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Has collaborative professional enquiry in education impacted on culture, professionalism and improvement capacity?: Exploring the views of leaders in the education system

Qualitative research methods BMDP 7008

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Contents

Abstract	3
Keywords	3
Definitions of keywords	3
Introduction	4
Context to the study	6
Methods	6
Data analysis – emerging themes	9
Impact on culture	9
Impact on professionalism	12
Impact on school improvement	14
Conclusion	16
References	18

Abstract

Welsh Government's recent policies support the development of a self-improving school system by building capacity with education practitioners' with emphasis partly being placed on collaboration within and across the system as being the mechanism to bring this about.

The aim of this research was to explore education system leaders' experiences of engaging in collaborative professional enquiry and their views as to whether and how it had impacted on school culture, practitioners' professionalism and school improvement capacity. The following questions were used to gather data:

1. Has the culture of the school changed since the implementation of collaborative professional enquiry?
2. Has collaborative professional enquiry impacted the development of individuals in terms of their professionalism?
3. Have you observed a change in improvement processes and improvement successes in relation to collaborative professional enquiry?

A qualitative approach was used with semi-structured interviews so that the researcher could understand the perspectives of the participants and be flexible in pursuit of new knowledge. The findings demonstrate that all participants perceived that collaborative professional enquiry had impacted and created a change in the culture of the school, practitioners' professionalism and the school's capacity to improve.

The findings contribute important knowledge to justify the deployment of collaborative professional enquiry in schools as well as identifying research questions, for example, establishing the perceived purpose of the collaborative professional enquiry and evaluating against those purposes as well as ascertaining whether practitioners' perceptions of the purposes align with those as set out by policymakers and/or the school. Further consideration should also be given to using a framework or model to evaluate the progression and impact of collaborative professional enquiry.

Keywords

Collaboration, collaborative professional enquiry, impact, self-improving system, school as a learning organisation.

Definitions of keywords

Word	Definition

Collaboration	Two or more people working together to create or achieve something
Collaborative professional enquiry	Two or more people working together to assess and evaluate ideas strategies to trial against an area requiring development before assessing and evaluating the impact of the strategies
Impact	A change that has taken place as a result of an action.
Self-improving system	The assumption that much of the responsibility for school improvement sits with the system itself (Hargreaves, 2010).
School as a learning organisation	"A school as a learning organisation has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision". (Kools and Stoll, 2017: p5

Introduction

Concerned with the relatively poor literacy and numeracy performance of 15 year old Welsh pupils in the international comparator testing arena of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), those determining the pathway for the Welsh education system have insisted on departures from previous policies and practices in pursuit of new ways of working to bring about improvements in pupil outcomes across Wales (Dixon, 2016). A course has been set towards Wales becoming a self-improving system with schools developing themselves as learning organisations as a mechanism to facilitate this system level change (Harris, 2016). Learning organisations, as set out by Kools and Stoll (2016), depict the presence of seven elements that move practitioners, groups and organisations to a flexible, adaptive state therefore building the capacity to respond to any factors that may prove a threat or opportunity. This 'adaptive capacity' is seen as the critical factor to building professional capacity and extending professional capital in Wales (Harris et al, 2022), therefore becoming and progressively strengthening as a self-improving system.

The seven elements of the learning organisation model include factors that are put forward as 'targets' and 'processes' as if synonymous terms: shared vision; continuous learning; learning and collaboration; culture of enquiry; exchanging knowledge; external environment; and, learning leadership. From examining the list of elements, it is unclear whether these are inputs, outputs, a mixture of both or simultaneously both. Indeed, Alma Harris raises the question "are these the outcomes of a SLO or the driver or both"? (Harris et al, 2022: 7).

