

Who Should Be Engaged in Collaborative Teacher Learning?

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Abstract

Collaborative teacher learning implies the involvement of different stakeholders in this process in order to realise school-based and community-based activities. Various channels of teachers' collaboration with their colleagues, school administrators, students, students' parents, local communities, teacher educators and policy makers have been studied based on literature analysis. The chapter also shares the experiences and some of the findings elaborated recently by the Latvian Erasmus+ project "EFFeCT" team who organised teachers' collaborative learning in four schools in order to enhance their professional competence in solving school-related and community-related pedagogical problems in interdisciplinary study environments. Throughout the course of this multilevel interaction we also gained insight into these teachers' regular reflections and analysis of the joint activities with their collaboration partners and their experiences gained. If the reader is interested further, we are open to collaboration and ready to share more details on the methods applied and on the findings of the research conducted throughout this collaborative teacher learning process.

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Introduction

Education today is facing a number of challenges brought about by dynamically changing processes which take place in the globalized world and the constant criticism of the business community related to the mismatch of graduates' skills and competencies and the growing demands for teachers' professional development. Teachers' professionalism is linked not only to the competence of teaching their specific subjects and organizing students' learning and development within an isolated study discipline but also in terms of teachers being able to influence ongoing processes in the entire school and society; if needed, even stepping out from the formal study environments and going into the community, making decisions and solving real life problems acting entrepreneurially, networking, leading and working in interdisciplinary environments. The multifaceted nature of all these demands changes the scope of expectations from teachers, as well as the character of organisation of teachers' professional growth, shifting the emphasis from individual to collaborative learning. This can be realised by promoting networking and professional collaboration not only between teachers and other education related stakeholders – i.e. their colleagues who teach different study disciplines, school administrators and teacher educators, but also between teachers and their students, the students' parents, entrepreneurs, professionals from different fields, municipalities, local communities, researchers, and policy makers. Such a collaborative teacher learning (CTL) network was created in Latvia within the Erasmus+ project "EFFeCT". This was aimed at promoting teachers' professional competencies in creating an interdisciplinary study environment and working in it for solving pedagogical and real life problems. The full landscape of this multilevel collaboration is continually being analysed to evaluate the impact of this approach on teachers' learning from different perspectives.

The research question:

Who should be engaged in collaborative teacher learning?

The research methods:

1. Analysis of literature to answer the research question on who should be engaged in CTL.
2. Individual and group reflections of the teachers who participate in the Erasmus+ project "EFFeCT" and the qualitative content analysis of the reflection texts to explore their experience while collaborating with the CTL network partners.

Who should be engaged in collaborative teacher learning?

To make CTL a regular practice in school, a crucial role is played by **school administrators** who need to create a collaborative learning culture providing the necessary resources, structures and processes that support teachers' efforts and make it possible for them to find time to meet regularly and work together on common professional tasks (Erickson et al., 2005). Only in those schools where the administrators consider CTL a high priority do they manage to reduce structural obstacles successfully, ensuring definite flexibility in timetables and creating a friendly and supportive work environment. This inspires teachers to create more effective and attractive teaching and learning methods and interdisciplinary study materials, and it helps them focus of running projects for solving topical problems of school and local communities using collective wisdom and multiple experiences (Oganisjana, 2015).

Teachers' collaboration with each other is the core of CTL, especially if this is embedded within their school and classroom contexts as such collective participation enhances their connectedness and aligns teachers' learning goals with school policy and goals (Nielsen et al, 2008). As argued by Chong and Kong (2012), CTL which takes place in working climates enhances mutual trust, openness and willingness to try new ideas, enabling those involved to feel safe to take collective responsibility for the results of the joint work. However, in the beginning of imbedding CTL in school practices there may be challenges faced due to the lack of experience of thinking and acting in interdisciplinary manner. Very often interdisciplinary teams of teachers who deliver traditionally less core study disciplines, for example, physics, history, drama, economics, literature and sports, experience "cultural shock" when they have to work together. Thinking traditionally from the perspective of the delivery of their isolated study disciplines, they cannot always find a common platform for understanding each other's language or working styles. Only having gained sufficient experience do they discover all the power and advantages of such collaboration (Oganisjana, 2015).

