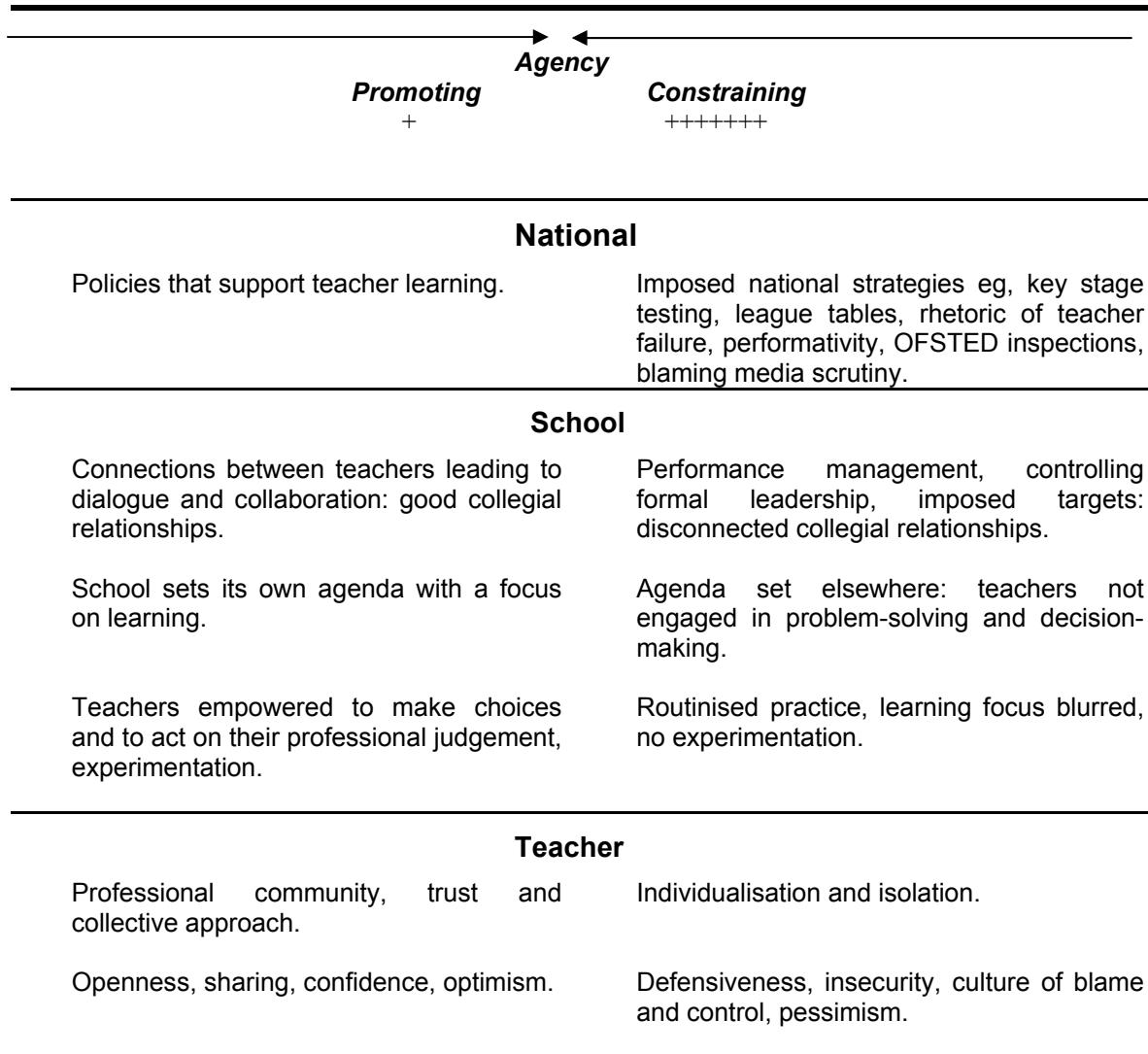
In describing the attempts by American policy makers to improve American schools in the 1980s, McNeil illustrates what she calls the contradictions of control that "...worsen the cycle of defensive teaching and student apathy..." (p 210), resulting in "...lowering the potential for meaningful teaching and learning rather than improving educational quality..." (*ibid*, p 210). The following description might also describe English schools in the last two decades:

"...policymakers are ...passing knee-jerk reforms that are imposing even more controls on teachers. The reforms standardise curriculum, increase teacher paperwork and proliferate ever more testing of both teachers and students" (McNeil, 1986, p 209).

