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All in this together? The reconstitution of policy discourses on teacher collaboration as governance in post-crisis Europe

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Abstract

With the rise of network governance, and its concomitant fragmentation of public education systems across Europe, international studies have recommended teacher collaboration as a means to bring educational stakeholders together. Yet, despite some agreement over the potential benefits to student, professional and organisational learning, there is limited comparative research into the policy response of national governments to this recommendation and the discourses in which any initiatives might be embedded. Such inquiry is important during a time of decreased public investment in education when policymakers might seek to encourage 'alternative' forms of collaboration. Employing Fairclough's three-dimensional framework to Critical Discourse Analysis, this article compares dominant policy discourses on collaboration in England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. Our findings reveal restricted discourses on *teacher* collaboration in these national contexts. Rather, in line with a global modernisation agenda for education, *organisational* collaboration and private actor engagement support the shift towards network governance while developing new forms of hierarchical and market control. Future research might therefore consider the impact of these reforms on teachers' individual and collective practices at the school level and on public education more generally.

Keywords

Teacher collaboration, discourse, policy, governance, Europe

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Introduction

Over a period of three decades, policies of decentralisation, deregulation and privatisation have become an increasingly common feature of public education systems across Europe (Ball, 2012; Ball and Youdell, 2008; Verger et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2013; Winchip et al., 2019). While there exist contextual variations in the extent, manner and perceived successes of their implementation, these structural reforms have not only changed the nature of central governments' involvement in and influence over teachers' work (Ball, 2008; Mooney Simmie, 2014; Whitty, 2000), but legitimated the entry of a wide range of new public, private and voluntary organisations and actors onto the educational landscape (Ball, 2012; Ball and Junemann, 2012; Olmedo et al., 2013). Supported early on by intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the shift from government to governance by and through networks was considered central to the modernisation of education systems for post-industrial 21st century society (see OECD, 2003). However, in more recent years, network governance, with its underlying principles of partnership, shared responsibility and consensus-building (Orain Gipuzkoa, 2016), has been justified by national policymakers as a means to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public sector administration. In England, particularly, it has provided centre-right governments with a convenient policy narrative with which to address the wicked problems created by 'big government' and a broken economy (Rhodes, 2017). Indeed, at the 2009 Conservative Party Conference, David Cameron, then Leader of the Opposition and future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (2010–2016), argued: 'if we pull together, come together, work together – we will get through this together' (Cameron, 2009). From this perspective, 'the minimal state' (Rhodes, 2017) would appear to promote maximal societal engagement.

While undeniably appealing, the political rhetoric of 'togetherness' conflicts with scholarly perceptions of increasing fragmentation in the delivery of public education and the development of the teaching profession (Courtney, 2015; Hudson, 2017; Leaton Gray and Whitty, 2010). Furthermore, it has been suggested that diversity of provision, in conjunction with additional quasi-market reforms of open enrolment, per capita funding and performance league tables, has created a culture of competition in and between institutions (Ball, 2008; Lupton, 2011; Sahlberg, 2012, 2016). Perhaps in partial response to this critique, teacher collaboration, within and beyond the school context, has become an ever more prominent feature of education policy recommendations by the self-same advocates of network governance (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015a, 2015b; European Commission, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; OECD, 2009, 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, their views have been reinforced by empirical and theoretical research which attests to the value of teacher collaboration to organisational and professional development (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Still, despite the apparent consensus between IGOs and certain members of the international scholarly community, it is noted that academic discourses on teacher collaboration are varied, contested and reflect a commitment to different values of educational change (Lavié, 2006). And although national reforms legislated to support teacher collaboration could be deemed equally diverse and ideologically based (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017), there remains limited critical analysis of the discourses in which these policy initiatives might be embedded. Such inquiry is important if we are to understand political stakeholders' perceptions of the function of teacher collaboration in wider governance contexts (Lavié, 2006).

In this article, we contribute to the growing international political and scholarly interest in both teacher collaboration and network governance by conducting a critical comparative analysis of policy discourses in three distinct European contexts: England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. We analyse five policy documents which, locally, have sought to influence teachers'

practices in the past decade. Employing Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional framework to Critical Discourse Analysis, we draw on the work of various theorists of network governance (for instance, Ball and Junemann, 2012; Jessop, 2001, 2015; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Rhodes, 2017; Thompson, 2010) to: a) compare the dominant discourses on teacher collaboration; b) explore whether and, if so, how these discourses privilege certain educational stakeholders over others; and c) enable critique of the policy texts within the political and socio-economic context of their production. In our analysis, we suggest that national policymakers have reconstituted the concept of teacher collaboration within an organisational logic which, to varying degrees in each jurisdiction, promotes the network as a principal mechanism of social coordination. Moreover, we argue that, in the context of decentralisation reforms and reduced public investment in education, policy discourses on organisational collaboration facilitate the standardisation of professional practice and enable the entry of private players into the field of public education. Thus, while central to the network, collaboration also works in the interests of the state and the market.