While investments in collaborative professional learning have existed in one guise or another for decades in the Welsh education system, there has been a visibly tangible increase in activity since the 2012 PISA outcomes. Through many iterations and formats, reputationally collaborative working is considered a worthy mechanism to bring about improvements across the education system. Similar changes to other public sector organisations, for example, the move to a team medical approach in GP surgeries have also been seen in this time and have resulted in improvements in patient care and NHS operating practices (Ickovics et al, 2019). Aligned with this, Welsh policymakers, over time, have developed the national approach and collaboration permeates the education system at all levels, from student teachers and initial teacher education, individual teachers via the Professional Teaching Standards (Welsh Government, 2019), whole cluster approaches to curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015), the National Professional Enquiry Project (Welsh Government, 2024) to inter-governmental level working (Kools and Stoll, 2017). Understandably, in a system that struggles for resilience due to a lack of capacity, both in terms of resources and consistent ability to achieve standards, collaboration is considered an expensive alternative to the widely available individual online learning and one-off development opportunities. However, supportive funding mechanisms, such as the collaboration grant, lead practitioner programmes and cluster funded working, incentivise this type of activity from schools facilitated by local authorities and regional consortia (Welsh Government, 2024).

Somewhat inevitably, with changes to embedded practices, there is some confusion in implementation while the system, regional, local authorities, schools and practitioners establish how this actually translates into practice. There are however also some questions around the coherence of key drivers for this. 'Collaboration', as one of the five strands of the professional leadership and teaching standards in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019), is set out as: seeking advice and support; working with in-school colleagues; supporting and developing others; and, enabling improvement creates a level of confusion about the purpose of collaboration as the first three elements describe inputs and the final element describes outputs, linking again to Harris et al's question about the driver or the output (2022). Significant variation is evident in terms of both the prevalence of collaborative professional learning and the format of collaboration between schools (Harris et al, 2017) as well as sizeable within school variation (Hopkins, 2003). Disappointingly some of this variation includes a misguided level of implementation in some schools whereby in 'doing collaboration' they are simply collaborating to achieve some collaboration within the school. Kools and Stoll (2018) found that generally schools in Wales were progressing well against the schools as learning organisation (SLO) model on two strands but that leaves more limited progress for the other five. The purpose of collaboration being directed to activity rather than impact is also reflected in the empirical research available in this area. Indeed, Philippa Cordingley (2015) states that the research in this area focuses on the narrative of collaboration rather than asking the question about what

the collaboration is designed to achieve and its actual achievements. This is possibly reflective of this being lacking within schools' implementation of collaboration and/or becoming a learning organisation but could also explain why schools in Wales have made limited progress in five of seven elements within the SLO model.

Currently, there is a volume of empirical findings that suggest that collaborative professional learning impacts positively on pupil outcomes and this is relatively uncontested. However, research outcomes that suggest any impact wider than the individual are limited and, to this point, there is no consensus or common level of agreement about what it impacts on outside student outcomes (Kools, 2016). While arguably student outcomes are the purpose of education (Harris and Jones, 2017) it could be also argued that it is a purpose, rather than the purpose and certainly the four purposes as set out in Successful Futures and the Curriculum for Wales would agree this (Welsh Government, 2019). Given the significant implications of the resource cost of the implementation of collaboration at whole school level, there is a need to generate a better empirical knowledge base about the impact of this resource allocation as it is acknowledged that the volume of the narrative about the impact of collaborative professional enquiry has outpaced the volume of available empirical evidence about effects and impact (Harris and Jones, 2022.

Posing the question whether this long-term approach to collaborative practice is yielding results at system level, it can be seen from the OECD report that the most recent round of PISA results for Wales are the most disappointing yet (2023). While declines could be seen in most countries, arguably demonstrating the impact of the pandemic on children's learning, Wales showed significant areas of decline, undoing the progress that had been made since it becoming a measure of a priority area in 2012 (Sibieta, 2024). However, whether that should be considered a measure of success is up for debate given that the qualifications and curriculum are not well aligned with PISA and it is therefore important that research affords other approaches to generate evidence to support the continued investments in driving collaborative professional enquiry across all levels of the education system in Wales.