Moves towards standardisation, through external controls, have the potential to lead to division, rather than collaboration, because teachers perceive their agency to be undermined.

For the purposes of explaining the context of my case study I need to map out the forces that affect teacher agency in my school: these forces seem to me to operate at national, school and teacher level as summarised below in Figure 3. These need to be examined in more detail before proceeding.

**Figure 3.** A fluid picture of forces on teacher agency



My research, I argue, gives evidence of collaboration as a force for teacher agency, in the context of the forces, dimensionalised and identified, in Figure 1: both promoting and constraining agency within this single school. High agency teachers (left hand side of Figure 3) take charge of their own destiny, setting an agenda that is appropriate to their own community. Low agency teachers (right hand side of Figure 3) effectively abdicate this role, allowing themselves to be tugged in one direction and then another by external forces. High agency teachers are actively engaged in the learning of their pupils, pursue improvement together and feel empowered to act on their professional judgement. Low agency teachers operate in a routine manner, unfocused on learning, lacking optimism about improvement, not supporting colleagues, and lacking confidence in their professional judgement. In a high agency situation (left hand side of Figure 3), trust is a key feature in all relationships, fostering self-confidence and a willingness to experiment as part of the learning process. In a low agency context (right hand side of Figure 3), on the other hand, relationships are undermined by a lack of trust, leading to a culture of blame, low self-confidence and a tendency to be defensive and controlling, with both colleagues and pupils, as suggested by McNeil (1986, pxviii).

## **A national context for forces on teacher agency**

The teachers in my case study, I claim, operated within the context of what seems to be a national culture of teacher criticism:

“State criticism of the teaching profession, orchestrated with the ‘Great Debate’ twenty-five years ago, has been vigorously sustained and developed by the subsequent conservative administrations, providing a strong basis for a sequence of interventions into the control of the educational system with the marginalisation of the other partners, namely the teachers themselves and the local education authorities” (Merson, 2001, p 74-75).

The agency of teachers in my school has been arguably undermined by what Ball (2001a) calls the:

“...terrors of performativity” which is “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change...” (p 2).

He highlights the fact that although government reforms are presented as giving schools greater freedom, in fact the controls are simply being changed. In the new scenario, teachers’ caring relations with pupils and colleagues are replaced by new roles as: “...producers/providers, educational entrepreneurs, and managers and are subject to regular appraisal and review and performance comparisons...” (*Ibid*, p 5). This situation, with performance continually being measured, may lead to a lack of trust, insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety and colleagues may become reluctant to discuss their teaching openly.

## **A school context for forces on teacher agency**

Let me map out the forces that were acting on teacher agency in my school. Managers were encouraged to set up systems that measured visible outcomes, for example the percentage of students achieving level 5 Maths, or GCSE grade C English. The pressure was for short-term tactics that may have undermined a long-term vision for school improvement. In this context, formal leadership may act in an interventionist, short-termist and essentially defensive manner, seemingly reactive, rather than proactive, fearful, rather than trusting. As Ball (2001b) says, performativity “...works from the outside in and from the inside out” (p 212) so that we are all drawn into its web:

“We sit on peer reviews, we write the accountability reports, we assign grades to other departments, we berate our colleagues for their ‘poor’ productivity...” (p 213).

In my school there were tensions between agency and control, between teachers who were keen to empower themselves and formal leadership which may be unwilling to trust. Such a leadership approach may dislike the complexity of collaboration, unwilling to “...work with people as equals, clarifying goals and achieving a working consensus on the ramifications and means of achieving change” (Latchem and Hanna, 2001, p 60). I argue that leaders need to be learners too, so that they “...share questions, offer ideas and support colleagues, pupils and students as they explore issues and endeavour to make sense of a dynamic world” (Law and Glover 2000, p 264).

My school context seemed, therefore, to present a complex picture of formal processes that go against agency and informal processes that work for it. McNeil (1986) found that in schools “...where the tension between the controlling functions and the educational purposes were resolved in favour of controls, teachers felt undermined, professionally threatened and ... they began unwittingly to participate in their own de-skilling” (p xxi).

I believe that collaboration is vital to teacher agency and examples from other schools show how fruitful it can be when nurtured in the school context. In a study of 12 English secondary schools (Gray *et al.*, 1999), two schools seemed to be improving more rapidly because they

“...were able to draw on colleagues’ experiences to formulate strategies and had found ways of helping colleagues to evaluate and learn from their own and other teachers’ classroom experiences” (p 146).