Teacher – student collaboration is one of the cornerstones of CTL as bottom-up processes, one which encourages students to be heard, respected and communicated with in an active dialogue, and are an indispensable part of a self-improving school (Leach & Crisp, 2016). In this collaborative set-up, teachers should learn to establish ontological openness of the *I-Thou* relationship with their students, listen to their points of views and inspire them to be independent learners rather than objectifying them in terms of *I-It* inter-human relationships with a notable

absence of dialogue (Guilherme & Morgan, 2009). Within CTL, teachers should learn to create such a study environment in which students become generative and inquisitively able to help themselves, teachers and others in solving problems, creating new values and acting in enterprising ways (Gibb, 1993; Kearney, 1999; Politis, 2005; Ravasi & Turati, 2005). It is argued that it's not the teacher who is to be active but the student; only in this way will students be able to overcome boredom or stagnation in their studies (Jones, 2006; Heinonen, 2007), then learning and thinking based on their experience and seeking new ideas which will help them to understand current issues and find new forms of behaviour in similar situations in the future (McGill & Beaty, 1992). The value of education should be in the widening of opportunities for students to enable them to: be engaged and explore issues, enhance their self-esteem and power of expression, learn to carry out different types of activities concerning an issue, both studying it theoretically and applying the knowledge gained in practice, often breaking away from the formal borders of school and becoming involved in community life (Koke & Oganisjana, 2011). The research "The development of teachers' professional competence for the work in interdisciplinary study environment for linking studies to real life and promoting students' entrepreneurship" conducted by the author within the ESF project "Support to Education Research" (2011-2014) in collaboration with ASEM (Asia – Europe Meeting) Education and Research HUB for Lifelong Learning" Network 5 "Core Competences", discovered a number of positive qualities of teachers and students which were initially unexpected. In the course of that CTL work, teachers and students had to collaborate to solve real life problems and in creating new values for commercialisation working together in heterogeneous interdisciplinary groups. The qualitative content analysis of the teachers' reflections showed, that they concluded that even those CTL-affected students who didn't have high academic achievements and were not active in the traditional study process, in reality were "smart, nice, supportive, able to help, more solid, disciplined and motivated". As for the students, they discovered that their teachers in reality "did have a sense of humour, were kind and friendly, didn't interrupt us and paid attention to all our ideas" (Oganisjana, 2015; Oganisjana et al., 2014). Thus, such mutual learning and listening to the views of students can be a powerful precursor for future change in practitioner and organizational practice (Macbeath, 2006).

Teacher–parent partnerships are also an important part of CTL as teachers have multiple opportunities to learn more about their students' backgrounds to decide what appropriate approaches and pedagogical tools should be applied in the case of each student. Traditionally

parents are engaged in school's indoor and outdoor formal and informal activities *“through parent–teacher meetings, being an audience at their children’s school performances, assisting in the classroom, collaborating with teachers to make educational decisions for their child, volunteering on fundraising activities or staffing the canteen and contributing to the development of school policies”* (Porter, 2008:13). Louise Porter (2008) summarizes teacher-parent relationship styles into four groups: “Professional-driven”, “Family-allied”, “Family-centred” and “Family-driven” depending on the view of parents, parents’ role, sources of goals or priorities, purpose of interaction with parents, communication style and common venues. Having analysed the findings of research in this field, it was concluded that parents’ interest and emotional support – both in education and beyond – help young people, whereas parental control is detrimental emotionally and to students’ performances (Porter, 2008). Therefore, it is very important for teachers to know how to build collaboration with parents so that parents become interested, knowledgeable and can support their children emotionally but do not pressure or control them in the form of authoritarian surveillance in terms of high grades in school studies and high achievements beyond school, as this can generate in children lower initiative and persistence, thus diminishing young people’s achievement motivation both in academic and extracurricular activities (Deslandes et al. 1997; Anderson et al. 2003).