The purpose of this research study therefore was to consider current research into collaborative professional enquiry in one school setting to determine whether it has an impact further than to the individual themselves. A qualitative approach was used for this research study as it sought to identify participants' views of collaborative professional enquiry within a school setting and did so using semi-structured interviews so that the researcher could develop an understanding of the participants' experiences and their thoughts and views (Bryman, 2016). The data analysed has been gathered from an all-through school situated in a rural area in South Wales (Kim et al, 2024). There is a need for rural schools like this to develop their own capacity and resources and particularly in Wales where the curriculum and qualifications are specific to them.

Context to the study

This study was based on the experiences and views of a small group of three educational practitioners who are in leadership positions. This study focused on the participants' considerations of the impact of whole school collaborative professional enquiry on culture, professionalism and the school. In order to consider the impact from a range of views, the three educational practitioners represented a middle leader, a senior leader and a system leader of mixed genders. They each had worked in the education system in excess of ten years and were aged between 30 and 60.

Methods

In line with its aim to generate deep insights and rich data to inform theory building into people, organisations and environments, the approach used in this study is qualitative in nature. Its underpinning philosophy is interpretivist, meaning that it attempts to generate an understanding of the concepts under exploration by understanding how participants interpret it (Bryman, 2016). In doing so, it tends towards an inductive viewpoint meaning that the theory is generated out of the research. In this study, this means that the outcomes of the analysis of participants' responses to questions will inform theory building.

Having selected a semi-structured interview, this research gives scope for flexibility dependent on the responses of the participants. In planning questions, for example, the research is exploring impact on the culture and ethos, the professionalism and improvement capacity however what participants may consider as their responses may present an opportunity for a greater level of exploration in places. The key factor is for the research to add new knowledge to the field where possible.

General purposive sampling was used in this study, with accessibility to participants and convenience being a key factor. The research question identified taking the perspectives of those occupying roles at different levels within a leadership hierarchy however it was important to ensure that all had experience of the same setting/context to allow for more likely identification of themes from a small sample of three participants. All three participants have worked within the education in excess of ten years yet occupy roles with different levels of leadership responsibility: faculty level, whole school level and system level.

It is important to note potential for bias, with the researcher being both an insider to both the context and the sector, while also having conducted prior research in this area as well as holding their own perspective (Bryman, 2016). Additionally, consideration has been given to

‘social situatedness’ which refers to social, cultural and contextual influence on perspectives and the interactions between the researcher, the situation and the context affecting decision making in research (Vygotsky, 1962). The researcher's position at the top level of the hierarchy within the organisation being studied must also be given to ensure transparency, relfexivity and that suitable mitigations are made to reduce and/or remove the risk of these bias. Part of participant selection being purposive therefore was to allow selection of people that would engage openly and honestly with the questions being asked, without concern or worry about the consequences of their responses. Within the participant briefing, both written and verbal, the researcher included a section giving reassurance that perspectives would be considered only as part of the research, that any engagement in the research would not impact any part of a personal or professional relationship or interactions of role. The researcher also made it clear to participants that the research question was being asked specifically to try to generate some answers; that those answers were not pre-determined and that the research process was one of genuine learning. There is, however, the clear benefit to being an insider researcher and knowing the context that makes the collection of data quicker and the interpretation of what is being said, in the context of the participant saying it and the environment of the organisation perhaps clearer (Ryan, 2015). In analysing the responses, the researcher consciously held their own view and therefore followed the process of narrative analysis; being led by the participant responses as an attempt to mitigate against bias within the interpretation. The question does remain whether a researcher external to education would interpret the findings in the same way?

