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Concerning collaboration; teachers' perspectives on working in partnerships to develop teaching practices

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Abstract

Teachers are often encouraged to work in partnerships to support their professional development. In this article we focus on three forms of working partnerships based in English secondary schools. Each has an intended function of developing teaching practices. The cases of mentoring, coaching and an adapted lesson study come from both Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development, but have common practices of one-to-one meetings, planned activity and shared reflection. The participants' perspectives on these practices were investigated through a multiple case study using semi-structured interviews. We established the degree to which their experiences could be considered to be collaborative, basing our analysis on the extent to which there was evidence of working 'together', not just working 'with'; and working towards a common goal, pooling knowledge and problem-solving. We conclude that collaboration for the development of their own teaching practices allows teachers to engage in more informed decision making and to construct a shared understanding of the nature of the desired learning outcomes and how they might be achieved in their own contexts. The teachers indicate that this experience often runs counter to their experience of the school cultures driven by performativity.

Keywords: collaboration, practice development, parity, performativity, coaching

Introduction

Teachers are expected to make changes to their teaching practices at all stages of their career development. Support, training and learning activities are designed to facilitate this, both prior to starting their careers (through Initial Teacher Education - ITE) and once in post (through Continuing Professional Development - CPD). In some cases these are designed to be collaborative, and include one-to-one working partnerships between two teachers. The organisation of one-to-one professional development in schools varies enormously, as do institutional and individual decisions about participation and roles. Our research focuses on three categories of one-to-one working practices which occurred in secondary schools in northern England during 2013-14. The categories can be summarised as follows; 1) teachers in peer-coaching partnerships, 2) student teachers working with mentors, and 3) student teachers working in pairs using an adapted form of lesson study. Our examples, from both ITE and CPD, have overlapping procedures of one-to-one meetings, planned activity and

shared reflection. The sample is not intended to be fully representative of one-to-one approaches, nor is it selected for the purposes of making direct comparisons but the cases of practice can be considered in relation to our research question: *Do one-to-one professional development processes, based in the workplace and focused on practice, allow teachers and student teachers to experience professional collaboration, and what variables seem to affect the experience?*

The context of the research

This research relates to participants' experiences as teachers or student teachers of working in partnerships based on mentoring, peer coaching or lesson study during 2014. Kennedy (2014) grouped coaching and mentoring together as 'malleable' models in her re-conceptualisation of a framework for CPD, suggesting that they are approaches which can be used responsively and contingently for different purposes. In earlier work Lofthouse and Leat (2013) defined peer coaching as 'forms of coaching which are not heavily invested with power [...] peer coaches engage equally and reciprocally' (p.9), suggesting a sense of parity and collaboration. In contrast, mentoring is traditionally viewed as a relationship through which an 'experienced, intellectually and socially valued employee' (Heikkinen et al., 2012, p.13) provides professional guidance to a less experienced colleague. Mentoring as a broad concept is changing, and is increasingly being 'associated with collaboration, collegiality and interaction' (ibid. p.13). This might explain the proposition that mentors gain reciprocal benefits in their role; it also justifies the inclusion of this non-peer relationship in this research study. Lesson study is 'a highly specified form of classroom action research focusing on the development of teacher practice knowledge' (Dudley, p1.). It is included in this research because 'it involves an element of collaborative enquiry or experiment between teachers who are trying to solve a problem or improve an approach' (ibid. p.3). 'Research Lesson Study' in its traditional form occurs over extended periods of time, but there is a precedent for shorter versions, and Cajkler et al. (2014) found evidence that the resulting teacher collaboration led to greater risk-taking in designing learning activities.

This paper forms part of a sequence of research activity in which we have explored the nature of teacher coaching in secondary schools (Lofthouse et al, 2010) and reported potential vulnerability of the practices of mentoring of student teachers (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2014).

An emerging theme (as exemplified by Lofthouse and Leat, 2013) has been the impact on the nature of professional learning and development practices in schools of the intensifying culture of performativity which Ball (2013) defines as '*a regime of accountability that employs judgements, comparisons, and displays as a means of control, attrition and change*' (p.57). Our research has also focused on specific details of coaching and mentoring practices, including the shifts achieved through adopting new observation tools (Lofthouse and Wright, 2012) and the professional learning resulting from teachers analysing their own practices using coaching dimensions (Lofthouse and Hall, 2104).

Literature Review

The interest in teachers using coaching and mentoring to develop classroom practices in England was substantially stimulated by the drive to establish new professional development approaches to meet the school improvement agenda - a political priority of UK governments from 1997 onwards. In 2002 Rhodes & Beneicke considered the potential role that coaching, mentoring and peer networks might have in enhancing professional development as a means to embed the changes in classrooms associated with the national strategies which were introduced in England around that period. They concluded that where the professional development culture of a school was already based on teacher collaboration coaching, mentoring and peer networks ought not to present difficulties to staff. However they also recognised (citing Harris, 2001) that in many schools collaboration was not prevalent. In the following decade the national strategies took a strong hold in school CPD and coaching and networks became part of the lexicon. In 2005 CUREE produced a National Framework for Coaching and Mentoring, creating definitions and indicating the overlaps and distinctions between different practices. In the present decade the national strategies have been removed from government-driven policy frameworks and so too has some of the related explicit encouragement for schools to create mechanisms through which teachers can work collaboratively.