Our analysis is developed through five key sections. To situate our research within a wider socio-economic context, we first explore theories of network governance and describe briefly variations between its approach in the education systems of England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. Following this, we examine the findings of previous studies on teacher collaboration. Highlighting Lavié's (2006) meta-analysis, we illustrate how discourses on teacher collaboration might be associated with attempts to govern teachers and the education system more widely. In the subsequent section, we outline our methodological approach and the linguistic and social theoretical tools employed to analyse the documents. Finally, we present our three individual case studies before comparing the findings in the discussion section.

Network governance: contextual and theoretical considerations

Network governance has become a topic of increasing empirical and theoretical interest in the field of public administration (see Ball and Junemann, 2012; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Rhodes, 2017; Thompson, 2010; Raab et al., 2015; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). It has been claimed that governance by and through the network is an unintended consequence of the social interdependencies that emerged through the withdrawal of the state and subsequent neoliberal ideological processes of marketisation in the late 20th century (Rhodes, 2017). However, more recently, there appears to be a degree of political intentionality behind this shift in governing mechanisms as national governments seek alternative ways to manage the complexity of social relations (Jessop, 2001, 2015; Orain Gipuzkoa, 2016; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Rhodes, 2017). Certainly, with its capacity to bring new actors and organisations – public, private and voluntary – into the public policy domain, network governance has been considered a more efficient and democratic response to socio-economic coordination (Klijn, 2005; Klijn and Skelcher, 2007; Sørensen, 2005; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). But while the principle of 'self-organisation' features predominantly in certain scholarly definitions (for instance, Jessop, 2015; Orain Gipuzkoa, 2016), networks can be deliberately designed to serve distinct purposes (Rhodes, 2017; Thompson, 2010). Equally, previous studies have highlighted issues of fragmentation (Rhodes, 2017) and weak accountability in service delivery as expertise becomes dispersed amongst a greater, yet possibly more ideologically discrete and less transparent, range of stakeholders (Ball, 2008; Ehren and Perryman, 2017; Osborne, 2010). In terms of this latter trend, it is argued that there has been insufficient inquiry into the privatisation component of networks in public education and, specifically, the extent of its influence on policy direction (Ball and Junemann, 2012).

Despite some degree of scholarly consensus over the concept and its perceived strengths and limitations, network governance has taken on diverse forms in the education systems of the three case-study countries under investigation. In England, the move to decentralised decision-making and multi-actor steering was facilitated by the neoliberal reform agenda of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative UK government (1979–1991) (Rhodes, 2017) which reduced the role of local authorities, introduced the local management of schools and established public-private partnerships in educational provision (Jones, 2016; Simon, 1991). Although subsequent administrations differed in the extent of their support for 'the minimal state' (Rhodes, 2017), the privatisation of education has been advanced by both the Left and the Right (Gunter and McGinity, 2014; Hatcher, 2011; Higham, 2014; Rayner et al., 2018). Indeed, since 2010, the mutual dependencies of the network have been reinforced by a notable trend towards 'contracting-out' (Rhodes, 2017). For Ball and Junemann (2012), this practice – which sees traditional public actors replaced with businesses, charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises – is emblematic of the substitutions inherent to the 'new' governance of education.

While the Netherlands has an institutional legacy of decentralisation and school autonomy that long preceded Thatcher, Dutch education underwent significant neoliberal-inspired changes in the eighties and nineties. During this period, central government relinquished its financial control over schools with a move to a lump-sum funding system, and local government handed over its management of publicly established schools to independent foundations. Since then, a significant number of (private as well as public) intermediary bodies have been established, representing both employers and employees. This has resulted in a growing number of complex networks, operating between the school and government levels, which are used by the Dutch government to try to 'steer' education (see, for example, Waslander et al., 2016). Although it has the potential to be more pluralistic, the consensus-oriented nature of 'steering through networks' has some alignment with the Dutch 'polder model' of consultation between social partners (Prak and Van Zanden, 2013).