Rosenholtz (1989) discusses the impact of teachers’ certainty about “...a technical culture and their own instructional practice” on student learning gains. She concluded from her research that

“...teacher certainty contributes significantly to student learning gains in reading and math over a two year period” (p 138).

She sees teacher optimism and enthusiasm as contributing to teacher certainty, which seems to me to be closely linked with teacher agency.

### **A teacher context for forces on teacher agency**

Although the working context for colleagues, as outlined above, is not ideal for agency, teachers and their leaders are free to make choices for how they operate in school. I argue that colleagues may provide important mutual support, acting as a buffer for teachers against all the pressures that act to control the way they work with pupils. Such colleagues may be able to mitigate the potentially undermining and isolated context in which teachers operate because they can help them make sense of the classroom situation. With colleagues there is an opportunity to focus on the essential aspect of the job - teaching and learning, and to regain some of their threatened agency.

The key factor in my school context was that colleagues were colleagues over the longer term, especially as over 30% have been in the school for at least 15 years. They knew that apparently selfless actions to support colleagues one day might be of benefit to them another day as colleagues repaid their debt with reciprocal aid. Axelrod (1990) cites the example of the United States Senate where it is likely that senators will interact with each other again in the future:

“It would be best to co-operate with someone who will reciprocate that co-operation in the future...” (p 16).

The same scenario applies in our school, where most teachers work in teams, sharing workloads, ideas, resources, problems, and possible solutions. In such a setting, colleagues can focus on learning, acting on the basis of the evidence before them, engaging with colleagues who are involved in the same quest, trusting themselves and each other. “I cannot change others; I can work at changing myself” (Mason, 2002, p xii) might be their motto. In short, colleagues can support each other’s agency by seizing the agenda, working against controlling influences that stifle learning opportunities both for themselves and for their pupils.

## **(2) Collaboration promotes professional community, and the qualities of trust and mutual respect**

Professional community seems to be a key component in colleagues' collaboration according to the data in my research. 35 out of 47 colleagues agreed with the statement "Teaching is one of the most enjoyable jobs" (see Appendix 2). In addition, there was a strong correlation amongst my colleagues between conceptions of teaching as 'enjoyable' and collaboration as 'liking'. Interviews with colleagues confirmed that they regarded social interactions with other teachers as important. Opportunities for staff socialising were regularly created whereby teachers choose to spend their leisure time with colleagues: weekly 5-a-side football, Friday evening gatherings in the pub, end of term social events, 10 pin bowling events for the science department. Friday morning break time was special because all colleagues were enticed to the staff room by doughnuts and coffee: the associated jovial banter often spilled over into discussions about pupils. In interviews, various colleagues spoke enthusiastically about the benefits of working with others: for example, one teacher talked about the friendship of a "...sort of network of close friends" in school.

Other writers have also highlighted the importance of the social interactions of teachers with each other. Nias (1998) found that primary school teachers were:

"...deeply appreciative of opportunities to talk, to share their sense of worthlessness and failure, to relax and above all to laugh". There was also a need to share "the moments of excitement, fulfilment and extreme happiness" (p 1260).

Rosenholtz (1989), in underlining the importance of sharing for some of her teachers, quotes a teacher who emphasises the:

"...co-operative spirit" amongst the staff and their good relationships: "...the teachers here are not just colleagues, in a lot of instances we're also friends" (p 50).

Bryk, Camburn and Louis (1999) in their research in Chicago elementary schools, conceived of professional community as frequent interaction amongst teachers based on shared values and purposes. Such professional community, in their view was built on: reflective dialogue among teachers; a deprivatization of practice, including peer observation and joint problem solving and shared work (p 753).

The strongest factor found in facilitating professional community was trust:

"On balance, we note that the dynamic relationship between professional community and social trust is likely to be mutually reinforcing" (*ibid*, p 767).

It might reasonably be speculated, with regard to my colleagues, that their enjoyment of social interactions with other teachers was part of the process of developing professional community and trust. Such professional, and trusting, relationships with colleagues allow teachers to talk openly, without fear, blame or judgement about their teaching and create the potential for development. Indeed, the authors found that:

"...innovation and experimentation" were much more prevalent where professional community had developed. They suspected "...that if professional community in fact fosters instructional change, it does so by creating an environment that supports teacher learning through innovation and experimentation" (*ibid*, p 771).