Each interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes although each could have been significantly longer. Participants were briefed about the research, its intentions, the format and their entitlement to stop and/or withdraw at any point. The interview was semi-structured and utilised three planned questions (see figure 1) however participants were supported with prompts and probes where it was appropriate to do so in order to elicit a greater amount of information or clarification of points raised. The questions and the probes and prompts are recorded in figure 1 (see below). This was done to try and achieve a level of consistency across the interviews. The interviews took place face to face within a quiet setting in the known school context. Microsoft Teams was used to record the interviews and produce a transcript for all of the interviews however there was a need to supplement one of the recordings with an app to transcribe as this function failed in Teams.

Figure 1: List of questions and prompts

4. Has the culture of the school changed since the implementation of collaborative professional enquiry?
- Can you describe the outputs and outcomes of collaborative professional enquiry?

• How has the process of collaborative professional enquiry impacted the culture? What is different to before? What do you feel it gives us as a school? • How much of this would you attribute to collaborative professional enquiry itself?
2. Has collaborative professional enquiry impacted the development of individuals in terms of their professionalism? • How? • What has changed? • How are people different? • What has that impacted on?
3. Have you observed a change in improvement processes and improvement succeses in relation to collaborative professional enquiry? • Do you feel that ** has improved as a school since collaborative professional enquiry has been implemented? • What aspects have we improved and how?

Ethical approval for the research was gained from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. All participants were provided with participant information and asked to sign a participant agreement form. The purpose of the research, the format of the interviews and how the data would be processed, used and stored, as well as how they, as participants, would be afforded confidentiality throughout was explained in detail to all prior to them giving their consent to take part.

The data that was gained from the interview transcripts was 'cleansed' in the first instance. Questions and duplication were removed. The data was then analysed using a narrative analysis which involved reading through it and noting any general themes by participant, looking at the themes across participants and then organising the data into the themes that emerged from the data. There were some difficulties with overlapping themes and therefore a level of difficulty was experienced in determining where data to support each individual theme actually sat however consideration that the questions of culture, professionalism and school improvement could not themselves be considered discrete and/or not connected.

In one of the many definitions available in social research, Hammersley (1995) argues that we evaluate validity by assessing the researcher's claims on the adequacy of the evidence offered in support of them. Validity is therefore present when the evidence accurately represents the phenomena. The intention with this research is to identify themes that have a level of commonality across participants, therefore allowing sufficient evidence to support the validity

of the claim of a theme being identified. In terms of relevance, this refers to the contribution that potentially can be made to the literature in the field, including whether it responds or reacts in some way to the concerns of possible participants. With regard to this research, relevance is addressed given the significant resource implications to facilitate and enable collaboration to take place.

Data analysis – emerging themes

Impact on culture: 'Togetherness'

There is a body of empirical evidence to support changes in culture alongside systems of professional collaborative enquiry in schools. Participants in studies have talked about a 'workplace shift' (DeLuca et al, 2018) and more broadly about it being a change from previous 'norms' of practice (Cherkowski and Schnellert, 2017). Further evidence gives details of the subsequent impact of changes to culture. For example, Hargreaves (2019) found that bringing teachers into groups to work towards common goals offered significant benefits to pupils. Where cultural change and collaborative practice sit in a sequence of change is more difficult to determine from the available literature however the research question being addressed with participants in this research is whether the collaborative working practices have impacted on the culture. This question is definitive about the sequence of events in any change that has been perceived.

Participants in this study were very clear that they felt that the culture in the school had changed in response to the collaborative professional enquiry. In fact, in response to the question about how much of this they saw being attributable to the collaborative working the commonality of response was nearly all. This then leaves questions about what participants perceive has changed about the culture. Hargreaves (2019), in reviewing over thirty years of research in this area, puts forward that in order to 're-culture', collaboration needs to be embedded in professional learning and he draws a distinction between 'contrived collegiality', to enforce collaboration resulting in a reduction in this practice, and more innovative practice where collaboration and learning together had become a 'way of life' resulting in increases in collaboration. In one of the case study schools studied as one of the latter instances, (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006) problems were used for shared enquiry rather than rapid interventions, where outcomes for students were poor they were openly discussed with partners including parents so that they could all work together as a team, they became a team that supported each others' well-being, taking collective responsibility for staff and children. Reflecting these research findings, all participants in the current study were able to express how the school had gradually built up multiple formats of collaborative professional enquiry; each becoming embedded in practice over time through iterative cycles and persistent reinforcements. Normal organisational practices like line management, for example, had

