The Complexity of Collegiality and Collaboration
Valerie Drew and Alison Fox

ABSTRACT: Collegiality and collaborative working are clearly embedded in the current education policy agenda in Scotland and are presented as unproblematic and straightforward. This paper looks at how this way of working is developing in two schools within the context of collaborative professional enquiry. It considers how such action contributes to professional development of teachers.

It also uncovers some fundamental tensions, even in schools where this action is supported, as it seems that traditional hierarchical structures fail to support and encourage the new professionalism envisaged for ‘A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century’. This involves discussion on issues of power, legitimation and engagement. It concludes by suggesting that extended dialogue leading to change in minds and structures is needed in schools before collegiality becomes a reality.

The Policy Context
Collegial and collaborative working is seen as intrinsic to the new professionalism heralded by A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century (SEED, 2001), and reinforced by Ambitious, Excellent Schools (SEED, 2004) and A Curriculum for Excellence (SEED, 2004a). In addition, teachers are expected to be reflective and enquiring and as such, collaborative professional enquiry is an activity entirely consistent with the new professionalism. It is however, our experience that there is some resistance to this way of working in schools and indeed, it seems that there are certain systemic barriers at play.

Within one local authority in Scotland collaborative professional enquiry (CPE) has been acknowledged as being central to school improvement, and each school in the authority has been encouraged to undertake a number of CPE in the pursuit of this goal. It is expected that “all staff " will be involved in improving attainment and achievement for all pupils through “collaborative learning, and specifically through action inquiry research projects” (West Lothian, 2004: p5).

This paper uses data from a case study, which set out to describe what is happening in two particular schools in this local authority. The management teams in both schools support the local authority policy, and support and encourage collaborative professional enquiry in their schools. In each school, several teachers are working towards Chartered Teacher (CT) status illustrating a culture of commitment to continuing professional development. These schools are therefore ones in which it could be expected that collaborative enquiry has a high chance of success.
The research group is made up of a university teaching fellow, and four teachers who have achieved or are working towards Chartered Teacher status and are leading a CPE in their context. The research group is working to develop a shared understanding of collaborative professional enquiry. From an early stage of the project it read:

*Collaborative professional enquiry is an enquiry into an area of joint professional concern and/or interest, undertaken by more than one colleague within a work setting or settings, which focuses on assessment and intervention to effect progress in pupils’ learning. Evidence is gathered to demonstrate this process, and its product.*

*It is designed to contribute to the professional development of those who engage in it, and therefore is a collegial affair which takes place amongst colleagues for the benefit of the whole school community, enabling teachers to co-construct a bank of knowledge, which becomes an evidence base about their own practice and the business of effective learning and teaching.*

*A distinguishing feature of collaborative professional enquiry is that it is initiated and led by the teachers themselves and while it is likely to be consistent with the school development or improvement plan and supported by managers within the school, they do not drive it.*

There has been broad agreement from people in the schools in relation to the first two paragraphs. From an early stage, however, it became clear that the third paragraph highlighted a number of contentious issues relating to teacher autonomy, and teacher leadership. Harris and Lambert (2003) note that teacher leadership is “dependent on whether the head and the senior management team within the school relinquishes power to teachers and the extent to which teachers accept the influence of colleagues who have been designated as leaders in a particular area” (2003: 45). The data suggests that both teachers and managers are still working to develop their understanding of teacher leadership as it involves a change from the more traditional delegation of tasks, to delegation and devolvement of power, not necessarily associated with a position or hierarchy.

**Power and legitimation**

The suggestion that CPE is initiated and led by teachers themselves is supported within the documentation for the local authority initiative described above (Currie, 2004), and yet a member of one of the CPE groups, interviewed said “I think we are always promoting independent learners within the classroom and that’s what we’re basically being given the chance to do. It’s management allowing you to be independent”. The choice of the word ‘allowing’ very clearly illustrates this teacher’s perception that permission was necessary for the CPE group to behave in this way, despite the national and local authority policy rhetoric, which suggests the centrality of such professional autonomy.
One teacher interviewed noted that many of her peers in the Chartered Teacher cohort were being given little autonomy or power: “some of them have basically been told, you know, this is your group and this is your project...they have been told you are in this group and you will do this”. Within one of the case study schools group membership was mandatory, though teachers could say which group they wished to join. Not all got membership of the group of their choice, however, and that caused some disaffection from the start.

Another teacher reported that she and her colleagues had been encouraged by school management to identify an area of their own choice for investigation and development. She felt, however, that it was then important that the enquiry be enshrined in the school improvement plan as such inclusion signalled its worth in the eyes of the managers and colleagues, and released resources to support its implementation. This was not necessarily easy, as the teacher believed that school improvement planning was “still a very top-down scenario”. So while power was being relinquished in some respects, other controls still existed.

Regarding the contribution of collaborative and collegial work practice to continuing professional development (CPD), one group reported a positive effect in terms of the increase of their own power due to the outcome of their CPE. They were able to offer the evidence from their enquiry to support recommendations for change in relation to use of support staff. One teacher said that it was “motivating for people – to realise that you had such strong evidence to show that something needs to be different”. They therefore were able to influence school policy to the benefit of their pupils’ learning using evidence from an enquiry that they had designed and implemented. This proved to be professionally rewarding for these teachers.