In the Republic of Ireland, most schools are state funded but privately owned and managed with limited middle-tier administration between them and the Department for Education and Skills (Coolahan et al., 2017). Historically, the Catholic Church has been the main private actor in public education (today approximately 90% of primary schools and 50% of post-primary schools are Catholic). However, this looks set to change as a result of the growing influence of neoliberalism on Irish education policy (Lynch and Moran, 2006; Mooney Simmie, 2012, 2014; Skerritt, 2019; Skerritt and Salokangas, 2020). Of particular note, and perhaps inspired by similar developments in England, are recent proposals for the decentralisation of decision-making powers to schools and their wider communities through greater school autonomy. At a time of low public investment in education following the 2008 financial crisis, it is argued that this move might provide the foundations for increased privatisation and the entry of profit-making providers into the school sector (Skerritt, 2019; Skerritt and Salokangas, 2020).

The aforementioned national distinctions in policy approaches reflect the contingent and complex nature of governance and its articulation with government. For Jessop (2001, 2015), such variability necessitates a strategic-relational approach to the analysis of governance. From this perspective, the network is one of several modes of governance (others include the state and the market) which state managers can variously employ in a process of meta-governance or 'the governance of governance' (Jessop, 2015). An emphasis on one particular mode over another can involve different social actors and lead to distinct outcomes. Governments must therefore decide if, when and to what degree each form of governance should be utilised to manage discrete social situations. For instance, the network, characterised by reflexive self-organisation (Jessop, 2001, 2015), would appear to have the greatest potential for collaboration between a range of educational stakeholders. However, the increasing privatisation of school provision, with its capacity to exclude

public actors, might be considered a failure of network governance or, alternatively and perhaps strategically, a shift towards the market as the dominant mode of governance.

Teacher collaboration as a discourse of governance

Despite clear conceptual and functional synergies, there is limited research on professional collaboration in and through network governance (see, for instance, Ahujia, 2000; Bryson et al., 2006). Indeed, in the field of education, most studies of teacher collaboration (or related concepts of 'professional learning community', 'community of practice', 'teacher teams') focus on its potential and/or actual contribution to teacher, pupil, school and system development rather than the governing context in which it takes place (see European Commission, 2015a, 2015b; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017; OECD, 2009, 2014a, 2014b; Schleicher, 2016; Tschannen-Moran et al. (2000); Vangrieken et al., 2015). When initiated by the profession, teachers' individual engagement in collaborative practices has been positively associated with self-efficacy, pedagogical innovation, job satisfaction, and the attractiveness of the profession (European Commission, 2015; OECD, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017; Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). Equally, at the level of the profession, it is considered a means to break through occupational and organisational norms which can lead to isolated classroom practices and limit opportunities for collective learning (European Commission, 2015a, 2015b). Thus, the 'official' discourse presents a decidedly positive, albeit somewhat idealistic, perspective of teacher collaboration; the implication is that if teachers work together, the benefits are manifold.

Offering an alternative stance, Lavié (2006) challenges the apparent homogeneity of this discourse and the educational change initiatives it supports. In his meta-analysis of existing academic research on teacher collaboration, he has identified five dominant discourses which he defines accordingly:

- *Cultural discourses* describe teacher collaboration as being embedded in cultural forms that blur the boundaries between personal and professional and stimulate interdependency and collective responsibility.
- *Effectiveness and improvement discourses* depict collaboration as a product of cultural management led by the school's principal in so-called effective schools.
- *Community discourses* embed teacher collaboration in a vision of schools as communities, where contractual models of relationships are transcended in pursuit of more inclusive, humanizing environments.
- *Restructuring discourses* elaborate the idea of a "new professional" who is capable of getting involved in collaborative practices within an ever-learning organization.
- Finally, *critical discourses* articulate an approach to teacher collaboration that integrates democratic practices, community participation, and shared reflection on teaching as a social and political praxis (Lavié, 2006: 775).

Though Lavié (2006) does not treat the theme of governance explicitly, it could be argued that cultural discourses, underpinned with notions of informality, interdependence and trust, align well with conceptions of the network. By contrast, school effectiveness and improvement discourses, which are managerial, goal-oriented and tend to promote interactions through activities of professional development, fit more with state-bureaucratic mechanisms of educational governance. However, this analysis is somewhat vulnerable to critique since the discourses emerge from academic research, rather than government policy documents, and there is little acknowledgement of the governance contexts in which the original studies were conducted. Perhaps of greater

significance for teachers, the first four discourses would seem to promote changes in behaviour and practice, whether through engagement with a wider range of stakeholders or expansion or redefinition of the professional role. Indeed, it is the underlying intention of such discourses which provides substance to the final critical discourse. For while teacher collaboration is largely promoted without question, certain scholars note that there is little critical examination of the purposes behind this approach to pedagogical practice. Such inquiry is important to our understanding of professional discourses as 'a powerful instrument of occupational change and social control at macro, meso and micro levels' (Evetts, 2009: 20). Moreover, in a period of cuts to public investment in education across the European Union (Voss et al., 2017), there is a need to investigate the type of educational collaborator encouraged at policy level.