Within their professional activities teachers collaborate with broader ranges of people, particularly beyond school environments, and realizing different projects for solving pedagogical, social and cultural problems of society, often networking with different stakeholders. In some school cultures **teachers – local community collaboration** is formally provided through various environmental education which is realised in order to consolidate the local community and realising local ideas through project-based learning according to the jointly planned school-based curriculum (Tali Tal, 2004). From the perspective of improving educational outcomes of students and promoting their social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development, school and district level educators establish connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses (Sanders, 2001). Hubbard & Hands (2011) argue that the engagement of children in extracurricular activities such as social clubs, camps, sports and arts activities, and visits to museums, art galleries, theatres and libraries, have a positive effect on students’ academic achievements and overall development. However, not all families can afford such activities and extracurricular activities for their children. This gap is often overcome by

school- and family–to-community partnerships which offer possibilities for pooling resources for the benefit of the students both within schools and beyond (Hubbard & Hands, 2011).

A positive form of enhancing the professional development of teachers is acknowledged to be **teacher – teacher educators collaboration**, organised in schools, where both parties meet and interact for the sake of collective learning in a series of workshops within teacher training programs for enhancing mastery of subject matter, providing a hands-on experience to participants and discussing and examining primary source materials that could be used in the classroom (Juarez-Dappe, 2011; Oganisjana, 2015). If this CTL process is also backed up with research, that would improve the developmental transfer between these two arenas (Postholm, 2016).

The directive role in CTL is played by **teachers – education policy makers collaboration**; the latter are those who initiate school reforms and who must be aware of the implications of different perspectives of the education policy enactment (Biesta, 2010). They should also be able to recognize that teaching practices need evolution too and that teachers are in a continuous process of developing as professionals (Riveros, 2012).

The experience of collaborative teacher learning within Erasmus+ project “EFFeCT”

Collaborative teacher learning in Latvia was organised in four schools from January 2017 to November 2017 in order to enhance teachers’ professional competence in creating interdisciplinary (ID) study environments and working within this framework to solve school and local community related problems. The CTL and the research arising all this process was organised in four phases under the supervision of the Latvian Erasmus+ project “EFFeCT” team, representing the Institute of Lifelong Learning and Culture “Vitae” and Riga Technical University:

1. Training of the four schools’ teams each made of five teachers, one of the school administrators, a parent and a related entrepreneur.
2. Creation of archives of topical problems of the school or local community environment, analysis of these problems in terms of deciding which of them should be solved, and elaboration of appropriate projects, also involving in this process other teachers of the schools, students, various parents, entrepreneurs, representatives of municipalities and other members of the local communities.
3. Accomplishment of the projects, documentation of the entire course, the teachers’ individual and group reflections on CTL and qualitative content analysis of the reflection texts.
4. Presentation and discussion of the results of the CTL work and related research at the Riga Conference of Erasmus+ project “EFFeCT”.

As the purpose of the research was to analyse the effects of all the channels of teachers’ collaboration and learning in the course of the entire project, it was decided to organise the reflections according to the “Network model of data collection on teachers’ collaborative learning” elaborated by the author (see Figure 1). The horizontal rows show all the stakeholders who the teachers collaborated with within the project, while the columns reflect the activities realised, in chronological order.

Figure 1

Solution for a school-related pedagogical problem	Solution for a community-related problem	Elaboration and realisation of ID activities	Joint analysis of the work done	Elaboration of the content and forms of realisation of the conference workshop	Elaboration of teachers' programme for work in competence-based ID study environment	Organisation of the leisure time together	Joint work at the seminar in "Kõngu dzirnavas"	
					●			"Teachers' interschool collaboration"
								"Teachers – NGO collaboration"
	●							"Teachers – municipality collaboration"
	●							"Teachers – entrepreneurs collaboration"
								"Teachers – local community collaboration"
								"Teachers – parents collaboration"
			●					"Teachers – school administration collaboration"
		●						"Teachers – other colleagues collaboration"
								"Teachers - students collaboration"
				●				"Teachers – project team collaboration"
●					●			"Teachers' intragroup collaboration"