changed in terms of its nature to being considered collaborative professional enquiry where support, challenge and development were all evident and commonplace. All monitoring activities had been re-branded to 'evaluation and learning' and the tone of sessions changed to focus on the learning rather than challenge and public accountability and the perception of the purpose of raising questions had changed into recognising the value of this practice:

> "...Five years ago, if someone said something 'bad' in in meeting it was taken as a criticism. Meetings used to be dominated by the person leading the meeting talking, telling. Now everyone talks at the meeting. They are framed by questions. All views are valid and there doesn't seem to be any level of hierarchy about who can challenge or who can raise something that isn't working well. I think this has really developed all staff and made them feel valued. I think it makes them feel like they are part of moving the school forward and that they really are a key part of everything that we do..." P3

> "... I think it means that we bring the best out of each other because we are all holding each other to account. .." P3

> "... over time, with the development of a shared language, a shared curriculum, a shared vision for children and their achievements a collaborative culture has emerged..." P1

All participants talked about every person, in every role in the school being valued. Changes around creating parity of entitlement for professional learning were detailed which included making sure that every member of staff had one hour per week paid professional learning time regardless of the role that they did within the school was talked about by participant two and extended to include that while the organisation of the professional learning meant working as part of different groups, that grouping the groups differently and also having whole staff sessions meant that staff other than teachers felt that they were invested in and also that their view mattered.

> "...from recognising that their voice is valued..." P2

> "...and from each other..." P2

> "... I think it is probably that bit that has had the most impact – the levelling of the contributions, that every voice is valid and that every person plays a role in the eventual pupil output, not just the teachers that last taught them. It takes a whole through school to educate a child...like the village phrase to raise them. .." P1

The changes to professional learning processes was attributed to enabling participants to feel this way; all participants clearly agreed that each and every voice was valuable and there was no challenge to this. However, from the participants, it was also clear that consistent 'messaging' throughout the school, reinforced again by a cycle of evaluation and learning, had

allowed this to become embedded as a consistently held view by feeding back the perceived impact on the whole school. This is a useful and important finding about participants' perceptions of how and why collaboration is changing the culture of a school and is supported by consistent statements around 'togetherness' as another emerging theme. That through each and every staff member being a key contributor to evaluation and learning processes, outputs and outcomes they had built one large team of staff that recognised fully that through each making their own contribution they would collectively impact significantly. This is in contrast to outcomes from research findings (for example, Arkhipenka, 2017; DeLuca et al, 2017) where participants have been unclear about both the purpose and impact of collaboration with the key difference here that leaders' discussions and feedback about the purpose, aims and intended outputs and outcomes are important to changing the culture.

The overall theme within this section links well with aspects of Ontario's 'collaborative professionalism' which is defined as all professionals working together to share knowledge, skills and experiences to improve student achievement. Collaborative professionalism values the voices of all and purports a shared responsibility for students (Campbell et al, 2016). Hargreaves and O'Connor however also bring the term of collaborative professionalism with an aligned but different definition Through decades of research in this area, they outline it as being a form of professional collaboration but one which has greater depth and rigour. They determine that professional learning can be effective or ineffective, weak or strong and have many formats however 'collaborative professionalism' carries a particular standard with it. They give 'ten tenets' of collaborative professionalism and have published how to move from professional collaboration to collaborative professionalism. Within the ten tenets are factors that include collective autonomy, collective responsibility and mutual dialogue but a further theme that came through from the interviews of the three participants that arguably needs to come prior to professional collaboration and/or collaborative professionalism is practitioners valuing professional learning itself. There are aspects of both definitions of collaborative professionalism evident in the findings of this research study.