Methodology

England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland were chosen as the units of analysis for this qualitative case study. In addition to their geographical proximity, these countries have important political similarities; all are long-standing members of the European Union[1] (European Union, 2019a, 2019b) and, in recent years, have been led by centre-right majority or coalition governments (Krouwel, 2012; McDonald, 2016; Wintour, 2010). However, to avoid the trap of 'methodological nationalism' (Dale and Robertson, 2009), and mindful of Ball's (1998) contention that 'national policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage' (126), we position our analysis within a wider modernisation agenda in which network governance has been promoted as a means to create flexible, reflexive and societally responsive schools and education systems (Commission of the European Communities, 2007a, 2007b; OECD, 2003). Certainly, after the 2008 financial crisis and within the framework of the European Semester, EU policymakers called for a more efficient and effective approach to teachers' professional learning and development (European Commission, 2012a). For instance, in 2014, the European Commission recommended that Member States 'explore the potential of enhanced cooperation, partnerships and networking with a broad range of stakeholders in the design of teacher education programmes' (Council of the European Union, 2014, C183/22). An examination of the similarities and differences in policy discourses on teacher collaboration in the three contexts will therefore not only respond to a comparative research lacuna but is timely for its investigation of the impact of multi-scalar modes of governance on teachers' work.

Analytical approach

To achieve the overall research aim, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed as a methodology. Analysts of this particular approach (for instance, Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 2014; Wodak and Meyer, 2009) seek to explore 'how discourse systematically constructs versions of the social world' (Rogers, et al., 2005: 371). Set within a critical realist paradigm, which treats structure and agency as two analytically distinct social phenomena (see Archer, 2008; Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998), CDA assumes that discourse, over time, can be causally efficacious (Fairclough, 2010). Thus, from this philosophical perspective, policy discourses on teacher collaboration might contribute to the construction of future conditions of educational governance.

Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional framework was adopted for the analysis of the policy documents. Here, discourse is understood as (a) a language text, spoken or written; (b) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation); and (c) sociocultural practice. Analysis therefore involved a linguistic description of the texts, an interpretation of the relationship between discursive processes and the texts, and subsequent explanation of the relationship between the discursive

processes and the texts (Fairclough, 2010). Modelling this framework, and to ensure coherence between the three case studies, our analysis is structured in response to the following three questions:

1. What are the dominant policy discourses on teacher collaboration?
2. Whose voices were privileged in the texts and their processes of production?
3. What is the governance context of these discourses?

This analytical approach enabled exploration of the dialectical relations between discourse and 'the deep-rooted extra-discursive structural conditions that shape the effectiveness of state power' (Jessop, 2001: 167). Additionally, CDA attends to the exercise of power *through* discourse (Van Dijk, 1993; Van Leeuwen, 1993). Thus, in highlighting the ideological basis of discourses on teacher collaboration, we were able to interrogate 'common-sense' assumptions about language which can legitimise exploitative social relations (Fairclough, 1989, 1994). However, acknowledging that CDA has a distinctly realist ontology, we accept that modes of governance cannot be reduced to discourse or vice-versa (Danermark et al. 2002; Sayer, 2000). Our study should therefore be considered an exploratory contribution to the growing body of discursive research on teacher policy (for instance, Beck, 2008; Kennedy and Doherty, 2012).

Given the significance of the dialectic between discursive and non-discursive (material) dimensions (Fairclough, 2012), this study adopted a transdisciplinary theoretical approach to analysis drawing on the aforementioned social and sociological theories of governance. For the textual analysis, we employed certain features of Halliday's (2014) theory of Systemic Functional Linguistics to understand how meaning was made through the functional organisation of structure and systemic patterns of choice. Particular focus was placed on the linguistic choices made by the text producers, the value of certain words to specific social groups, the degree of agency in teachers' collaborative practices, and the level of obligation under which teachers were to collaborate. To establish how interdiscursivity functions, we assessed the degree of lexical cohesion in and between the policy documents. Finally, attention was given to logogenesis, namely, how meaning developed across each text.