Figure 1. Network model of data collection on teachers' collaborative learning (elaborated by Karine Oganisjana)

Teachers reflected separately on the challenges and benefits which they had had while collaborating with each category of stakeholders when carrying out each activity. The marks in the intersections of the rows and columns illustrate the meaning of the approach to this data collection. The red mark, for instance, shows that the teachers involved in the project reflected

on the challenges and benefits which they had had while elaborating the solution of school-related pedagogical problems inside their groups (see Figure 1). As for the blue mark, that speaks about the teachers' reflection on the challenges and benefits which they had collaborating with municipalities while solving community-related problems. Thus, each intersection in the grid has a meaning; this assisted in the data collection process when arranging it in an organised and purposeful manner. The qualitative content analysis of the reflection texts was conducted for each collaboration channel separately in terms of developing categories and revealing the challenges faced and benefits gained in collaboration with each party engaged in the CTL.

The diagrams in Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the frequencies of categories developed in the course of the qualitative content analysis of the teachers' reflection texts, also relating to the challenges and benefits they had while collaborating with other teachers at their schools.

Figure 2

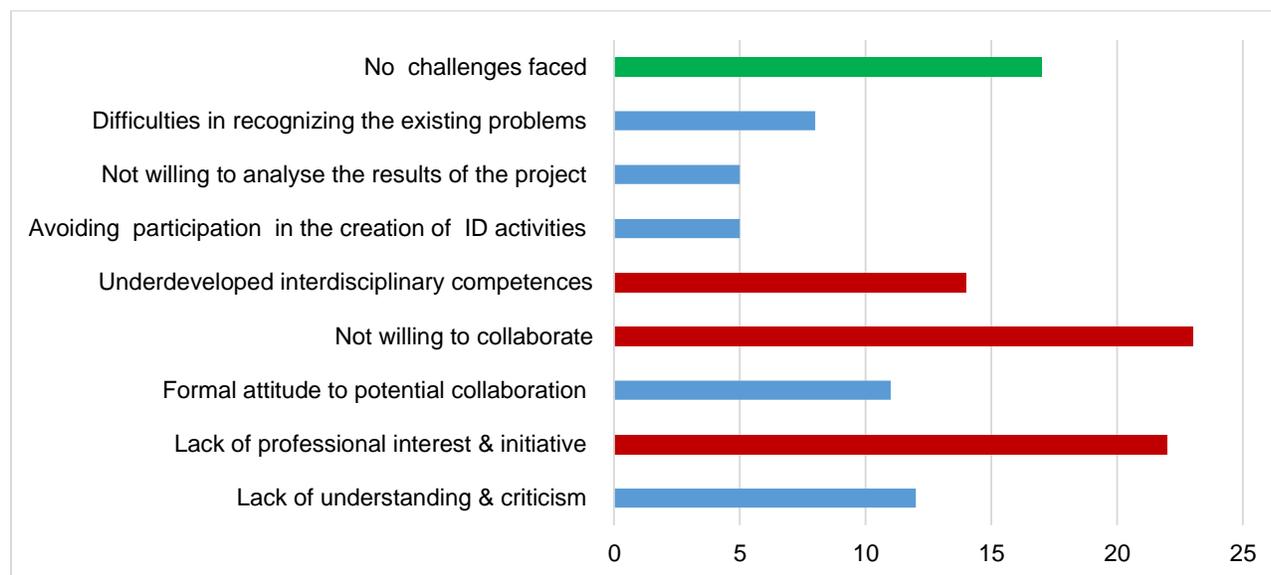


Figure 2. Challenges faced by the project teachers, related to the collaboration with their school colleagues while solving school or community related problems through interdisciplinary activities

Figure 3

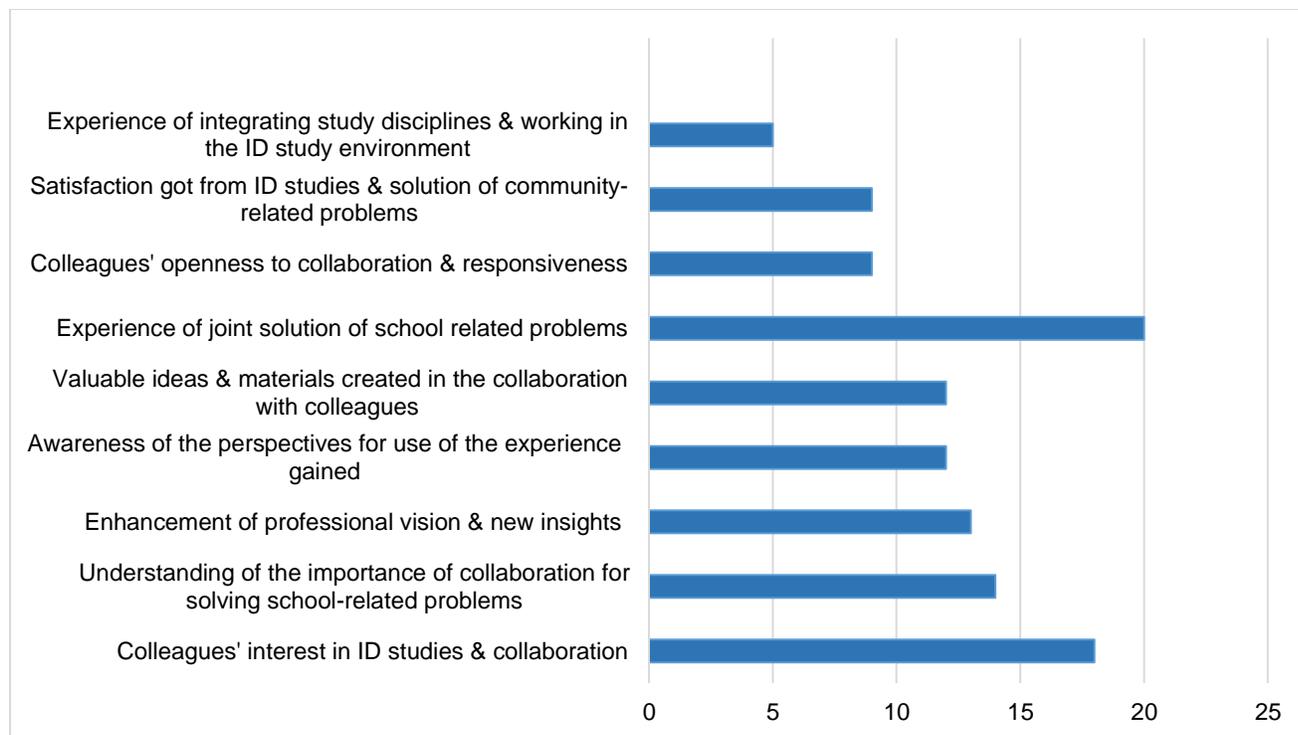


Figure 3. Benefits gained by the project teachers, related to the collaboration with their school colleagues while solving school or community related problems through interdisciplinary activities

Similar pairs of diagrams were set out and analysed for the teachers' collaboration with each stakeholder engaged in the Erasmus+ project "EFFeCT" in terms of gaining insight into all experience which the teachers acquired within CTL.

Conclusions

1. The stakeholders engaged in CTL are: teachers' school colleagues and administrators, teacher educators, students, students' parents, entrepreneurs, municipality and local community representatives, researchers and policy makers.
2. The teachers' reflections on the challenges faced and benefits gained within each collaboration channel showed that the teachers managed to: a) use the opportunities offered by the collaboration with the stakeholders successfully; b) overcome difficulties related to the creation of interdisciplinary study environments when solving school and community related problems, enhancing their professional competence; c) motivate the stakeholders to overcome formal attitude and lack of interest, and apply their efforts towards making the ideas come true; d) research, plan and organize all the human, intellectual and time resources in order to realize their projects and to analyse their own learning experience.

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