Coaching, mentoring and lesson study practices straddle Eraut's (2007) typology of learning from others in the workplace. He offers a framework which includes *work processes* with learning as a by-product; *learning activities* located within work or learning processes; and *learning processes* at or near the workplace, to explain ways in which early career professionals learn. For example one-to-one learning processes intersect with *work processes* by design in that they frequently rely on the participants observing each other at work, trying

things out and consolidating, extending and refining skills. Helpful routines within *learning activities* include asking questions and giving and receiving feedback. Eraut (ibid.) also outlines learning and context factors influencing learning in the workplace; exploring the relationships between the challenge and value of the work and the feedback and support offered in affecting the commitment and motivation of the ‘learner’, concluding that the organisation of work, and the working relationships influence learner participation and their expectations of progress. It is likely that these dimensions play a role in altering the experiences of one-to-one professional development.

While the foci of this research are the experiences of teachers working in pairs to develop their own practice, we are interested in the extent to which these partnerships take on the characteristics of successful collaborations between larger groups of professionals. Bolam et al. (2005), Vescio et al. (2008) and Watson (2014) provide evidence of the characteristics of effective teachers’ professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs experience success through supporting collaborative inquiry (Zech et al., 2000, Timperley et al., 2007) and enabling individual participation in critically reflective communities (McArdle and Coutts, 2010). Collaboration goes beyond working ‘with’ another person and in school settings can be defined as ‘teachers work[ing] together to develop reciprocal professional learning’ (Burley and Pomphrey, 2011, p.48). Meirick et al. (2007) found that teachers’ collaboration in a reform context led to familiarisation with other teachers’ teaching methods, and exchange of ideas, resulting in changes in teachers’ cognition, but less self-reported change in their behaviours. Collaboration for professional learning has both individual and social dimensions, and can create conditions supporting engagement, action, reflection and sense-making which McArdle and Coutts (ibid.) do deem to be productive.

Building on Eraut’s (2007) work our attention is on experiences of professional learning which occur in the workplace and are based on learning from or with others. As there is a common focus on developing teaching practices we thus recognise them as forms of practice-based learning. The models of partnership are themselves definable forms of practice. A theory of practice architectures is offered by Kemmis et al., (2012), who view practice as socio-cultural, rooted in, and bounded by, traditions of the context and articulated by the participants. They propose that practice is composed of three dimensions *social space*, termed ‘relatings’, *physical / temporal space* ‘termed doings’, and *semantic space*, termed ‘sayings’. Billett (2011) proposes three dimensions of practice-based learning stating that

learning experiences are organised into a *practice curriculum*, *practice pedagogies* and *personal epistemologies*. Thus teachers' practice-based learning might include planned episodes of one-to-one learning, based on questioning, reflection or joint activity, and influenced by the means by which the individuals approach the experiences of partnership. Meirink et al. (2009) recognise that these practices are unlikely to be isolated, but will typically form part of a sequence of learning activities (perhaps organised as a practice curriculum). Meirink et al. (ibid.) also confirm the role of deliberate action in teacher learning, such as experimentation with alternative teaching approaches; reinforcing the importance of practising the targeted practice as an aspect of professional learning.

Methodology

The ontological roots of this work are framed by the academic role of one of the co-authors who designs, manages, teaches and assesses both initial teacher education programmes and part-time Masters provision for teachers and school leaders (including programmes related to coaching and mentoring). In addition the same co-author has developed a number of non-award bearing professional development initiatives based on peer-coaching with both primary and secondary schools. In this respect the co-author has a recent or current working relationship with each of the cases. This positionality within the research is critical (see Table 1 for details). It provided access to the sample of research participants and led to research which was rooted in prior knowledge of the contexts. There is a keen motivation on the part of that co-author to improve academic and CPD practices by reflecting on how teachers learn, and how they can be supported to learn. This research is a deliberate attempt to inform that reflection and consequent course design through engaging with a contemporary practice-related evidence. As such, the epistemology of this research rests on the belief that the relevant knowledge-base can be extended as a result of establishing questions that emerge from practice, which reflect the co-authors' values and which can be pursued through systematic enquiry.

A multiple case study approach was selected in order 'to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth' where 'the contextual conditions' are important (Yin, 2009, p.18). The ten cases included in this paper are of teachers and student teachers working together for practice development, and are characterised by similar underpinning processes; one-to-one meetings, planned activity and shared reflection. The cases of partnership fall into three categories and are outlined in Table 1. Within each category three or four cases were selected, between them

representing practice in eight schools. The models of professional development all have a common (if sometimes weak) sense of ‘plan, do and review’ with practice changes intended to have an impact on teaching and learning. A purposive sample was selected based on our knowledge (direct or via school co-ordinators) of partnerships where participants had reported positive working relationships.

Category	Cases & Pseudonyms	Context (all secondary schools)	Participants	Outline of practice	Positionality of co-author to cases
Teachers in peer-coaching partnerships, schools A & B	1A: Malcolm & Angus 1B: Amanda & Steven	School A: Peer-coaching (referred to as Sharing-Good Practice) is conducted by every teacher. This has been established for four years, as part of directed CPD time.	Each partnership involves two teachers working across subjects.	The senior leaders select a focus area for teachers to discuss according to school improvement planning, and time is allocated to designated partners for discussions designed to share practice, with two SGP episodes each year.	Co-author supported the development of the school's SGP programme four years prior to the research. This included working with a group of lead practitioners, none of whom were interviewed as part of the case.
	1C: Emily & Simon 1D: Paul & Gina	School B: Peer-coaching is in its first year, with a coaching development programme running through the year. Coaches and coachees are volunteers.	Each partnership involves two teachers working across subjects.	The coachee volunteers to be coached and identifies an aspect of practice; coaching cycles consists of pre-lesson coaching, lesson observation with video-recording, post lesson coaching supported by video as tool.	Co-author supported the development of the school's peer-coaching programme during the academic year in which the research was conducted. This included working with the coaches (2 of whom were interviewed in this case) to develop working practices. The development programme was ongoing at the point of the research.
Student teachers working with experienced teachers for mentoring (3 different schools)	2A: Philip & Gill 2B: Amy & Carol 2C: Patricia & Colin	Student teachers following a one year post-graduate course, with two-thirds of the course in school placements where they are mentored.	Mentor and student teacher are teaching the same subject; students take a proportion of their mentor's and other colleagues' timetables. All cases are based in Science departments.	One-to-one, face-to-face mentoring undertaken in the context of the placement schools. The mentoring role includes induction, supervision of teaching, feedback and support for progression, training in key teaching practices, and assessment of achievement against the standards required for qualified teacher status.	Co-author has previously taken responsibility for the teacher education programme. In the year of the research the co-author was acting solely as a tutor to other student teachers.
Student teachers working in pairs and a triad to develop their pedagogic repertoire (3 different schools)	3A: Emma & Louise 3B: Lewis & Stuart 3C: Bill, Peter & Bobby	Student teachers following a one year post-graduate course, with two-thirds of the course in school placements. The case study practice forms the basis of an assessed compulsory module.	Student teachers are all at same stage of course. Students in each of cases 3A and 3C teach different subjects to each other, and students in case 3B teach the same subject as each other.	Students required to use an adapted version of research lesson study (RLS) to focus on the development of strategies for Teaching Thinking within their subjects. RLS involves successive cycles of co-planning, co-observation (with focus on pupil learning) and co-review.	Co-author had co-designed and co-taught the module within which the student teachers were undertaking lesson study.

Table 1. Outlines of the cases of practice

As a means by which to distinguish the cases within our three categories we have adopted the concept of ‘parity’ (Heikkinen et al. 2012.) Heikkinen et al. (2012) describe parity as existing at existential level (as people), at epistemic level (according to equality in competence and knowledge) and at juridical level (related to roles and responsibilities).

1. The peer-coaching in category 1 exhibited a range of characteristics in the two schools sampled but in both cases it was designed to provide time for teachers to talk together about their teaching practices. The participants were teachers in the same school, but they did not necessarily teach the same subjects or have equivalent levels of experience or the same professional skill attributes or knowledge. Indeed they sometimes worked at different levels of the school hierarchy.
2. The mentoring in category 2 occurred between an experienced teacher and a student teacher during teaching placement, where the mentor and student teacher were teaching the same subject in the same school and where the student was teaching some of the mentor’s classes.
3. The category 3 cases represent student teachers who were using a version of lesson study as a mechanism for working together (see table 1 for details). In terms of parity, while all the participants were student teachers, they did not necessarily teach the same subjects or hold the same standard of entry qualifications. They were not necessarily equivalent in age or in the degree to which they had pre-course relevant experience and they had each gained alternative opportunities for prior learning.

Our key methodological objective was to draw on the participants’ perspectives to articulate the conditions for, experiences of, and constraints on collaboration in the context of working in partnerships for practice development. We applied an interpretive paradigm and considered each case of professional practice as ‘a lived experience for those involved in educational processes and institutions’ (Kemmis, 1993, p.188). We employed practical reasoning, and aimed to ‘transform the consciousness of practitioners and by doing so, to give them grounds upon which to reform their own practices’ (ibid. p.188). While Hammersley (2012) critiques the role of case studies in developing theory through both empirical generalisation, and theoretical inference, Thomas (2010) refers to case studies as the sources of ‘exemplary knowledge’. Like Thomas we do not claim that our examples are

representative, but consider that they can be '*viewed* and *heard* in the context of another's experience (another's horizon) and used in the context of one's own (where the horizon changes)' i.e. they are 'interpretable only in the context of one's own phronesis' (Thomas, 2010, p.31). Thomas defines phronesis as 'the ability to see the right thing to do in the circumstances' (ibid., p.23). Given the limited nature of the case studies our principle aim is not to generalise or theorise; but instead to learn from their features.

Method

Paired semi-structured interviews were undertaken within each case, helping us to focus the interviewees' attention on the concept of working together, and allowing us to consider not just the content of the replies but characteristics of dialogue which might indicate an ethos of collaboration. We were aware of the potential practical and ethical constraints of paired interviews, and were conscious that it might affect the nature of individuals' contributions. The research was not intended to highlight issues that arose when relationships were problematic and thus only individuals who were deemed to have a good working relationship were included in the purposive sample, and two potential interviewees declined. The main focus of the interview schedule (which is outlined in Figure 1) was the phenomenon of collaboration within the partnerships. Interview questions also allowed us to gather information about the case contexts, and this was augmented by one co-authors' working knowledge of each situation. While the sample had been recruited by the co-author with working knowledge of the practices the interviews themselves were conducted by the co-author who was not closely associated with the individuals or contexts. The interviews were scheduled within one month of each of the experiences of professional partnership.

Question 1: In terms of teaching development what was your focus, why were you working together? Who had set the agenda for your work?

(Category 2 cases please focus on a phase of mentoring when you were prioritising a specific area of teaching development e.g. teacher questioning, rather than mentoring as a whole. Please take a moment to agree what this is.)

Question 2: In practical terms how were the aspects of meeting together, planning, teaching, lesson observation and reflection organised?

Question 3: Think about your experience of working together that you have just outlined. To what extent do you think this could be defined as collaboration? It might be helpful to think about it in terms of the following definition:

Collaboration is an action noun, describing the act of working with one or more other people on a joint project. It can be conceptualised as 'united labour' and might result in something which has been created or enabled by the participants' combined effort.

Question 4: Can you identify how your collaboration impacted on you as teachers and on your pupils?

Question 5: Have you learned any lessons about the nature of collaboration and will this inform your future practice?

Figure 1. The semi-structured paired interview schedule

The interview schedule was piloted with student teachers (with experience of both mentoring and lesson study), who were asked to give advice on the suitability of the phrasing. Minor adjustments were made prior to conducting the interviews. The core questions were taken as starter questions, the researchers having discussed potential prompts to support the interviewees in extending their answers by exploring their views, and reviewing and reflecting on their experiences (Newby, 2010). A key feature of the semi-structured interview was the provision of a definition of collaboration despite the risk of this 'leading' the conversation. The rationale for this was the experience of the researchers who recognised that the terms collaboration and co-operation are often used interchangeably. It was hoped that its inclusion would promote more focused responses during the interviews. The mentoring interviews (category 2) had an additional instruction to direct participants' attention towards an episode when they considered themselves to deliberately focusing on the development of a definable practice (rather than the entire experience of mentoring).

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and the transcripts were read by the researchers (co-authors) and meaningful units were identified. These units were then

analysed in three stages, which were not predetermined but which emerged iteratively as the transcripts were read and re-read.

Stage 1. Relevant meaningful units were coded as descriptions of collaborative learning which indicated either *collaboration as co-construction* or *collaboration as co-operation*.

Stage 2. Further sub-categories were created which enabled additional coding of the units, for example *collaboration as co-construction: challenging practice*. At this stage it was evident that the category 1 peer-coaching cases from school B stood out in the ways in which the participants reported and were perceived (by both the interviewees and the authors) to demonstrate a significant sense of collaboration.

Stage 3. The category 1 peer-coaching school B interview transcripts which had emerged in stage 2 as having greatest evidence of collaboration were used to establish key themes which added another layer of coding of all of meaningful units (stage three). For example, although our cases did not include scrutiny of the actual dialogue of the professional development episodes we were interested in the extent to which the participants self-report characteristics of their engagement could have co-constructive dimensions. In this third and final stage the transcripts were re-examined in order to identify the variables which appeared to impact on the degree and type of collaboration experienced by the participants in each setting.

Findings

In order to answer the research question *Do one-to-one professional development processes, based in the workplace and focused on practice, allow teachers and student teachers to experience professional collaboration, and what variables seem to affect the experience?*, it is essential that space is given to the participants' voices through direct quotations. These have been reported verbatim to maintain the authenticity of the teachers' voices, and are organised around the key themes emerging from interviewees who had engaged in peer-coaching in School B. The themes relate to the dynamics and outcomes of the experiences of working together to develop practice in environments which were deemed 'safe'. There is also a consideration of the significance of aspects of professional decision-making as the basis for the partnership, for example through voluntary participation or focus areas for joint working. The analysis of the participants' responses indicates both commonality and differences in the experiences of working in the partnerships, but suggests that these are not

only accounted for by the essential character of three different categories; in that a range of variables seems to exist.

Collaboration as shared labour for a common purpose

As indicated above the participants from school B (cases 1C and 1D) seemed to have experienced the strongest collaboration. Here peer-coaching was in its infancy and voluntary. Coaching was also the focus for a year-long professional development programme (led by one co-author) to support the coaches to take on their new role. Although these cases involved teachers from different departments who had no previous experience of working together the interviewees made frequent use of ‘we’ and ‘our’; they often finished each other’s sentences and their responses to the interviewer’s question often triggered questions to each other to support each other’s recall or clarification;

Emily: the first one...what did we do? We’ve done two kind of cycles I suppose haven’t we? The first one was pupil engagement

Simon: yes trying to just think of different ways to actually approach the subject that I might not have thought of before

Emily: yeah we looked at engagement and we’ve looked at differentiation and challenge haven’t we?

Case 1C (Emily coaching Simon)

Gina: but I just felt more like.. I wasn’t nervous and I felt more like you were just seeing if the plan worked,

Paul: yeah, OUR plan

Gina: our plan, yeah

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

In both cases the individuals showed a strong personal motivation to engage in and learn from the experience and seemed to appreciate the rigour and challenge of the peer-coaching:

Paul: I agree completely. I think it did have rigour. I think we did keep the rigour in there. I mean if we were best mates here, we could have got together, I’ll coach Gina cos she’s a good mate, and this will be easy, we’ll have an easy time put our feet up,... but I think we were quite rigorous, we were completely engaged,

Gina: yeah

Paul: and we talked about, you know, what would you expect to see?... I think we had quite a bit of professionalism going on and that had to be upheld, otherwise I think it could break down a little bit

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

There was a sense that both parties had learned through the experience as a result of combined effort; reinforcing the perception of collaboration and togetherness. This occurred despite the fact that in these cases the roles of coach and coachee were defined (unlike in school A, cases 1A and 1B). Although they taught different subjects the coaches and coachees worked together to plan the lessons, creating a sense of joint endeavour and co-ownership;

Gina: I just mean, by your ideas and my ideas, and sharing them, combining them and refining them is what made that lesson happen. If I'd sat down to do that lesson on my own, I don't think it would have been the same

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

Simon: I like the word symbiotic, it's basically not all one way, it's not top down it's not 'do this' 'go away do that- this is a critiqueyou bounce off each other I think, it's more a two-way

Case 1C (Emily coaching Simon)

In addition to this sense of united labour at the planning stage there was evidence that they shared an interest in the lesson outcomes;

Paul: cos one of them [pupils] said 'why are you filming it?' and I said, well I haven't got eyes in the back of my head, we want to review this... and they, WE, you used that word in the film, you can see it, and I thought they now know we are collaborating, that's interesting...

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

The findings from the other categories demonstrated that some other participants recognised combined effort for a common purpose, in particular a focus on students (pupils) and their learning;

Emma: Yeah it wasn't my lesson it was our lesson and having feedback was easier because it was our lesson and we were critiquing the LESSON not the teacher.