### **(3) Collaboration promotes teacher learning through dialogue**

The data from the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) responses of 34 colleagues, pointed to the value of dialogue for teacher learning. For example, 25 teachers mentioned the benefits of "...hearing the ideas of others, sharing/clarifying ideas, spending time talking or being able to put problems into context and boost confidence". In addition, 22 out of these 34 colleagues said that the most useful professional development activity, in the previous year, that they had experienced, had been formal, or informal, meetings with colleagues in school or out of school. My research into colleagues' conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning has shown that my colleagues saw collaboration and learning as connected and as an integral part of their work as teachers. Interview data supported my argument that collaboration promotes learning through dialogue, as outlined in the following quotations:

“...you always learn something from collaboration with other teachers...”

and

“...working with the Special Needs department...has really opened my eyes...”

Teacher learning through collaboration was described as:

“...ten times greater...more concentrated...”

and

“...within my team it's a sharing approach to developing...”

I am led to speculate that there is a component in collegial interactions that may enhance what Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1988) has called:

“...the “flow experience”, that is when “goals are clear, when above-average challenges are matched to skills, and when accurate feedback is forthcoming, a person becomes involved in the activity. At this point, concentration focuses on what needs to be done...Irrelevant thoughts, worries, distractions, no longer have a chance to appear in consciousness. Self-consciousness...also disappears for the same reason...there is great inner clarity, awareness is logically coherent and purposeful” (p 34).

Here, 'flow' refers to the mental state of the individual. My speculation is about the potential for individuals in a cohesive group to achieve a kind of group flow, stimulated by working together, focusing on an issue of common interest and leading to new insights and possible changes in practice. 'Sato' describes the flow experience of young men, in Japanese motorcycle gangs, that engage in 'risk-taking' rides. The so-called "runs" did not just provide thrills "...but also offered an opportunity to experience a heightened state of consciousness and a strengthened sense of self" (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p 93).

What is of particular interest to my own argument is that the most highly rated reward for these young men was friendship and community, deriving from:

“...a sense of unity in the ordered collective undertaking in which one participates voluntarily. In the carnival atmosphere of a run, the rules governing interpersonal interaction in everyday life are temporarily suspended; and vivid and unmediated sociability becomes possible” (p 113).

Learning for teachers may depend, at least in part, on whether there is a culture of noticing learning in school: "...noticing: noticing what children are doing, how they respond...It is almost too obvious to say that what you do not notice, you cannot act upon" (Mason, 2002, p 7). The noticing process is more likely, I would contend, for teachers who engage in dialogue

about learning with colleagues, thus challenging the “...routines and decision habits” we have developed in order to “keep mental effort at a reasonable level” (*ibid*, p 7).

A number of writers point to the value of collaboration for teacher learning. For example, Gray and colleagues (1999, p 134), found a high correlation in teachers’ perceptions between the notion of a school that focuses on the processes of teaching and learning, and the quality of teaching and learning. Implicit in this is the idea of teacher collaboration as a means of improving learning in the school. The power of teachers working with each other and learning about learning is also indicated by the authors’ research as a factor in the most rapidly improving schools in their study. These schools;

“...had developed ways of being more specific about precisely how they wished to improve pupils’ learning, were able to draw on colleagues’ experiences to formulate strategies and had found ways of helping colleagues to evaluate and learn from their own and other teachers’ classroom experiences” (p 146).

Watkins (2001) argues the need for teachers to build with their pupils “...a vocabulary of learning and highlight a learning discourse” (p 7), because such a focus on learning has been shown to enhance pupil performance. Teachers also need to work with each other “...as active and collaborative constructors of meaning with autonomy and self direction...” (*ibid*, p 7).

Rosenholtz’s data (1989) showed that teachers in “...learning-enriched settings primarily cited colleagues in conjunction with their own problem-solving and creative capacities...” In addition, her evidence indicated that teacher learning opportunities led to an improvement in pupil learning (p 103).

## **Summary**

In this paper I have drawn together elements of the data arising from my study, and from other sources, to build an argument that has suggested that collaboration promotes agency, professional community and learning, against the grain of controlling pressures on teachers. My argument is relevant to the notion of a ‘learning community’: a term I use to indicate a school where the focus is on learning within the context of collaborative relationships based on trust and mutual respect. In such a learning community, both leadership and follower-ship have agency: when engaged in an ongoing dialogue about how to make student learning more effective.