Many of the teachers who had been involved in a CPE reported that they had benefited professionally from the experience. One reported an increase in self-confidence, and access to the wider school picture, while another noted that it had been of “far more use and value than just a one-off course” because “this is all putting it into practice and it just all comes together”. Yet another thought that the process had contributed to team building amongst colleagues, and another noted that it helped colleagues prepare effectively for a successful inspection. Lastly, one (modest) teacher noted that after 29 years of teaching she thought she was now ‘a slightly better teacher’ having been involved in the CPE and having ‘looked at how she taught’. This particular teacher made reference to the difference between working collaboratively with colleagues on a relevant project and going to an inspirational one-off conference where “you’ve been inspired on the day but because you couldn’t take it forward then or there was no kind of future thing where you were going to meet and talk about it and try it out, it gets forgotten”. Collaborative
professional enquiry therefore was seen to contribute meaningfully to CPD in both settings, and could be said to have empowered the teachers involved.

**Engagement**

A number of teachers involved in leading CPE in various settings have reported that their colleagues have engaged enthusiastically and in doing so have benefited their own development as well as that of their pupils. Once engaged there was a high degree of commitment and motivation displayed in each of the groups studied. Other teachers, however, have had more difficulty when trying to engage their colleagues with such comments as: “I don’t have time; it’s going to be a lot of work; I’ll do it if I get something out of it.”

The staff interviewed all reported high regard for the teacher leaders of their CPE group. The collaborative activity responsibility should be shared, however the case studies allude to the importance of the role of one person in driving the intervention forward. What is the role of this individual - leader, “skilled convenor” (Connolly and James, 2006) or facilitator? These individuals, and the way in which they enact their role, seem to be key to the successful development of collaborative professional enquiry and are a manifestation of Sachs (2003) “transformative professionalism” which is surely embodied within the Standard for Chartered Teacher.

Engagement with literature has also been an issue within the CPE groups. On trying to encourage colleagues to increase their knowledge and understanding of the area of study through engagement with research and literature, many have found them reluctant to spend time on reading. Teachers’ reluctance to engage with literature is not a new phenomenon: however, Scott (2000, p.121) suggests that the “practitioner has to engage critically with educational texts in order to change themselves and their practices”. Perhaps a comment from one of the teachers involved highlights an area of importance: “I was immediately taken by only one aspect of it…” which was “that wherever it had been tried and properly implemented then the success rate of candidates was demonstrably better…”. So if literature and research is meaningful and relevant to classroom practice, and offers tried and tested advice on how to improve learning within the classroom, then teachers are more willing to engage with it. Another teacher, however, gave out some reading to the members of her group and reported, “I had thought it was quite readable but nobody read it. In fact one member of staff came back the next again day and said “not on your Nellie” and basically said she wasn’t going to get involved because she was too lazy and didn’t want the hassle.”

June 2006 (Revised August 2006) 4
Collaborative professional enquiry or traditional working group?
Comments from a number of interviewees suggested that while managers supported CPE it was not clear that they understood what it involved.

- “I don’t think managers understand what we are doing”
- “It is probably quite scary for them [managers] and especially if they don’t know anything about where this is from, which I think probably quite a lot of them don’t”

There certainly seems to be confusion in some quarters about the difference between a CPE group and a more traditional working party group. While in one school the two terms were used interchangeably it was acknowledged that they were very different and indeed that the loose use of the terms caused confusion. Traditional working groups (TWG) were seen as more task focussed, with no necessity or remit to evaluate impact on learning, while CPE groups were thought to be more process focussed. They were likely to work towards an unspecified outcome, having designed and tracked an intervention and evaluated its impact. A member of the management team in one school conceptualised the difference, saying that in a TWG the remit is generally given to the group which then feeds back to the Senior Management Team, while a CPE is more about classroom practice. One teacher also commented that the work of a CPE group was informed by reading and incorporated time to discuss and reflect on the rationale behind current practice, in contrast with a TWG, which tended to produce a policy or develop procedures.

Conclusion
It seems that the issue of how enquiries are initiated, and who leads and is responsible for them continues to perplex. Reflecting on the last paragraph of the research groups’ working definition of CPE, one teacher said

“I think it is something even from the reading I have done, that should be initiated and led by the teachers and it should be supported by managers and they shouldn’t drive it – I think, if its to be what it’s meant for, or what I understand it to be. But that is not to say that is what actually happens in practice of course”.

Perhaps the most telling part of that quote is the acknowledgment by this teacher that her understanding of what collaborative enquiry involves is perhaps different to that of others. Perhaps this is why ‘what actually happens in practice’ differs from the political rhetoric, and is contingent on the professional commitment and understanding of both teachers and managers in school. What is needed is extended discussion at all levels of what collegiality and collaborative working involves. Once school communities are nearer to reaching a shared understanding and commitment to working in this way, then what actually happens in practice might be nearer to what is imagined by policy makers.
References:


