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**Teacher collaboration and collegiality as workplace conditions. A review**

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Geert Kelchtermans

## Teacher collaboration and collegiality as workplace conditions

A review

**Zusammenfassung:** „Lehrerkooperation“ und „Kollegialität“ sind nicht nur viel benutzte Begriffe. Sie bezeichnen entscheidende Faktoren der Schulentwicklung sowie des beruflichen Kompetenzaufbaus von Lehrern. Die folgende Übersicht über die relevante internationale Forschungsliteratur zeigt jedoch, dass dieser positive Beitrag nicht selbstverständlich ist. Es wird darauf aufmerksam gemacht, dass Zusammenarbeit und Kollegialität unterschiedliche Formen annehmen und für unterschiedlichen Interessen eingesetzt werden können – auch für solche, die kritisch betrachtet werden müssen. Ebenso ist es wichtig, eine Balance zwischen Kollegialität und Autonomie zu erreichen. Allzu einfache Behauptungen über die Vorteile von Kooperation sind ebenso wenig begründet wie negative Urteile über die Autonomie des einzelnen Lehrers. Ein adäquates Verständnis von Lehrerkooperation ergibt sich erst unter Einbeziehung des organisatorischen Kontexts der Schule. Die hier anzutreffenden Bedingungen bestimmen und beeinflussen die spezifische Form, den Inhalt, die Bedeutung und den Einfluss von Kooperation. Insofern resultieren Zusammenarbeit und Kollegialität aus den spezifischen Bedingungen des Arbeitsplatzes Schule und wirken umgekehrt auf diesen zurück. Für ein adäquates Verständnis dieser Zusammenhänge wird sowohl ein kulturbezogener wie auch ein mikropolitische Ansatz benötigt. In diesem Sinne sollten professionelle Lerngemeinschaften nicht so sehr als strukturelle Arrangements, sondern als kulturelle und mikropolitische Umwelten für solche Formen von Zusammenarbeit und Kollegialität angesehen werden, die nachhaltig zum Lernen der Schüler, zur beruflichen Entwicklung von Lehrern sowie schließlich zur Schulentwicklung beitragen.

### 1. Setting the scene: definitions and boundaries

“Teacher collaboration” as a term and an object of educational research seems obvious and selfevident in its meaning. Yet, even a quick look at the literature shows that the term is far from being unequivocal. Further definition and specification are necessary in order to properly discuss the issue.

#### 1.1 Collaboration and collegiality: connected, dynamic and contextualised terms

In this article, We will use the term “collaboration” in a descriptive sense as referring to teachers’ cooperative actions (their actual doing things together) for job-related purposes. In this definition “teachers” encompasses all educational staff members of a school.

In the literature teacher collaboration is often mentioned in the same breath together with (or even subsumed in) “collegiality”. Although indeed closely connected,

both terms are not identical. Whereas collaboration is a descriptive term, referring to cooperative actions, collegiality refers to the quality of the relationships among staff members in a school. Often the term carries with it a positive value, referring to “good” (supportive, stimulating, rewarding, equal/democratic) relationships among equals. As such collegiality implies a normative dimension that goes beyond mere description and refers to an aspect of the school’s organisational culture.

Collaboration and collegiality constitute and reflect one another. The actual actions of working together are determined by the quality of the relationships among staff members. They “reflect” collegiality. At the same time, however, the actual actions contribute to the meaning and value of the professional relationships. This mutual constitution and reflection is an ongoing process and therefore, both their appearance and meaning may develop and shift over time.

Collaboration and collegiality do not happen in a vacuum, but – on the contrary – always appear in the particular context of a school, at a particular moment in time. Furthermore, understanding the actual manifestations of collaboration and collegiality demands that we look at them as meaningful interactions (rather than mere behaviours). This implies that they can only be properly understood by taking into account the context. In other words, collaborative actions and collegial relations constitute important working conditions for teachers and as such they influence the professional development of teachers and school. By taking this organisational and contextualised approach, we join the majority of authors on the issue (see e.g. Little 1982, 1990a and 1990b; Rosenholtz 1989; Lieberman 1990; Hargreaves 1994; Smylie 1995; Clement/Vandenberghe 2000, Southworth 2000).