Impact on professionalism: Understanding and valuing the purpose of collaborative professional enquiry

In setting out the professional standards for teaching in Wales, policymakers have defined a set of six 'qualities and dispositions' that are to be considered overarching all five of the elements that make up the standards that teachers have to meet, maintain and improve upon throughout their career. One of these is 'the professional learner'; "the teacher is a professional learner and commits to continuous engagement in career long development, collaboration and innovation" (Welsh Government, 2019: p8). A broad statement that is open to interpretation and elicits many more questions than it answers, not least the definition of the keywords within it. Within the empirical research relating to this as a theme linked to collaboration, there has

been more of a focus about what factors within qualities/characteristics/dispositions make for effective collaboration rather than what qualities/characteristics/dispositions collaboration develops. A question of sequencing the events in any change however this piece of research questions change as a result of collaborative professional enquiry and is clear about the order.

A culture of continuous learning within any organisation is likely to impact positively on individuals' development as well as produce a benefit from the collated impact of individual improvements. The goal therefore is to create an environment that both allows and enables this (Carpenter, 2017). From the participants' responses, it can be seen that following some years of various formats and approaches to collaborative professional enquiry being implemented that there is a willingness and openness towards continuous professional learning:

> "...staff are motivated to find solutions within their own practice..." P2
>
> "...staff are more open to trying new things..." P2
>
> "... A known sense that the solutions can be found, if not at first, over a period of time by trying different things. There has been a real development of a reflective, adaptive collective of staff that invest time in getting to know children as individual pupils and learners and know that what can be achieved collectively is greater than can be achieved by the individual..." P1

All participants discussed the way that existing calendar events, like department meetings and academic review sessions, had been changed to emphasise learning, that this had been done over time and that it helped them to understand that the learning was the most important factor because that would be the key 'thing' that would help the school to improve.

> "...The way that sessions are shaped now have nuanced differences – phrases like "what are the points of learning here" and "how will that impact on forward practice" are a norm and that is a point of difference. We are expected to know why we know what we know – with this there is an expectation that evidence is considered but there is an openness about what that evidence is. ...The focus is more on the quality of the output of the activity and the quality of the learning points and subsequent activity going forward. In a way, it has developed an excitement about learning because that is where the focus is..." P3
>
> "... staff are really clear that with high trust comes high accountability but, as scary as that phrase is in many schools, what it means here is that everyone will hold you to account. There is an expectation that standards will be good and better but that where they are not, there is an onus on drawing the learning points through and knowing why it hasn't worked, why it hasn't improved and being able to support that with how we

> know that. There is an expectation that the learning from this will be used to re-develop, create new iterations, to improve going forward and that is what we are accountable for doing. Perfection is not expected. I think this makes everyone responsible and knowingly responsible...” P3

The following suggest that challenge and critique had previously been considered a negative aspect of their professional experiences but was now accepted as a part of learning and how learning links with improving:

> “... knowing that challenge and critique is an important part of learning and improving together...” P1
>
> “...staff are more thoughtful and reflective of their practice...” P2
>
> "...staff now place more value on professional enquiry because they can see firsthand how this can increase expertise within themselves and the school...” P2

These extracts lend support to developing an understanding of the value of continuous learning but also that the actions taken to change and emphasise learning through daily operations within the school setting meant that they valued it within their role. Arkhipenka et al (2018) found that only half of practitioners in their small scale study of sixteen participants valued the process of asking and answering questions and reflecting on practice, however, the researchers detail that here the purpose of the collaboration was to impact on student attainment outcomes and nothing else. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, only two of the sixteen participants valued enquiry enough to see its contribution to whole school improvement. Participants in the current research study differed in that they all held a view that the purposes of collaboration were to improve as individuals, groups and as a whole organisation; that, at all times, they were contributing to whole school improvement priorities as well as their own professional learning. Linking back to the Welsh Government professional teaching standards, there is a delicate line to tread in assuming values and an uncomfortable stance in dictating dispositions but the findings from this research suggest that where practitioners see both value and purpose in activities, they are more likely to align themselves with the purposes of the activities.