Documentary research

In this comparative study, a 'document' encompassed three specific genres of policy text: a policy framework, an action plan and a government white paper. Although every effort was made to ensure comparability of policy documents, the differences in genre reflect cultural distinctions between the policy-making processes in the case study contexts. Moreover, our purpose was to analyse discourses on teacher collaboration; it was therefore important to select documents which were considered to have had significant impact on such practice. Those chosen for analysis were:

England

- *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010* (Department for Education (DfE), 2010);
- *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016);

Netherlands

- *Teachers Agenda 2013-2020: the teacher makes the difference* (Lerarenagenda 2013-2020: de leraar maakt het verschil) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (OCW), 2013);

Republic of Ireland

- *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* (Department of Education and Skills, 2016);
- *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning* (The Teaching Council, 2016).

The documents were produced between 2010 and 2016, in the period following the 2008 global financial crisis and subsequent economic recession. All were developed under centre-right majority or coalition governments. The documents were available online and downloaded and stored electronically for subsequent analysis. The following section outlines our main findings.

Findings

England

When a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office in May 2010, David Cameron, then Conservative Prime Minister, spoke of his desire for cultural change in England. With claims of the biggest budget deficit in the G20, he proposed large-scale public service reform to remove the wasteful bureaucracy of central and local government by increasing decentralisation, improving transparency, and encouraging private capital investment (Cameron, 2010). In an apparent move away from Thatcherite individualism (Scott, 2011), his vision of 'The Big Society' was marketed through the rallying cry that 'we're all in this together' (Cameron, 2010). This re-articulation of the neoliberal settlement would be legitimated further in the education sector through two white papers, one produced under a centre-right coalition (2010–2015) and the other (following the 2015 general elections) under a Conservative majority government (2015–2017): *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010* (DfE, 2010) and *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016). Despite a professed aim to raise the status of teachers – significant during a recruitment and retention crisis – both documents focus predominantly on structural reforms and the creation of a school-led system of improvement. It is therefore interesting to analyse discourses on teacher collaboration in light of this new organisational logic.

The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010 (DfE, 2010) (henceforth *SWP*) has eight chapters of which only one is partly dedicated to teachers. Thus, despite the assertion of the title, teachers and teaching are given little thematic status within the policy document. In fact, 'teacher' and 'collaboration' are not collocated at all. Teacher development is instead proposed through '*observing teaching and being observed*, having the opportunity to *plan, prepare, reflect and teach with other* teachers' (DfE, 2010: 19, authors' own emphases). While such activities might convey state-level trust in the profession, they are founded on neoliberal principles of individual freedom. According to the Coalition the bureaucracy of current professional training models inhibits teachers' ability to '*work with* others to develop effective practice' (DfE, 2010: 19 authors' own emphasis). However, there are discursive tensions in the text. Far from the creation of a professional community, peer observation and the concept of the 'open classroom' might be considered part of a wider discourse of professional accountability to the self-improving school-led system (Hargreaves, 2010). Moreover, further proposals to increase transparency - through inspections and league tables, a more prescriptive 'back to basics' curriculum and, in *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016) (henceforth *EEE*), a new standard for teachers' professional development - could restrict teachers' capacity for professional autonomy and pedagogical innovation.

A discourse of *organisational* collaboration is dominant across the two policy documents. Significantly, the principal means for teacher collaboration will be through Teaching Schools, an initiative which enables 'outstanding' schools and teachers to lead on professional learning and 'broker partnerships' across a cluster of institutions. In *SWP* (DfE, 2010), the Coalition states its

desire to develop a national network of these schools based on the teaching hospital model. Here, the alignment of educational and healthcare providers appeals to ideologies of professional status and emphasises the institutional location of practitioner development. Prioritising practical over theoretical knowledge, the Teaching School model of professional learning reduces the role of universities and local authorities in initial and continuing education. This policy intention is reinforced in *EEE* (DfE, 2016) where the Conservative government supports 'a common approach to professional development' through the expansion of school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) programmes. Consequently, a 'what works' discourse emerges through the promotion of 'best practice' at the local level.

Within this discourse of organisational collaboration, schools are rebranded as 'academies' and 'free schools' within an inter-organisational network of trusts, chains and federations. In *SWP* (DfE, 2010), the Coalition plans to extend the Academies Programme of the previous New Labour government which would allow all schools to *choose* conversion 'providing they *work in partnership with* a high performing school that will help support improvement, or another sponsor' (DfE, 2010: 54, authors' own emphasis). Thus, in the school market, 'failing' institutions are 'weak' and collaboration is reconstituted as 'support' and 'sponsorship' from those who are 'strong' within and outside the school system. Yet, the motivation to collaborate is not only academic; it is hoped that institutions will manage their finances better through economies of scale and sharing best financial practice. In fact, to promote inter-school collaboration, stronger schools will be offered 'a new collaboration incentive' (DfE, 2010: 14) of additional funding. By contrast, in *EEE* (DfE, 2016), all schools will be *forced* to academise. Here, multi-academy trusts are promoted as a means to collaborate but academies must also 'work with' voluntary, business and statutory agencies. This collaborative discourse crosses public and private boundaries and emerges through organisational rather than professional linkages. Despite their reimagining as 'families of schools', the publication of performance data, so that institutions can ostensibly 'learn from each other', supports discourses of comparison and competition.