## *1.2 Setting the boundaries*

Our approach of collaboration and collegiality as meaningful organisational realities guided us in the selection and analysis of the research literature and helped us to delineate the scope of this review. Our review does not include:

- the pedagogy of cooperation: the technicalities of specific methods and procedures for collaboration; the effectiveness of different forms and formats of working together, like different forms of team teaching (compared to the traditional situation of one teacher and a group of pupils, see e.g. Crow/Pounder 2000);
- formal relationships of supervision, coaching or mentoring: supervision of student teachers during their practicum by their mentors (experienced teachers); mentoring relationships during induction (experienced teachers supporting beginning colleagues) (for example: Bullough 2005; Rust 1994); different pedagogies of coaching among colleagues. Nor will we include the growing literature on university-school collaboration in teacher education (see e.g. Erickson/Minnes Brandes/Mitchell/Mitchell 2005; Burbank/Kauchak 2003) or between schools for children with special needs and “common” schools in projects of “inclusive education”;

- forms of collaborative action-research by teachers or teacher educators to deepen their professional knowledge and to improve their practice (see for example Burbank/Kauchak 2003; Loughran/Russell 2002; Loughran et. al 2004).
- the issue of teacher leadership and participatory decision-making in school management (see e.g. Smylie 1994; Huffman/Kalnin 2003.)

In the article we argue that the particular form, content, meaning and impact of teacher collaboration have to be understood as determined by the organisational context of the school in which it takes place. In other words: the cultural and structural working conditions in schools determine and mediate actual teacher collaboration, as well as the way “collegiality” is experienced and valued by the staff members involved.

## **2. Teacher collaboration as a workplace condition**

The interest in teacher collaboration is not new, but over the passed 25 years its focus and ambitions have shifted remarkably. Early optimistic claims and hopes were outbalanced by empirical work. More recently the concepts of teacher collaboration and collegiality are often discussed as part of the idea of “professional learning communities” or “communities of practice” (see e.g. Bolan/McMahon 2004). Below, we will first elaborate briefly on the shift in emphasis in research attention, but then develop a more systematic analysis of teacher collaboration and collegiality as elements of the school as a workplace. In order to properly understand collaboration and collegiality and to be able to evaluate their educational merit, their complexity and organisational embeddedness need to be disentangled.

### *2.1 Collaboration as the way out of isolation*

Since Dan Lortie in his influential book *School teacher* (1975) exemplified teachers’ work as often isolated (“the egg-crate structure“ of schools) and characterized by individualism, uncertainty and the lack of a shared “technical” culture, many authors have started looking at collaboration as the solution for problems in schools and as a powerful tool and perspective for school improvement. Lieberman (1986, p. 6) argued: “Contexts, needs, talents and commitments differ, but one thing appears to be constant: school cannot improve without people working together”. Illustrative for this stance is also Lieberman’s book collecting a set of articles (that had been previously published between 1978 and 1989), all of which take up the idea that “each school needs to establish a collaborative culture as a precondition for its own development” (Lieberman 1990, p. IX). Reviewing the literature on teacher collaboration in the ‘80’s Clement/Vandenberghe conclude that “one is confronted with an overwhelming abundance of workplace conditions proven conducive to teachers’ professional development and school improvement [...]. Yet one workplace condition seems to beat the lot: collegiality.” (Clement/Vandenberghe 2000, p. 81; see also Clement/Staessens 1993).

From the early eighties of last century on, a whole series of books and articles has been published, reflecting a growing interest and belief in the benefits of collaboration and collegiality. Several studies provided empirical evidence for the claims about the benefits, but at the same time contributed to a more balanced view. In spite of the positive claims, however Little had to conclude, after reviewing the literature, that “the term collegiality has remained conceptually amorphous and ideologically sanguine. Advocates have imbued it with a sense of virtue – the expectations that any interaction that breaks the isolation of teachers will contribute in some fashion to the knowledge, skill, judgment, or commitment that individuals bring to their work, and will enhance the collective capacity of groups or institutions. [...] Teachers’ collaborations sometimes serve the purposes of well-conceived change, but the assumed link between increased collegial contact and improvement-oriented change does not seem to be warranted” (Little 1990a, p. 508).

For example, in 1982 Judith Warren Little published a study based on extensive interviews with administrators and teachers from 6 schools (primary and secondary), that were highly heterogeneous in terms of student outcomes and staff participation in professional development (in-service training). She found that a strong sense of collegiality among the staff, manifesting itself in collaborative practices and discussions, positively contributed to teachers’ participation in staff development activities and in innovative teaching practices. She concludes: “By celebrating the place of norms of collegiality and experimentation, we place the related matters of school improvement, receptivity to staff development, and instructional leadership squarely in an analysis of organizational setting: the school as workplace” (Little 1982, p. 339).

In her book *Teachers’ workplace: the social organization of schools* (1989) Susan Rosenholtz takes up that idea in a study of “effective” elementary schools in the US and how their organisation (working conditions) positively contributed to compensate for the uncertainties as well as threats to teachers’ self-esteem that are inherent in the teaching job. On the basis of both questionnaire and interview data, she concludes that sharing educational goals, forms of collaborative work (sharing, helping and help seeking) and forms of teacher leaders had a positive impact on teachers’ experience of their job. “While uncertainty is endemic to teaching, even under the best of circumstances, norms of self-reliance in isolated schools leave teachers even more uncertain about a technical culture and instructional practice. Ironically, as teachers contemplate the enormous challenges before them and how or whether they should confront them, perhaps the best weapon they could wield against uncertainty lies in colleagues, particularly teacher leaders, within their own schools” (Rosenholtz 1989, p. 69; see on teacher leaders also Smylie 1994).

In the United Kingdom Nias, Southworth and Yeomans (1989) used extensive case-study-methodology to analyse the staff relationships in primary schools. In some of the schools, they identified a distinctive “collaborative culture”. Collaboration among teachers was self-evidently part of the daily work life and reflected a specific set of beliefs and values, constituting the school’s organisational culture: “The culture was built on four interacting beliefs. The first two specify ends: individuals should be valued but, be-

cause they are inseparable from the groups of which they are part, groups too should be fostered and valued. The second two relate to means: the most effective ways of promoting these values are through openness and a sense of mutual security" (Nias et al. 1989, p. 47; see also Nias 1999 pp. 234ff.).

These examples empirically demonstrated the benefits of collaboration and collegiality, but also revealed the complexity of the issue and thus challenged researchers to acknowledge and include this complexity in their work. The list of benefits attributed to teacher collaboration is impressive: providing moral support and promoting confidence; increasing efficiency and effectiveness of teaching; reducing overload and setting boundaries to teachers' task; promoting teacher reflection and thus teacher learning and finally contributing to continuous school improvement (Hargreaves 1994, pp. 245-247; see also Johnson 2003, pp. 337-338) *staut New alinea*. These benefits, however are not automatically achieved by collaboration, nor accomplished by any form of teachers working together.

Little concludes her review of the literature by setting the agenda: "For teachers to work often and fruitfully as colleagues requires action on all fronts. The value that is placed on shared work must be both said and shown. The opportunity for shared work and shared study must be prominent in the schedule for the day, the week, the year. The purpose for work together must be compelling and the task sufficiently challenging. The material resources and human assistance must be adequate. The accomplishments of individuals and groups must be recognized and celebrated." (Little, 1990b, p. 188 *italics in original*). Little's agenda already indicates that or a more balanced, differentiated and differentiating approach to the issue is necessary.

In order to properly understand and evaluate (value) collaboration and collegiality. More in particular one has to (a) distinguish between different forms of teacher collaboration, (b) develop a more balanced view on the value of both teachers' collaboration and autonomy, and (c) take into account the content or the agenda of teacher collaboration (collaboration for what?). We will now further develop these three conclusions.

## 2.2 *Different forms of collaboration and collegiality*

In her widely cited literature review Little argues that much "that passes for collaboration does not add up to much" (Little 1990a, p. 508). In order to properly value collaboration and collegiality, one has to be explicit about both the form and the content of collaboration/collegiality. She distinguishes four different forms of collegial relations that reflect differences in the strength of the relationships involved and that can be situated on a continuum from independence to interdependence: storytelling and scanning for ideas, aid and assistance, sharing and joint work. Through storytelling and scanning for ideas teachers exchange experiences, gather information, nourish their friendships, but keep the talk far from the actual practice in their classrooms.

A second form can be observed in teachers providing aid and assistance to colleagues who ask for advice. Since the explicit asking is an important condition and it is



seen as a request for help, implicitly the issues of professional competence and self-esteem come into play. Asking for help may be considered acceptable for a beginning colleague, but not for an experienced one (see also Kelchtermans/Ballet 2002).

Different forms of sharing ideas and materials or methods are a third conception of collegiality. The form and consequence of sharing can differ, depending for example on the professional beliefs and norms in the school culture (e.g. traditional norms of non-interference versus shared norms of experimentation and mutual support).

Finally, joint work, refers to “encounters among teachers that rest on shared responsibility for the work of teaching (interdependence), collective conceptions of autonomy, support for teachers’ initiative and leadership with regard to professional practice, and group affiliations grounded in professional work” (Little 1990a, p. 519).

Hargreaves acknowledges that Little’s distinction in different forms of collaboration and collegiality is helpful in properly conceptualising and evaluating the phenomena. “What matters is not that there are many different kinds of collaboration and collegiality but that the characteristics and virtues of some kinds of collaboration and collegiality are often falsely attributed to other kinds as well, or perhaps to collaboration and collegiality in general” (Hargreaves 1994, p. 188). As an example, he criticises Rosenholtz’ claims on the benefits of teacher collaboration while the actual forms and manifestations, that are addressed by the questions in her interview guideline, almost exclusively concern giving and receiving help and advice. Since none of the questions addressed more pervasive or critical forms of collaboration, involving shared decision-making, systematic reform efforts etc., he concludes that in fact “Rosenholtz’s criteria of collaboration are very much like the kinds of limited sharing and swapping of stories that Lortie [...] identified as being quite compatible with a basic commitment to individualism and autonomy in the classroom among teachers” (Hargreaves 1994, p. 210).