Case 3A (Lesson study, Emma and Louise)

Bill: I think we were more focussing on the students and the approaches as opposed to the teachers which is nice cos a lot of the time the teacher [observer] is 'well what were YOU

doing' and how were you assessing' and such and such as opposed to why did this technique work, why were the kids responding the way they were, so there was a different perspective almost

Case 3C (Lesson study, Bill, Peter and Bobby)

Emma: We formulated some of the ideas very tentatively, then I found the topic so I planned the more content based side of the research study but then we worked collaboratively on the thinking skills

Louise: Cos it was quite good because Emma planned what she wanted to do in general but to get the actual task we discussed exactly what would be the best way to do it so even though I didn't have the content knowledge I could help plan

Emma: Which was great because I had an idea which I sort of posed and then Louise's idea was like far superior to my own so we used that.

Case 3A (Lesson study, Emma and Louise)

Colin: We decided on what the theme was going to be and then on what lessons it was going to be so to make sure it was a cohesive scheme of work we planned to deliver it.

Case 2C (Patricia mentoring Colin)

Cases 1A and 1B were notable for not substantially articulating this sense of joint enterprise. In neither of these was there a requirement to *work on* developing teaching practice, merely an expectation to 'share good practice'. This did not preclude planning lessons together, or observing each other, but this was not an expectation, more a matter of choice and logistics;

Angus: we met and shared what we do and how we go about things and what works and what could be improved really

Case 1A (Malcolm and Angus, Sharing Good Practice)

Creating a safe forum for professional challenge and the significance of parity

Underpinning the sense of shared work towards a common goal was the experience of working as peers, which participants regarded as productive. Intertwined with this were the relationships that already existed or developed through the experience:

Amanda: It's more of a joint thing isn't it? It's not as if Steven has said I'm gonna help you do this it's more of a sitting down and saying oh I like the idea of that, how do you do that? It's more on the same level sort of thing rather than any other mentoring relationship

Case 1B (Amanda and Steven, Sharing Good Practice)

Stuart: Because we both know each other as trainee teachers, we both know our experiences as well whereas if you were doing this with someone who's more experienced you might kinda be thinking right if they say something I've got to kinda agree cos they've...you've got 20 years' experience and if I disagree with you am I the one that's going to be wrong whereas we both know we're inexperienced [...]

Case study 3B (Lesson study, Lewis and Stuart)

Angus: We're not coaches, we're just colleagues, I suppose we have a similar method in our departments but areas where we could probably learn from each other

Case 1A (Malcolm and Angus, Sharing Good Practice)

Emma: and it's peer feedback rather than mentor feedback ...it's teamwork

Case study 3A (Lesson study, Emma and Louise)

As would be expected this experience of parity was less frequent in the mentoring cases;

Colin: It was following the expertise of the tutor, so I was being instructed because I'm obviously taking over a class, I'm not solely responsible for that class.

Case 2C (Patricia mentoring Colin)

While there may not be epistemic or juridical parity, there were other ways in which a specific existential parity was established which supported the partnership, for example perceived similar personalities, a sense of shared habits or similar ages;

Colin: just the whole idea of working with someone who has the same mentality; the same organisation

Case 2C (Patricia mentoring Colin)

Carol: as soon as you see somebody teach you know that side to them, how they would plan and you're a bit like me, you're quite eclectic in the things, all the things you do, you pull together quite different activities

[...]

Carol: [Being close in age does make a difference] just because I'm still new in my career and I have still literally just moved out of home so I'm at the beginning of my adult life if that makes sense? So we both help each other and so we're more able to go right you do this, you do this and get on with it

Case 2C (Carol mentoring Amy)

A strong feature of the perceptions of participants in peer-coaching in school B was the lack of evaluative judgement provided by the coach to the coachee. In this school the coaching

training had established an ethic that the process should be disassociated from the grading and feedback that were part of the normal lesson observation experiences of teachers. The aim was to keep the discussion about the quality of teaching as neutral (not passive) as possible, using questions and co-enquiry to consider the nature and elements of teaching practice. This supported the sense of collaboration; this was not something ‘done to’ the coachees by the coaches, and thus it was a process they engaged in without fear of failure:

Emily: I think that becomes a little bit of a fear factor almost isn't it when you're constantly getting observed and it's got an end result of a grade and your pigeon-holed into that grade a little bit whereas with this it's nothing like that, it's

Simon: no

Emily: it's just skills, really open-ended

Case 1C (Emily coaching Simon)

Gina: It did feel completely different, because I didn't feel like, I don't know sometimes, I think that when you are being observed you feel like you are out on your own, out on a limb...

Gina: I didn't feel like you were watching me, I felt like you were watching the tools, yeah watching the activity unfold

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

The peer-coaching encouraged risk-taking in terms of planning and teaching lessons. This was critical in terms of potential outcomes because it led to the genuine development of practice rather than the adoption of safe routines;

Gina: It did feel completely different to normal observations in that I felt like it was all right to try something new, cos that was the whole point of it and it felt like it was all right for it not to work completely because I was trying something new. Whereas if you're being observed under the professional development cycle you play safe, you play to the Ofsted [inspection] standards.

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

Beyond school B itself there was further evidence of the professional dialogue offering a safe forum in which practice could be developed through professional challenge. This was found in all categories, and sometimes led the participants to feel they could make choices about their practice, or have their ideas questioned by their partner. There was the commonly stated sentiment that these episodes of professional partnership served an alternative purpose from, and felt tangibly different to, the standard experiences of being observed as part of

performance management or the monitoring and assessment process associated with initial teacher education. The teachers and student teachers felt this keenly; indicating how quickly the new entrants to the profession gain a sense of the performance-based culture. Keeping judgements out of the equation provided the safe space, but did not result in a sheltering from the challenge of developing practice;

Stuart: when you're teaching a lesson that you're getting observed in [by your mentor] you kinda want to make sure - you know what they're gonna be looking for [...] whereas when it's two friends doing it you're like 'in general did that lesson work'?

Case study 3B (Lesson study, Lewis and Stuart)

Simon: no we never talk about grades it's just talking about trying to get more...just trying to approach it in a slightly different way.

Case 1C (Emily coaching Simon)

Lewis: I think a key difference would be is how honest would you be with yourself? We were very honest with each other

Case study 3B (Lesson study, Lewis and Stuart)

Gina: it did [feel] completely different to normal observations in that I felt like it was alright to try something new, cos that was the whole point of it and felt like it was alright for it not to work completely because I was trying something new. Whereas if you're being observed under the professional development cycle you play safe, you play to the Ofsted [inspection] standards.

Case study 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

One further example demonstrates a different element of the safe space; that of the lesson itself. For the participants in Case 1D the coachee found herself in conversation with the coach during the lesson. This type of relational interaction is rare during most teachers' experiences of lesson observation in England;

Gina: yeah I did feel like I could talk to you during the lesson and just point out a few things that were going on that you might not have been able to see from where you were sitting

Paul: yeah [...] I felt like the cycle was encouraging that, this three part thing where you are working together, I felt like that was a good part of it really

Case study 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

While for all participants there was a prescient concern of meetings standards (e.g. a requirement of student teachers) or the quality of their teaching overall (as illustrated by teachers concerns about whether they were ‘satisfactory’, ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’), we are interested in the extent to which these partnerships encouraged participants to focus on the details of teaching and learning and enabled and motivated them to work on those specific dimensions of practice;

Paul: Yeah cos you really want [lesson activities] to work. You said you weren’t nervous before. I was a bit nervous, I think you were a bit nervous a bit..

Gina: I wanted it to work.

Paul: you had energy [...]

Gina: I feel now like, that I can identify issues that I might have with a class, and actually make a positive... take positive steps to kind of overcome those issues because it’s worked once, so why shouldn’t it work again?

Case 1D (Paul coaching Gina)

One aspect of this seems to be the opportunity for a new perspective and generating fresh practical ideas. The chance to work with colleagues from other subjects in particular triggered this;

Simon: I wanted somebody who was out of the department who didn’t know about the maths basically cos that’s not..I don’t feel I need help with the maths cos I know the maths, it was more just the teaching style, I just need a shake up try something different

[...]

Simon: I just like to learn. I know if you’re left to your own devices you’ll slip into habits that you don’t realise you’re doing, sometimes it’s nice just to get a fresh pair of eyes to say ‘do you know you always do that? Have you ever tried doing it this way?’

Case 1C (Emily coaching Simon)

Gill: I enjoyed working together cos obviously from a different subject different ways of teaching different strategies.

Gill (Case 2A) reflecting on her experience of lesson study

Distinguishing co-operation and collaboration

Collaboration implies working cognitively on a challenge together, piecing together ideas or creating something through joint deliberation. Running alongside, and sometimes perhaps

instead of, collaboration, is co-operation. The potential co-existence explains why in our original data analysis we used the idea of collaboration as co-operation. We considered co-operation as task management processes which included agreeing how to complete tasks, identifying who will complete tasks, and fulfilling one's side of the bargain. Sometimes co-operation was necessary due to the need to manage logistics;

Carol: it was difficult to find a time when we were both available so we went well you do this and I'll do this and we'll put it together and so when it was put together we were able to have a look at it and say yeah that fits

Interviewer: so is it quite a hard thing time-wise...

Case 2C (Carol mentoring Amy)

Malcolm: we have a cycle, meet, decide what we want to look at, why, what's worth... bring some work, meet again, maybe try something, a suggestion that has been made and we'll go away and maybe tweak this here, improve this, go away and give it a go, then come back and feed back to each other how we think it's gone

Case 1A (Malcolm and Angus, Sharing Good Practice)

Emma: yeah we had a chat about what the lesson might be, ideas and then you'd go away and put some ideas down

Case study 3A (Lesson study, Emma and Louise)

Typically when participants were acting co-operatively there was a sense that they checked-in with each other- one would give feedback or offer a new idea to the other, who would then make their own decision about how to use that advice after the 'check-in'. This was potentially quite efficient, and certainly added extra perspectives to an individual's lesson planning processes (this was the part of practice development where co-operation in our cases was typically focused). The most frequent references to what we deemed to be co-operative behaviours were found in the mentoring cases. For mentors it may also be perceived as maintaining the 'expert' stance, and expecting the student teacher to demonstrate the ideas that they want to put in to practice before they are let loose on the class;

Patricia: what would normally happen is [Colin] went away and planned it and had a look at it and said I'm doing this, this and this and I'd say well how are you going to do that and how are you going to look for this and then and that would help hone in on the key parts.

Case 2C (Patricia mentoring Colin)

There was also a reasonable expectation on the part of mentors of the student teacher making the transition from being a novice to becoming competent, and one mentor suggested that this also meant transition away from collaboration;

Philip: I suppose really it becomes less collaborative as time goes on because you're looking at somebody who's training to become independent really because you're looking at the end of the process, somebody's who in September is going to be in the classroom on their own with their own classes, so I think inevitably independence develops, so you go through being very collaborative in the beginning to perhaps less so at the end. That's my kind of feeling really

Case 2A (Philip mentoring Gill)

Compulsion versus choice

With respect to our cases we see compulsion on a scale from an implicit expectation to work in certain types of partnerships, to a demand created by the regulations of a training course or by the rights of managers to direct employees' time and efforts. We are using it here to refer to situations where there was no choice in participation, or theme, or type of practice. In the case of category 1 school A peer-coaching (framed as Sharing Good Practice - SGP) was not an elective process, but part of the school's infrastructure for staff development and a requirement for all teaching staff. Partnerships were designated by leaders, partners regularly swapped, participation was monitored by an SGP management group and the same group used the school improvement priorities to impose discussion themes within which individual foci could be tuned;

Angus: we were paired up and directed really, to be honest, to look at feedback

Case 1A (Malcolm and Angus, Sharing Good Practice)

In category 2 the student teachers were being mentored towards professional standards and being judged in relation to them, albeit in (in best practices) against a scale of progressive development over time. The student had no choice about being mentored and the mentor only had the choice of whether or not to act in that role for that programme; neither had a choice of 'partner'. In category 3 the student teachers were required to take part in joint lesson study and they often did so with peers not of their choosing (due to placement arrangements). What did seem important was that although it was obligatory, the research lesson study had been scheduled during a period of school visits and training rather than

during the final assessed placement itself, so that the potential for negative aspects of compulsion were perhaps overcome by positive logistics;

Bill; It was good that we were doing outside of a normal timetable trying to do it in the middle of teaching would be impossible I think just because we're under so much pressure.

Case 3C (Lesson study, Bill, Peter and Bobby)

Thus the only cases where there was no 'compulsion' was school B (peer coaching). It may be significant that it is the cases from this school where evidence of collaboration was most demonstrable. However even in this setting the scheduling logistics were important. In addition there is evidence that the infrastructure or tools provided a beneficial foundation or even a scaffold (e.g. the record sheet for the research lesson study, or the non-negotiable theme for sharing good practice).

Malcolm: It was a whole school focus from the teaching and learning team. It was a broad focus wasn't it and we could narrow it down and decide which areas we wanted to look at.

Case 1A (Malcolm and Angus, Sharing Good Practice)

Bobby: We already knew the way we were gonna reflect because there was kind of a scheme a proforma the university had given us to think about these things and then do it and then think about these things so that guided us.

Case 3C (Lesson study, Bill, Peter and Bobby)

Discussion

The intention of this research was to explore the extent to which teacher partnerships (which focused on developing teaching practices) offered opportunities for collaboration, and how the resulting experience was perceived by the participants. Collaboration and co-operation both imply doing something with at least one other person. The key difference is in the intent and social practice. When people co-operate they agree to help each other out, for example by dividing up responsibilities to lessen individual workload. Through co-operation individuals might be working towards separate goals which may be more or less aligned, and they can gain some efficiency or edge through co-operating. Co-operation is often a management tool for getting decisions implemented.

In contrast, perhaps the most straightforward definition of collaboration is the sense that individuals work *together* and not just work *with* one another; but this needs some expansion.

When individuals collaborate they work towards a common goal, they pool knowledge and problem-solve together; they may even achieve the elusive *co-construction*. In an earlier analysis of teacher coaching transcripts Lofthouse et al. (2010) used the concept of co-construction to define a specific dimension of professional dialogue. During this type of dialogue participants' conversational 'turns' 'are characteristically short and the coach and coached teacher collaboratively develop an idea, building on the successive contributions of their partner' (p.16). In addition, 'both parties challenge their own practice and work together to develop new suggestions for teaching and learning' (p.25). Given the analysis undertaken in this research, it is difficult to demonstrate that co-construction occurred; particularly in respect to Lofthouse et al.'s (2010) proposal that it has semantic dimensions. However we do feel that the conversational habits demonstrated during some of the interviews provide some evidence of co-construction. This was most striking in school B, especially given that the individuals had no former experience of working together. These interviews were tangibly more dialogic than most of the others; the participants anticipated their partners' views, helped to elicit one-another's perspectives and often finished each other's sentences. The turn-taking was fluid and fluent, and the sense of shared enthusiasm was palpable. Of course it is possible that this is purely the result of personality traits; effusiveness or impatience; but there is no reason why similar qualities would not have influenced the other interviews. What seems as possible is that these interviews had a certain quality as a result of the collaborative experience that the participants were sharing.

There are some distinctive features of these cases in school B, which might be significant and are therefore worth highlighting. In no particular order these include;

- the lack of compulsion; both coaches and coachees were volunteers, and the areas of practice that they focused on were their choices;
- the deliberate 'mixing it up'; all coaching happened across subjects, no one was coached by a direct line manager, and indeed some coaches had fewer years of teaching experience than their coachee;

- the structure of the coaching cycle; prior to a lesson (which was observed by the coach and videoed) a coaching conversation occurred to allow some elements of joint planning and a secure sense of what the ambitions of the teacher for the students' learning are;
- the use of video meant that both parties were able to select clips to discuss in the post-lesson coaching, and this helped to maintain a focus on details of the practice and ensure that the reality was shared rather than partial recollections or potentially skewed perspectives Lofthouse et al. (2010);
- the disassociation of the peer-coaching from judgement or performance management; creating a safe forum in which colleagues could be honest with each other, take risks and ask questions;
- the newness of the model in the school; this seemed to trigger an enthusiastic engagement in the process as a novel activity;
- the year-long development process which accompanied the introduction of the coaching model; giving both coaches and coachees separate spaces to plan for and reflect on their experiences;
- the very real focus on both teaching and coaching practices. Lessons were identified which the coach was able to observe, planning was shared based on pooled experiences and there was some gentle goading to have a go at new approaches. The video helped the participants to unpick details of practice. The two coaching cycles meant that there was a follow through rather than a conclusion – as such practice is seen as being tentative and in development over a period of time.

In each of our other cases of teachers working in partnerships some (but never all) of these conditions were present. The nearest similar experiences seemed to be the student teachers working together using the research lesson study approach.

Our research also provides evidence of a structural difference between those practices which are undertaken by peers, and those which are not. For example the relationships are likely to be different when two student teachers work together compared with when a student teacher works with a more experienced teacher. When that person holds responsibility for setting targets for the student teacher and reporting his or her achievements it is likely that the nature

of the relationship changes again. Despite this, our cases of mentoring did demonstrate elements of collaboration, but perhaps more frequently the experience was of co-operation. Factors likely to influence this include the parity level of participants (Heikkinen et al., 2012), and where this is limited, the social or ‘relating’ aspect of the partnership as a practice (Kemmis et al., 2012). In some cases there was consequently a stronger emotion of ‘togetherness’ than in others. This is likely to be reciprocal and cumulative as the more trust the individuals have in each other the more likely they are to be open to scrutiny and support from them.

Another interesting dimension to our findings, is the extent to which the model of partnership was underpinned by a specific focus on developing teaching practices, rather than the global concern about teacher performance. Again, the peer-coaching in school B and the lesson study had the most in common. In both categories the participants were expected to work together at all stages of practice development; to share knowledge in order to generate ideas, to share an experience of the lesson itself, and to share the critique of the practice. Taking a socio-cultural historical view of teaching development (such as that considered by Ellis et al., 2010) in relation to teacher education); it is believed that practice is conducted by individuals and groups as a response to evolving contexts and situations. Practices are influenced by an individual’s beliefs, decisions, experience and expertise. They are actions embodying language, relationships and physicality. They can stagnate, but they can also be altered through practicing allowing them to be understood and refined with intent. While little of this conceptualisation was explicitly articulated by the participants some of its connotations are threaded through their interviews. Meirink et al. (2009) and Timperley et al. (2007), amongst others, emphasise the significance to teachers’ learning of working in groups with a focus on making deliberate choices regarding changes to their classroom practice. Our cases illustrate that this can be effective in paired partnerships. Our findings suggest that paying attention to the specific practices of peer coaching at the same time as using peer coaching to develop teaching practices (seen uniquely in school B) may be significant, perhaps indicating that participants had developed a greater meta-awareness of the iterative relationship between what Eraut (2007) defined as the workplace *learning processes* and *activities* and *work processes*. The focus provided by the development programme might also be helping to keep the nuances of peer-coaching in the consciousness of the participants; reducing the likelihood that they slip in to other routine professional habits (such as those associated with performativity) during the episodes of coaching.

These fine-grained dimensions can be unpacked further in light of Kemmis et al.'s (2012) theory of practice architecture (including the physical spaces created by time and routine) or in terms of the related work processes, learning processes and learning activities as defined by Eraut (2007). Kemmis et al. (2014) recognise mentoring (for example) as a contested practice which does not occur in a vacuum, but which is pre-configured (but not determined) by practice architectures which are related to specific sites of the workplace and its cultural context. As such the potential of these partnerships can be interrupted if they are used to develop practice purely to meet the demands of the performative system that exists across education. Performativity is enacted through a myriad of monitoring techniques and data gathering activities in order to record and display success (Ball, 2013). These measures lead to ranking – league tables of schools and departments, and the grading of teachers. Hierarchies develop, not simply related to roles and responsibilities, but in the perceived qualities of each teacher which are held by both others and him- or herself. In England performativity has a tight grip on initial training, workplace induction and continuing professional development (CPD).

Kennedy (2014) recognises the international pressure exerted by the 'what works' agenda and the tendency for policy makers to direct what influence teachers' learning and training should consist of. In addition she foregrounds Sachs' (2001) differentiation between 'managerial' and 'democratic' professionalism, and in this context we would highlight Sachs' proposition that the latter enables professionals to build alliances, promote openness and teacher agency. Finally, Cajkler et al. (2014), in relation to lesson study, indicate its potential for building teachers' professional capital rather than increasing the performative pressure on them as individuals. Seeking forms of parity even when individuals are not peers may be one way to support professional learning through collaboration and co-construction.

Collaboration is rooted in partnerships in which participants demonstrate respect for each other, and can support professional learning and the development of mutuality. These are epistemological attributes that tend not to be attributable to highly performative cultures. Indeed Ball (2003, 2013) goes as far as to suggest that performativity generates a culture of terror. Strong professional learning structures designed to promote collaborative practice development, such as those discussed here, might help to weaken the grip of performativity and the drift towards managerial professionalism.

Conclusion: the value of the cases

We have not shared these cases of practice to imply that one model of professional development partnership is more effective than another. One size cannot fit all in a diverse and rapidly evolving education system, through which it is hoped teachers have successful and long careers. It is clear however that experiences of partnership are potentially rich and they can play a key role in supporting teachers and student teachers to focus on developing specific teaching practices. Teaching requires the application of a range of knowledges in practice; and it is essential that means are found through which teachers and student teachers feel empowered and confident to develop their practice by taking risks, borrowing and generating ideas and being open to support and critique. These learning processes and activities (using concepts from Eraut's typology) run the risk of being compromised in a heavily performative culture, which does create demands on teachers to constantly evidence improvements in teaching and learning but is largely focused on externally decided and evaluated benchmarks of quality. Collaboration for the development of their own teaching practices allows participants to engage in more informed decision making and to construct a shared understanding of the nature of the desired learning outcomes and how they might be achieved in their own contexts. It offers a means through which teachers can gain greater authority in their own practice.

Beyond such generalisations it is hoped that these cases will act as exemplary knowledge (Thomas, 2010) through which other practitioners, school leaders, policy-makers and researchers in diverse contexts and with unique experiences, can hear these voices from another horizon, and with phronesis make wise decisions in their own practice landscapes.

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