Impact on school improvement capacity: Understanding of evaluation and valuing accountability

Accordingly to Mourshed et al (2010) schools that are moving from ‘good to great’ and from ‘great to excellent’ demonstrate increasingly accurate school-based decision making and a level of agility and flexibility in pursuit of accurate self-evaluation and improvement planning. In extending these principles, Hopkins (2003) puts forward that by developing ‘intelligent accountability’ principles, systems and processes an organisation exemplifies both greater accuracy in pinpointing individualised solutions and also develop the professional level of skill

that the staff have. The existence of impact measurement and/or evaluation is not common in professional collaborative enquiry (Harris) and where it is present, it tends to look to student outcomes (Kools, 2016). This is mirrored in the prevalence of poor quality evaluation within schools more generally. Estyn, the national inspectorate for Wales, persistently include a reflection on the prevalence of schools having been inspected having a recommendation around self-evaluation in their annual reports (Estyn, 2024). Indeed, schools typically have three different organisations within the middle tier that triangulate schools' self-evaluations to some degree: local authorities, regional consortia and the inspectorate. However, for the Welsh education system to become self-improving there is an agreement that schools need to be the leaders (Harris et al, 2017). That there is movement from what has previously been a prescriptive regime to one of professionalism (Hopkins) and Fullan, in his many publications on developing professional capital, states that the key for this is by building capacity and developing people. There are many reports that underline the importance of teachers' professional collaboration in creating better school and system performance (Hattie, 2015) and this reinforces the argument for using this as a mechanism for sustainable positive change (Harris and Jones, 2022)

The importance of an ongoing cycle of evaluation for improvement is emphasised in relevant literature. Carpenter (2017) details the systematic nature of this, the use of multiple sources, innovating, planning and 'doing' implementation, analysing the impact and taking the learning points forward to the next cycle; all of these 'parts' being an essential part of improving. Hargreaves summarises that "talk leads to action" indicating a change in culture, moving away from meetings where items were talked about and nothing was done. Changes in evaluation and a growing understanding both of what evaluation should be but also its purpose was evident with two of the three participants, with the third reflecting on her observations of others' within the school growing in their understanding of this.

> "... I used to evaluate by myself and largely this was based on what I thought, the data and what I thought the data was telling me. The data is still important because we are here to get results for the pupils however if there is a lack of other information no value is given to the data by itself. I didn't like having to get evidence from pupils' work and pupil voice and staff voice activity in the first instance but now I can't ever understand how I did my job as a leader without it. The data tells you very little on its own and I value being able to understand better what it is actually telling me. I used to think things like this child is still a 5 and still a 5 and now they've gone up a little bit but now I am able to say things like this child is still a 5 and that is because they can do this but are struggling with this because they have a learning gap over here and still do not understand this concept. The child lacks confidence in this area because they've kept trying it and trying it and trying it and they still haven't fully got it so they're a little

> scared of it. To resolve this, we are going to need to take another approach. There has also not been much in the way of feedback from the teacher at the point of learning here so that could be something that we change in order to bring about the change that the child needs to remove the fear and move forward in their learning. ..” P3

Participants detailed how, over time, they had developed an understanding of putting the pieces of learning together and drawing from a wide range of sources to make evaluations that are accurate and evidence based.