Central to collaboration in the new inter-organisational context is the educational leader. 'Excellent' headteachers can become Local and National Leaders of Education and support their peers in other schools. In *SWP* (DfE, 2010), the professed policy aim of the Coalition is to create 'productive working partnerships' (28). However, in a declarative statement in *EEE* (DfE, 2016), it is asserted that 'the country's best school leaders know what works' (9) thus the Conservative government seeks to ensure that capacity is spread through system leaders who will mentor, coach and, significantly, evaluate the quality of education in other schools. So, while collegiality is seemingly promoted, a discourse of managerialism emerges. The resounding message is one of top-down school improvement rather than bottom-up teacher development.

This leadership dimension is perhaps expected given the highly decentralised education system in which schools in England now operate. Indeed, the privileging of certain leaders' voices as policy evidence is noticeable within *SWP* (DfE, 2010). Amongst the in-text citations and vignettes are the perspectives of academy leaders, executive principals, CEOs of academy trusts, National Leaders of Education and, indicating policy inspiration from across the Atlantic, charter school leaders. The educational leaders in England – some with links at the highest political level as Department for Education advisors or Conservative Party donors – remark on purported school improvements as a result of reduced bureaucracy and the increased 'freedom' of academisation. Representatives of federations, trusts and chains emphasise particularly the standardisation of policy and practice at school level and the financial benefits of collaboration through shared services, contracts and even staff. Their statements reveal consensus with the autonomy-accountability reform agenda of the centre-right Coalition, ostensibly influenced by the 'best' performers in the OECD's PISA rankings, but actually based on structures from 'less successful' systems such as

Sweden and the USA. By contrast, there is a notable absence of teachers' voices in the policy document. These exclusions are perhaps not so surprising given teacher trade unions' marginalisation from policy processes following the abolition of the social partnership by Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education.

The privileging of the organisation and structural reforms over the occupation and its professional needs could be said to have had a considerable impact on teachers' work in England. Since 2010, the media have raised concerns over high staff turnover (Mansell, 2015), increased workload and reduced time for professional development (Garner, 2015). Moreover, despite the two white papers' emphasis on the development of positive inter-organisational relations, there have been reports of aggressive takeovers of 'weaker' schools by large academy chains (Stewart, 2010; Walker, 2013) and the abandonment of struggling schools (Perraudin, 2017). Thus, for some practitioners, collaboration has been experienced as *coerced* or *contingent* rather than informal and collegial. More critically, at a time of real-term school budget cuts and teacher pay freezes, 'collaboration incentives' could be considered a subversive way to gain educators' consent to wider system reform.

Netherlands

The teaching profession in the Netherlands is currently a topic high on the political and public agenda. As well as recent teacher movements, demanding better pay and working conditions, 2017 saw the Teaching Profession and Teachers Register Act (*Wet Beroep Leraar en Lerarenregister*) come into force. This act is particularly significant as it outlines for the first time a professional statute and standard for teachers. It also emphasises the importance of teacher autonomy and (receiving much criticism from within the profession) requires that all teachers complete and register a minimum number of certified, in-service training hours. Together with further education grants, the Teachers Register forms a key part of a governmental action plan to strengthen and professionalise teaching. In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science published *Teachers Agenda 2013-2020: the teacher makes the difference (Lerarenagenda 2013-2020: de leraar maakt het verschil)* (OCW, 2013) (henceforth *Teachers Agenda*). This report outlines the main challenges facing teachers and teacher training up to the year 2020, and the actions and initiatives being developed to address them. *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013) can be understood as a vehicle to achieve broader educational goals, such as those set out by the *Quality Agendas* (OCW, 2007; 2008) and the *National Agreement on Education (Nationaal Onderwijsakkoord)* (OCW, 2013). Given its political significance and comprehensive view, the document is an excellent source for understanding, from a policy perspective, the prominence and direction given to teacher collaboration in strengthening the profession.