A proper evaluation of collaboration and collegiality, thus, cannot but treat them as organisationally embedded phenomena that can take different forms and therefore can have different values. In the Netherlands, Kwakman (2003) studied the factors that determine teachers’ participation in professional learning activities and concludes that “teachers participate most in activities as professional reading, sharing ideas with colleagues, or improving lessons”, but they hardly engaged in “collaborative activities that demand more than just talking or discussing” (Kwakman 2003, p. 166). Her analysis also shows that providing the structural and organisational conditions for teacher collaboration and professional learning was an important, but not a sufficient condition to turn the schools into learning organisations. Teachers’ personal characteristics, like attitudes, personal efficacy, perception of feasibility or meaningfulness etc. proved to determine teachers’ participation in professional learning more than characteristics of the tasks or the environment. This influence was both direct and indirect (personal characteristics mediating the characteristics of tasks and environment).

Similar observations were made by Leonard and Leonard (1999) in the U.S. The value of formal opportunities for teachers to exchange and collaborate as part of the learning organisation was acknowledged, but informal and voluntary collaboration were considered at least equally valuable because they are most often triggered by a situation

or challenge for which teachers themselves collectively felt the need to address them (Leonard/Leonard 1999, p. 240).

### *2.3 Towards a more balanced view on collaboration and autonomy*

Not only need different forms of teacher collaboration and collegiality be distinguished, but also the belief in their benefits – as compared to teacher autonomy need to be differentiated.

Hargreaves provides a more balanced evaluation of teachers' "isolation" or "individualism", arguing that individual work (autonomy) by teachers does not have to be negative, nor that collaboration is always to be valued positively (see also Smylie 1995). He distinguishes three forms of autonomy as a workplace condition for teachers: constrained individualism, strategic individualism and elective individualism. Constrained individualism results from administrative or organisational limitations that make it difficult – if not impossible – for teachers to collaborate. Sometimes teachers choose to withdraw in their classrooms for strategic reasons, for example because of increasing pressures and demands on them by others. Elective individualism reflects a positive choice, driven by intrinsic reasons, for working alone (Hargreaves 1993, see also 1994 and 1996).

Clement and Vandenberghe (2000) made the different forms and relations between autonomy and collegiality the focus of their study. They elaborated on Hargreaves' distinctions and found a fourth variant of autonomy: "ascribed autonomy", in which a teacher is authorised by the entire school team to work on particular issues autonomously. Often this implies an explicit and public valuing of particular expertise and competences of that colleague (for example organising out-of-school-activities, establishing a project together with parents, etc.). Interestingly, Clement/Vandenberghe, both conceptually and empirically link autonomy and collegiality to teachers' professional learning. They argue that the balance between autonomy and collegiality in a school constitutes a working condition that strongly influences whether and to what extent formal and informal learning opportunities for teachers can appear in schools, whether and to what extent the organisation provides the learning space, thus allowing to actually take up learning opportunities and turn them into learning experiences. If the relationship between autonomy and collegiality is "polar" (one opposing the other) then the chances for professional learning experiences are much smaller than in schools where autonomy and collegiality are balanced in a more "circular" way (one influencing and allowing the other to occur) (Clement/Vandenberghe 2000; Clement/Staessens 1993).

That not all collaboration is educationally valuable is reflected in what Hargreaves has labeled "contrived collegiality", referring to the workplace conditions where teachers' collaborative working relationships are not spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable but can be characterised on the contrary as administratively regulated and controlled, compulsory, implementation-oriented (putting into practice what others have decided and designed),

fixed in time and space and predictable (Hargreaves 1994, p. 195) (see also below). This collegiality does not contribute to the further development of teachers' professionalism.

Further evidence for this balanced view on collegiality and autonomy is found in the extensive literature review by Firestone/Pennell (1993) on teacher commitment. They conclude that commitment was influenced by both autonomy and collaboration. Autonomy as self-determination was central to intrinsic motivation: teachers' feeling personally responsible for their students' outcomes allows them to make internal causal attributions for pupils' results. Reducing this autonomy (teachers' control about the organisation and content of their work) contributes to dissatisfaction and possibly burnout. Teacher collaboration – they argue – has both a socio-cognitive and an affective dimension. The first refers to learning opportunities or chances on feedback by working together. The latter refers to the feeling of collegiality, of shared responsibility for the educational endeavour in the school. The authors refer to different studies in which collaboration and commitment are linked, direct or indirectly, but also emphasize that the impact of collaboration is always mediated through other working conditions like the availability of time (see also Hargreaves 1994, p. 188; Leonard/Leonard 1999; Nias 1999b).

Nias summarises this balanced view in her concise definition of collaborative culture: it was "built on a belief in the value of openness, tempered by a respect for individual and collective security typified the core of that culture" (Nias 1999b, p. 235). Different forms of both teacher collegiality and autonomy, thus, are to be valued differently. For the goals of school improvement and teachers' professional development a proper balancing of both autonomy and collegiality seems to provide the most promising way ahead. Yet, the issue of the content of collaboration (and autonomy) has to be included as well in the discussion.

## *2.4 The content or agenda of collaboration and collegiality*

It is obvious that teacher collaboration can not only take different forms – as Little (1990a) argues – but also that its content and agenda can differ significantly. Therefore the meaning and value of collaboration and collegiality also depend on that agenda. Irrespective of the participation form of collaboration, one needs to ask the question: 'collaboration, for what'?

### *2.4.1 Conservative collaboration and collegiality*

Although advocates of teachers' collaboration and collegiality often claim that they contribute to professional development and school improvement, this is not always the case. Teachers themselves seem to value most collaborative agendas that concern the core process in education: pupils' learning or well being (Firestone/Pennell 1993; Smylie 1995; Shachar/Shmuelewitz 1997). For that reason it hardly comes as a surprise that teacher collaboration often confines itself to solving problems that arise in the day-to-day classroom practice. Finding practical solutions to challenges in teaching turned out to

be the most prominent agenda of collaborative actions, as Scribner (1999) concluded in his study on the impact of workplace conditions on teacher learning. If teachers were given the opportunity to collaborate, their learning tended to focus on two areas: a) developing classroom management strategies, and b) developing, improving, and affirming pedagogical skills (see also Leonard/Leonard 1999, p. 240).

In her study on professional certainty with Norwegian teachers, Munthe found that teachers collaborate most on planning lessons, but that this “collaboration needn’t enhance professional development at all. In fact, collaboration on planning lessons may also prevent teachers from experiencing personal development [...] Collaborative planning may in fact represent more constraints that make students’ individual differences and needs even more difficult to meet.” (Munthe 2003, p. 810). Although she did find a positive relationship between collaboration and teachers’ perceived professional certainty, that relationship was not very strong. Collaboration and collegiality that only address the ‘how to’-question seem to contribute more to the status quo than to change or improvement.

For the latter to happen, Clement/Vandenberghe (2000) argue that the professional learning resulting from collaboration has to be ‘deep’ enough, i.e. has to include also exchange, discussion and confrontation of underlying beliefs (see also Kelchtermans/Hamilton 2004). In their study of Belgian primary schoolteachers, they found that collaboration avoiding to discuss the beliefs underlying teaching practices contributed to what they called “conservative” or even “reactionary” professionalism. In order to see collaboration contribute to “progressive professionalism” collaborative work had to go beyond the practical problemsolving and include also an explicit discussion of teachers’ personal beliefs, on which their professional actions are based (Clement/Vandenberghe 2000).

This “deep learning” places high demands on the emotional and affective quality of collegial relationships (see also Kelchtermans 2005). Without a level of trust and safety, teachers will hardly be willing to engage in professional collaboration and exchange that might threaten their deeply held professional beliefs (see also Johnson 2003, p. 346; Wilson/Berne 1999, p. 198). Johnson (2003) even found that the perceived benefits of planning, discussing and working in collaborative teams were to a large extent social-emotional. Teachers felt better about their jobs, their students and themselves and this contributed to lower absentee rates, less stress, greater commitment and enthusiasm.

The importance of the social and emotional meaning and impact of teacher collaboration is further corroborated by studies showing that competition between teachers or between collaborative groups of teachers often has strong negative effects (Leonard/Leonard 1999; Johnson 2003; Hargreaves 1992).

Yet, although positive collegial ties among members of a school team in many respects make it a satisfactory workplace, its effects are not automatically and always positive. This is forgotten too often in the literature on teacher communities (Achinstein 2002b; see below). Avila de Lima (2000), for example, showed that close personal ties among members of a team often inhibited collaboration and professional learning. Friendship relations made it difficult to really consider different (possibly conflicting) perspectives on how to meet the students’ needs or to discuss improper professional conduct.

In her study on the organisational cultures in innovative primary schools in Belgium, Staessens identified the so-called “family school”, characterised by an informal culture of congeniality, that made the school in some ways a pleasant place to work, but that at the same time effectively managed to buffer all attempts to change (in particular through formal procedures) and to maintain the status quo. Celebrating the collegial relationships went along with avoiding all forms of exchange and collaboration that could possibly threaten the collegial bonds (Staessens 1993, pp. 118-119). Hargreaves similarly concluded that collaboration is sometimes “confined to safer, less controversial areas of teachers’ work – ones which avoid collaboration in classroom practice, or collaboration through systematic shared reflection, in favor of moral support and sharing of resources and ideas. [...] These kinds of collaboration can be comfortable, cozy and complacent [...] Collaboration can be conformist. It can lead to groupthink, suppressing individuality and solitude and the creativity of thought which springs from them” (Hargreaves 1994, p. 247). Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) present the case of a Japanese secondary school and show how collaboration between the teachers did not contribute to teachers’ professional learning or changes in the school culture. Teachers’ individual beliefs (for example on the desirability to use a more communicative approach to teaching foreign languages) were silenced by the dominant culture. Collaboration and interaction among teachers was rare and – if they appeared – only contributed to continuing the status quo. In the culture of this school “managing students and various task assignments took precedence over teaching, and communication and collaboration consisted of keeping pace with other teachers and getting through the day” (Sato/Kleinsasser 2004, p. 811). Johnson (2003) similarly found that collaboration in some occasions efficiently worked to keep the team ‘in line’, while ‘silencing’ all dissonant voices.

So, although it seems evident that positive collegial relationships are to be valued as a workplace condition contributing to job satisfaction, commitment and – eventually – better learning by the students, one has to remain critical and also question whether these forms of collegiality are not working at the same time to block initiatives and processes of change and improvement. Several studies show that there are two sides to the coin and that the benefits of collegiality sometimes turn out to have a ‘cost’ at the same time.

#### 2.4.2 *Collaboration on a de-professionalising agenda*

Critical policy analysis also helps to more prudently value teacher collaboration. Jeffrey (2002) analysed the impact of the performativity discourse in educational policy, with its emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, outcome measurement and marketisation, on the collegial relationships in primary schools. He argues that performativity reduced teachers’ professional competence and thus made them more dependent on each other, “not in a collegial sense but in seeking reassurance that everything they do is ‘right’” (Jeffrey 2002, p. 538). Although in some sense the collaboration between teachers increased, the author observed at the same time that more hierarchical relationships were

installed replacing the traditional culture of equality among colleagues. Collaborating to meet the externally imposed criteria for educational quality induced more hierarchy and the loss of important pedagogical values in the school culture. In his description of “contrived collegiality”, Hargreaves (1994) similarly warns that those forms of “collaboration” are not contributing to teacher development but only to the effective execution of externally imposed agendas for educational change (see also Sugrue 2004, p. 76).

That teachers’ view of collaboration may also be determined by wider historical and political circumstances is illustrated in a study by Abrahams on teachers in post-apartheid South-Africa. He found that teachers positively valued the idea of collaboration, while at the same time “finding comfort in the norms of independence and privacy because the alternative – collaboration – carried with it the threat of exposure, ridicule, loss of face, and even job loss” (Abrahams 1997, p. 421).

Research on the intensification of teaching (Apple 1986; Ballet/Kelchtermans/Loughran, in press) also shows that teacher collaboration can in fact contribute to increased work load, stress and the risk on burn-out. Johnson (2003) rightly questions the claim that teacher collaboration would reduce the work load, since meeting and exchanging has to be done ‘on top’ of the job. Although his study provides evidence for the benefits and positive impact of teacher collaboration, he also warns that “it would be naïve at best, and dishonest at worst, to suggest that all teachers benefited [...] There are grounds for concern about the use of collaborative teams to ‘silence’ dissent and debate and to promote conformity with majority norms and practices” (Johnson 2003, p. 349).

### **3. Culture, community and conflict**

It will have become clear that most research on teacher collaboration not just simply describes teachers’ collaborative actions, but – in order to understand and evaluate them – situates them in the context of the organisational culture. This culture is defined by Schein as “the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organisation’s view of itself and its environment” (Schein 1985, p. 6). The organisational culture determines what forms of collaboration are possible in the school, but at the same time teachers’ working together, exchanging ideas, etc. strongly contributes to the content and form of the culture, its sustainability and changes (see also Giddens 1984).<sup>1</sup>

For that reason, providing structural conditions for collaboration is no guarantee for teachers actually working together because of the cultural processes of interpretation. Hargreaves, for example, shows that providing teachers with out-of-class preparation

1 This reflects the idea of what Giddens has called the “structuration” principle: the structural environment determines teachers (as members of the school organisation), but only on the condition and to the extent that the teachers involved acknowledge the structures (Giddens 1984).

time did not result in teachers working more collaboratively, because “preparation time became absorbed by the deep-seated culture of individualism and classroom-centeredness that has become historically and institutionally ingrained in the prevailing patterns of teachers’ work” (Hargreaves 1992, p. 99; see also above and Hargreaves 1993). Avila de Lima (2003) documented how student teachers – in spite of formal arrangements and discourses favoring collaborative practice – were socialized into professional cultures that framed their views of themselves and of teaching in essentially isolated ways. Cameron (2005) recently found that providing the structural opportunities for collaboration were not only facilitating, but in some occasions proved to restrict and inhibit proper decision making and action.

To sum up, collaboration is not to be valued positively per se. One also has to include in the evaluation its content and impact and those are influenced and mediated by processes of sense-marking.

### 3.1 Collaborative culture and community

Nias et al. (1989) argue that “collaborative cultures” in schools are primarily reflecting personal relationships, rather than educational views. They identified four areas in which a collaborative culture influences the teaching practice. Firstly, there is a broad consensus among the staff about teaching methods. Secondly, the culture reflects ideas about what collegial relations are and should be. The group “was not seen as a moral burden but as the means by which and the context within which individuals could achieve their maximum development” (Nias et al. 1989, p. 50). The culture results, thirdly, in a strong sense of commitment to a common task. Finally, the impact on actual teaching behaviour and more in particular of the choice for team teaching showed a paradox: “Where there is a school-wide culture which encourages teachers to think of themselves as individually different but mutually dependent they may, but often do not, teach in tandem. [...] But sub-groups, especially those which are built upon or incorporate team-teaching, impede school-wide acceptance of particular practices and inhibit the open discussion that might eventually lead to the creation of a whole school perspective” (Nias et al. 1989, pp. 52-53).

As we have argued before, one sees here again the complex relationship between collaborative actions and the meaning they get in the wider organisational culture, and the norms and ideas of collegiality it encompasses. Hargreaves takes up the term “collaborative culture” and argues that in a collaborative culture teachers work together voluntarily and spontaneously, without an external agenda. The collaboration is clearly development-oriented, pervasive across time and space and to a large extent unpredictable (Hargreaves 1994, pp. 192-193). As such a “collaborative culture” fundamentally differs from a culture of “contrived collegiality”, “individualism” or “balkanization”, the three other forms of culture he distinguishes (see above) insert from p. 68. Yet, “it is through the forms of teacher culture that the contents of those different cultures are realized, reproduced and redefined (Hargreaves 1996, p. 219).

Part of the collaborative culture is also a view on the balance of autonomy and collegiality. Nias (1999a) links this to the notion of care and argues that a “culture of collaboration” sometimes develops in response to externally imposed (legislative) changes because of which teachers have to interact more and start to be more aware of and concern about their colleagues. “To the extent that through increased contact they (= the teachers, GK) develop an interpersonal relationship with their colleagues, they also therefore feel ethically involved with them” (Nias 1999a, p. 72), but at the same time she warns that: “There is [...], another side to staff interaction. It may prove an additional charge upon over-extended teachers, especially when individuals feel obliged to ‘care’ more than they feel is possible” (Nias 1999a, p. 74). Discussing more explicitly the issues of teacher stress and burnout, Farber acknowledges that community and collaborative culture are valuable in terms of stress reduction, but “these valuable support structures often contribute to stress in subtle and often unacknowledged ways” (Farber 1999, p. 165).

More recently, several authors started to link the idea of collegiality or collaborative cultures to the concept of “professional community” (Miller 1999, p. 156; Southworth 2000) that has become very central in the literature on teachers’ professional development and school improvement (see for example Cochran-Smith/Lytle 1999; McGregor 2003). Achinstein defines a teacher professional community as “a group of people across a school who are engaged in common work; share to a certain degree a set of values, norms, and orientations towards teaching, students, and schooling; and operate collaboratively with structures that foster interdependence” (Achinstein 2002a, pp. 421-422). Just as it was the case with “collegiality” in the early eighties, the idea of “community” has become a prominent image for schools as organisations to strive for, since it promises to be “the solution to many of our schools’ problems” (Achinstein 2002b, p. 6).

### 3.2 *Community and conflict*

Although the cultural perspective on schools as organisations has proven to be a fruitful approach to analyse, understand and evaluate collaboration and collegiality, it often also obscured or played down important dimensions of life in schools. Hargreaves has argued that the analysis of interpersonal relationships in schools should not only be studied from the “cultural perspective”, but that it needs to be complemented by the “micropolitical perspective” (Hargreaves 1994, p. 190; see also Cameron, 2005). Whereas the cultural perspective focuses on processes of consensus building, on the identification of the shared values and norms that knit a team together and constitute an important source for sense-making by the organisation members, the micropolitical perspective looks at individual differences, goal diversity and conflict, the use of informal power and the different interests that also are at play in interactions among the members of an organisation (Ball 1987, 1994; Blase 1991, 1997; Altrichter/Salzgeber 1996 and 2000; Kelchtermans/Ballet 2002).

Stoll writes: “Micro-politics particularly come into play in relation to the issue of subcultures within schools. Indeed, it could be argued that the concept of one holistic



culture is too simplistic, particularly in a large secondary school (Stoll 1999, p. 43; see also above “balkanized culture”, Hargreaves, 1992). A balkanized teacher culture “is made up of separate and sometimes competing groups, jockeying for position and supremacy like loosely connected, independent city states” (Hargreaves 1992, p. 223) move to p. 66. Nias makes it clear that collaborative cultures “should not be mistakenly viewed as conflict free or cozy” (Nias 1999b, p. 235). McGregor is critical about the notion “community of practice” because it does not contribute “to unpack the important power relationships crucial in decision-making and negotiation” (McGregor 2003, p. 127).

Collaboration that includes talk and discussion about values and deeply held beliefs, does not only need a safe environment of trust and mutual respect (Erickson/Minnes/Brandes/Mitchell/Mitchell 2005), but it also increases the risk that conflict and differences in opinion may appear (Johnson 2003). The micropolitical perspective helps to understand why collaboration often does not go beyond practical problem solving and avoids professional beliefs and identity to become part of the collaboration. Kain (1996) for example documented this ‘persistence of privacy’ by showing how difficult it was to include traditionally ‘private’ issues like teachers’ individual grading practices, into the collaborative action and discussion. Manouchehri (2002) observed that implementing peer-observations and peer-feedback during student-teachers practical training often failed as a strategy to deepen those student-teachers’ reflection and professional learning because the students turned out to be reluctant to question and confront each other’s pedagogy (Manouchehri 2002, p. 736).

It also explains why collaboration often appears only to the extent that it does not threaten cultural norms or the relationships of power and influence among the team (see Sato/Kleinsasser 2004). Gitlin (1999) further illustrates this by showing how difficult it is to develop and implement a collaborative culture as a means to facilitate the school’s work on a radical progressive school reform. The “robust collaboration” he aimed for not only demanded teachers to intensively work together, but at the same time also envisaged changing their ideas in favour of the radical reform agenda.

Yet, as Achinstein (2002a, 2002b) argues, conflict constitutes an inherent part of professional communities and the collegiality and collaboration that go with it. She explicitly addressed the *role of conflict in professional learning communities* and showed how the forms and outcomes of organisational learning were deeply determined by the way in which the communities dealt with differences and conflict in their collaboration: “Communities that can productively engage in conflict, rather than those with low levels of conflict or those that suppress their differences, have a greater potential for continual growth and renewal” (Achinstein 2002a, p. 448). The main challenge for professional communities is thus to find a balance between on the one hand maintaining the interpersonal ties and connectedness in a caring community, while on the other hand sustaining the constructive controversy (in which differences in opinion and beliefs can arise) that is necessary for authentic professional learning. Her study exemplifies in detail how a realistic and valid approach to understanding collegiality and collaboration needs both the cultural and the micropolitical perspective.

#### 4. Conclusion

Understanding and valuing of teachers' collaborative actions and the idea of collegiality that goes with it demands a certain level of sophistication. Simplistic claims about the benefits of collaboration are as little warranted as negative judgements about teacher autonomy. Not only is a balanced view on both working conditions necessary, but the "beneficial impact" of either of them has to be understood as mediated by other working conditions. Furthermore, both collaboration and autonomy can take different forms, address different contents and contribute to different agendas. Judging their educational value cannot but take a stance on the desirability of that content or the goals in the agenda. Both a cultural perspective (focussing on the sense-making, the values and norms) and a micropolitical perspective (explicitly addressing issues of power, interests and influence) are needed to disentangle them. In the same vein, professional learning communities – in which collaboration and collegiality are supposed to play a key role – ought to be conceived of not so much as structural arrangements, but rather as cultural and political environments in which those forms of collaboration and collegiality can take place that really contribute to pupils' learning, teacher development and quality of school improvement.

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**Abstract:** *“Teacher collaboration” and “collegiality” are not only frequently used concepts in educational research and school practice, they have also been promoted as decisive factors contributing to school improvement and teacher development. The review of the research literature- presented in this article-, however, shows that those virtues and benefits are not as self-evident as one may think. It is argued that collaboration and collegiality can take different forms and contribute to different agendas, not all of which can be positively valued. Furthermore a more balanced view on collegiality versus autonomy is needed. Simplistic claims about the benefits of collaboration turn out to be as little warranted as negative judgments about teacher autonomy. Properly understanding and evaluating collaboration and collegiality can only be achieved by taking into account the organizational context of the school. Both a cultural perspective (focusing on the processes of sense-making, the shared values and norms) and a micropolitical perspective (explicitly addressing issues of power, interests and influence) are needed to disentangle and understand them. In the same vein, professional learning communities in schools –in which collaboration and collegiality are supposed to play a key role- ought to be conceived of not so much as structural arrangements, but rather as cultural and political environments aimed at allowing those forms of collaboration and collegiality to take place that really contribute to pupils' learning, teacher development and school.*

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