> “... It seems that the purpose of accountability has not changed but by changing the processes, the output has changed. People are actively seeking several sources of information, they are identifying their own questions about their areas of responsibility. They are seeking solutions and putting them in place. Monitoring them again, checking they are still working. Evaluation and learning, as they call it, is ongoing and cyclical rather than task and finish pieces of leadership work...” P1

> “...they’re able to evaluate their own professional practice. They able to analyse and critique their own practice...” P2

Andreas Schleicher (2018) noted that infrequently do teachers observe their professional standards like other professions do and there are large disparities between their working practices and those of other professions. Considering the development of a self-improving system, practitioners understanding what their roles are is critical to building capacity within schools and across the system. In the case of the participants in this study, they were able to describe that one of the purposes of the collaborative professional enquiry was to support them in knowing their roles, others’ roles and how all of those put together made for a functional school. The phrase “we are all a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of every child, every adult and every bit of the school” was used by participant one which affords again common messaging across the school.

> “...I feel they’ve developed a thorough understanding of their roles and that the contribution they make to pupil outcomes that this doesn’t just fall back on the teacher...” P2

> “involving all staff in evaluation and improvement planning means that they really understand what we are trying to do as a whole school. For the first time ever, I think that every member of staff would be able to talk to you about each of the school improvement priorities, give the rationale as to why they are the most important and urgent parts and also explain what we are doing as a whole school, what their role is in it as well as what others are doing...I think all of this helps everyone to be able to do their roles well as they understand how important they are to the whole school...” P3

> I think it makes them feel like they are part of moving the school forward and that they really are a key part of everything that we do..." P3

Conclusion

By asking questions about the impact of collaboration on culture, professionalism and improvement, this study adds some important findings to the available research in this area as it holds collaboration as an 'input' rather than just being a present factor. Notwithstanding that collaboration cannot be considered a sole input, the methodology of the study in placing value on the participants' perceptions has allowed identification of collaboration leading to changes in:

- **Culture** with all practitioners being and feeling valued as equals in the pursuit of enquiry, commonality of messaging and feedback to practitioners about the purpose, aims and outcomes leading to collaborative professional learning as an agreed and valued approach.
- **Professionalism** through the recognition of and value placed on continuous learning from collaboration and the value of their contributions to support, challenge and development as a core part of this.
- **Improvement capacity** through using collaborative professional enquiry as a mechanism to strengthen practitioners' understanding of, as well as the perceived value of, purpose and usefulness of evaluation and learning activities to support whole school improvements.

While these findings sit alongside other research in this area, they do offer a context specific understanding of what individual practitioners view as being the changes brought about by collaboration which is a different offering to other research in this area. The very small sample size within one context does mean that there is limited generalisablity and using one person from each of three layers may have diluted some of the strength in the evidence so there is a question about whether further research into specific roles may add greater knowledge. In pursuing perspectives from different levels within the school and education system hierarchy has given greater breadth but less depth in terms of drawing themes through with supporting evidence. There are, however, some relevant and interesting learning points that also help to identify further gaps in the available research in this area. One such question is whether including a focus on participants identifying the purpose and aims of the collaborative professional enquiry within a context would support better identification of themes when considering the impact.

In considering literature in this area, there is a possible question for future research around whether a framework could or should be used to support the evaluation? Whether this would

be the school as a learning organisation model, the professional teaching standards, the ten tenets of collaborative professionalism or indeed a different model.

It is important as a researcher to demonstrate reflexivity and there are often biases present in research. All research is subject to critique and highlighting biases doesn't necessarily serve to eradicate them but to acknowledge them allows for reflection through a lens which perhaps adds more depth. The inevitable criticisms that sit with biases can be balanced by the value that research can add to the profession or sector from someone who has a vested interest in generating purposeful points of learning and informing possible future actions and the research has identified some important questions for research to progress. If one considers the resource implication of collaborative enquiry, as one factor, we are looking at quite significant financial cost of professional people's time but also the allocation of that time resource in a busy calendar of competing priorities in a country that has a significant transformational educational agenda. Any activity of this cost must be justified and so, if we are not aware of its value, then surely its value will be questioned? This justifies the research in this area.

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