Teachers Agenda (OCW, 2013) is built on seven themes: three address teacher training and the fourth aims to ensure a good start in teaching for newly qualified teachers. The remaining three themes are more concerned with professional practice and the teaching environment ('the development of schools as learning organisations', 'all teachers to be competent and qualified', and 'working towards a strong professional organisation'). While we may expect to find the promotion of teachers' collaborative practices within these themes, discourses on teacher collaboration are notably limited. The term *samenwerking* (literally translated as 'working together') is present yet is used almost exclusively in reference to *organisational* collaboration, particularly between teacher-training colleges and schools. The same is true for the concept of 'partnership' (or derivatives thereof). Other terms associated with teacher collaboration equally fail to engage with the *process* of collaboration. 'Team', for example, is used several times in reference to the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, but with no discussion of the nature of teamwork. Similarly, the importance

of 'trust' – considered essential for effective collaboration – is only recognised in relation to performance assessment (trust needed for effective peer review) and individual development (the trust and space needed by teachers to 'work on their own professionalisation' (OCW, 2013: 6). On only one occasion is teacher collaboration mentioned directly: in reference to the work of *Leraren met Lef* (Teachers with Guts), a grassroots teacher organisation which promotes bottom-up teacher empowerment through idea-sharing in regional and national meetings and workshops.

The potential role played by school-based collaboration in improving teaching and learning is barely mentioned in *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013). The dominant discourse relates to a more formal, hierarchical and external type of collaboration. With the importance of teacher certification and competence (theme six) repeatedly stressed, this fits into a construction of professional development based on credentialism and individual performance. *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013) aims to professionalise teachers in a number of ways. As well as the important contribution made by in-service training (recorded in the Teachers Register) and a push for more highly educated teachers (through the availability of further education grants), it also places a significant responsibility on school management. Besides offering good career trajectories for staff who develop themselves professionally, *employers* are encouraged to undertake annual development interviews, steer team development, and reward good performance (OCW, 2013: 22). In keeping with this model of corporatisation in education, the report also urges managers to encourage 'collegial consultation'. The extent to which this should be considered akin to teacher collaboration is unclear. For instance, underlining the performative discourse, the term 'peer review' is used several times throughout the document and is encouraged within both schools and teacher-training colleges. Conversely, more process-oriented terms such as 'peer learning' were not found.

The action plan, it is stressed, is the product of an intensive period of consultation with hundreds of teachers and other education professionals across the country. Yet is it not 'teachers' who dominate the report; rather, great importance is placed on the successes and needs of organisations and the use of external experts, particularly those from the private sector. Amongst the initiatives outlined in theme five of the report, 'developing schools as learning organisations' is a clear example. Schools are encouraged to be 'outward-looking' and urged to strengthen relationships between training colleges, universities and the business community. Schools that enable teachers to receive targeted guidance through external coaching are also praised and actions that encourage this are spotlighted. These include 'the hybrid teacher', which connects teachers and principals with employees in the business world, the (now completed) *School aan Zet* (Schools have the Initiative) programme, which links schools with external 'knowledge experts', and the work of the McKinsey & Company-created *leerKRACHT* (teachingFORCE) foundation which, amongst other ideas, partners schools with top Dutch companies.

Not only is it striking that teacher collaboration is all but absent from the report, but so is any real discussion of school-based practice. Instead, the report focuses on the image of the profession; how to make it more attractive (particularly to men) and how to improve the calibre of applicants. Contextualising these findings offers some insight here. On a practical level, given that the teacher shortage in the Netherlands is reportedly amongst the worst in the EU (European Commission 2013), this 'rebranding' of the profession is perhaps unsurprising. On a more ideological level, it is important to stress that Dutch schools (officially, school boards) are some of the most autonomous in the world, with over 90% of curricular and administrative decisions made at the level of the school board or lower (OECD 2016b). The freedoms that they have in terms of organisation and direction are closely protected, with the government role largely restricted to quality assurance.[2] This may help explain why *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013) stays away from direct attempts to influence collaborative practices. In fact, in the Education Professions Act 2006 (*Wet op de beroepen in het onderwijs* or *Wet BIO*), this responsibility was handed to school boards.[3] The

decentralised structure of governance might also go some way towards explaining the privileged position of organisations in the agenda, with the Dutch government leaning on these stakeholders to help 'steer' policy through to implementation (see Waslander et al., 2016). However, while keeping a respectable distance from school practices, the report does not appear to even acknowledge the value of autonomous, collaborative working cultures.