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## **Appendix 1**

### ***Questionnaire on professional development activities***

#### ***Survey of Professional Development 1999-2000***

Name:.....

I would appreciate your comments on any activities you have found most beneficial to your professional development in the last year. These comments will be helpful in planning the allocation of INSET resources for 2000-2001. Such activities might include:

- a) formal or informal meetings with colleagues in school or out of school
- b) a course, in school or out of school
- c) conversations with colleagues in school or out of school
- d) working with a colleague in the classroom (eg support)
- e) teaching a particular group of pupils
- f) an appraisal or monitoring activity
- g) classroom observation
- h) INSET Day activities
- i) a school trip/visit/extra-curricular activity.

1. Which of the above activities have you found most useful over the last year? (please list two of them)
2. What was it about these two activities that made them most useful?
3. To what extent did these two activities involve working with a colleague/colleagues?
4. Who were the people you worked with?
5. Who led these activities? (please tick the appropriate box)

Self  Other person(s)  Joint venture

Continue overleaf if you wish. Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please leave the sheet in my pigeonhole.

Mike Hudson

## Appendix 2

### ***(Introduction)***

### ***Questionnaire on conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning***

#### Views on teaching and professional development: a questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to discover your views on teaching, learning and collaboration (working with other teachers).

*There are no right and wrong answers. Don't think too hard – your first response will be the best.*

I would be grateful if you would take the time to respond to all the items on the questionnaire by ticking the appropriate boxes.

It is important that I obtain the views of all colleagues in order to build a complete picture, so please take five minutes during the INSET Day (3 January 2001) to complete the questionnaires and return it to my pigeon hole today (if at all possible).

Many thanks for your co-operation.

Mike Hudson, Staff Development Co-ordinator

## Appendix 2 (Contd.)

### **Questionnaire on conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning**

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements.  
 SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

	SD	D	A	SA	
Teachers should help all pupils and colleagues do their best					Tf1+
To be honest, learning for teachers can be boring					Ln1-
The best thing about collaboration is that it helps teachers focus on what really matters					Ce1+
Pupil-centred teaching just does not work					Tf2-
Collaboration with colleagues is a “pain”					Cl1-
The key purpose for any teacher is continuing to learn					Lp1+
Teaching is all about getting the best out of others					Tf3+
The support of colleagues is essential to teachers					Cu1+
To be truthful professional development for teachers is rarely interesting					Ln2+
When it comes down to it teaching can be a drudge					Te1-
Talking to colleagues is the best part of the job					Cl2+
Learning as a teacher is essential to improving as a teacher					Lp2+
To be truthful teaching just grinds you down					Te2-
Collaboration with colleagues just does not help to move things forward					Cu2-
Teachers are fascinated by making sense of their world and their experience					Ln3+
Teaching has lost its way					Tp1-
United we stand, divided we fall					Ce2+
Teachers get to do new things by being shown					Le1-
At least teachers are doing something worthwhile					Tp2+
Working with other teachers is a diversion from the real job					Cu3-
Too often INSET activities do not engage the interest of teachers					Ln4-
Being in control at all times is the first priority for teachers					Tf4-
Working with colleagues undermines the individual teacher					Ce3-
The most important element in learning for teachers is creating new ideas with others					Le2+

## Appendix 2 (Contd.)

### ***Questionnaire on conceptions of collaboration, teaching and learning***

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements. SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

	SD	D	A	SA	
Teachers learn best through dialogue					Le3+
Teaching is just too hectic to find time to talk to colleagues					Cl3-
Teaching is a labour of love					Te3+
Working with colleagues is fun					Cl4+
Teaching has been overtaken by pointless bureaucracy					Tp3-
Professional development does not in fact produce better					Lp3-
Colleagues are the most important resource for teachers					Cu4+
Teaching is one of the most enjoyable jobs					Te4+
Learning for teachers is about keeping up to date					Le4-
Working with other teachers reduces confidence					Ce4-
Teaching really makes a difference					Tp4+
Professional development is essential to the improvement of teachers					Lp4+

Note: Codes were not on the questionnaire and are presented here for the benefit of the reader

Le = Learning as elicitation

Lp = Learning as purposeful

Ln = Learning as engaging

Tf = Teaching as facilitating

Tp = Teaching as purposeful

Te = Teaching as enjoyable

Ce = Collaboration as empowering

Cu = Collaboration as useful

Cl = Collaboration as likeable

+ = The positive end of the dimension

- = The negative end of the dimension