Perhaps of greater concern are the ways in which the practices and norms that *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013) does promote could *negatively* impact collegial relationships. Namely, policies which foster reward, status and narrow, output-based interpretations of professional achievement may actually incite teacher *competition* over collaboration (Evetts 2011). While there exists little research on the matter, and it might be too soon to investigate whether and how such policy has impacted practices, it is interesting to note that a recent OECD review called for strengthened collaboration in and between Dutch schools (OECD 2016a). The recommendation was made following research which revealed that the Netherlands scored lower than the OECD average in all but one collaboration-based activity. While the urgency to attract quality teachers and professionalise teaching in the Netherlands is thus understood, the means by which *Teachers Agenda* (OCW, 2013) aims to do this – more qualifications and certification, more evaluation and closer ties to external experts – need to be better balanced with policies which encourage more supportive and collaborative cultures within schools themselves.

Republic of Ireland

In recent years, public investment in education in the Republic of Ireland has reached the OECD average (OECD, 2013). However, as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, the Irish government has begun to assess how it reallocates resources to ensure sustained investment. In this economic context, two policy instruments have been produced which appear to have divergent goals for the teaching profession. *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning* (The Teaching Council, 2016) (henceforth *Cosán*) was developed by the Teaching Council, the statutory professional standards body for teaching in the Republic of Ireland. This policy text constitutes the first national framework for teachers' professional learning. Revealing a high level of intertextuality with the Council's *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (The Teaching Council, 2011), continuous professional development (CPD) is defined as 'life-long teacher learning' and comprises the full range of educational experiences designed to enrich teachers' professional knowledge, understandings and capabilities throughout their careers. In the same year that this profession-led policy was produced, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published a strategy statement entitled *Action Plan for Education 2016–2019* (DES, 2016) (henceforth *Action Plan*). In contrast to the Teaching Council, the DES provides a policy, legislative and funding framework for education and skills development from early years through to adult and second chance education. When launched, the *Action Plan* was considered a pioneering development for the education sector. Building on the model of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) *Action Plan for Jobs* (DBEI, 2012), it outlines the hundreds of actions and sub-actions to be implemented between 2016 and 2019.

In *Cosán*, the Teaching Council acknowledges a correspondence between teacher collaboration and effective CPD, especially in terms of improvement to teachers' instructional practice. It underlines particularly the importance of 'meaningful' or 'purposeful' collaboration (The Teaching Council, 2016: 11–12) which is claimed to lead to more relevant, profession-led development. This is emphasised through the declarative statement that '*in working together* as part of existing school planning processes, *many teachers identify their own professional development needs* and plan for learning opportunities to meet those needs' (The Teaching Council, 2016: 20, authors' own

emphases). Such an acknowledgement is very much in line with the value of shared professional responsibility which underpins the work of the Teaching Council. This value is equally evident in the discourse of collegiality which infuses the Teaching Council philosophy of effective teacher CPD. For this organisation, collaborative teacher learning is considered 'the most important aspect of successful, positive CPD' (The Teaching Council, 2016: 12).

Thus, the discourses within the *Cosán* framework recognise the value of teacher collaboration to professional as well as pupil and school development. In fact, this document invites teachers to appreciate

> the complex ways in which their learning can benefit their students (not just in terms of student learning outcomes, but more broadly in terms of their levels of motivation, interest, engagement, and enjoyment), school culture and the wider school community (The Teaching Council, 2016: 10).

This community discourse represents a counter-narrative to the more contrived understanding of the nature and purpose of teachers' work in the *Action Plan* (DES, 2016). Here, under 'Goal 3 - Help those delivering education services to continuously improve', the DES refers to the efforts of the Teaching Council to develop a national framework for teacher CPD. Although this gives an impression of interdiscursivity between the *Action Plan* and *Cosán*, closer examination leads to a different conclusion. For instance, the concept of 'teacher collaboration' is almost entirely absent from the *Action Plan*. In fact, the term 'collaboration' is subsumed under reforms of teacher education and induction which support 'peer learning and peer exchange' (DES, 2016: 31) and the emergent discourses are more closely aligned with 'implementing a new quality framework for schools' (DES, 2016: 4). Thus, in contrast to the Council's promotion of collaborative cultures, the *Action Plan* forms part of a DES commitment to develop a lifelong learning approach to teacher development, equip teachers with the right skills for 21st century teaching and learning, and improve school leadership. To this end, it advocates the establishment of a 'Centre of Excellence' to support in-school improvement and peer exchange. Paradoxically, the creation of this external body could be said to formalise professional learning opportunities and remove collaborative practices from the institutions which would benefit most.

Similar to *Cosán* (The Teaching Council, 2016), the *Action Plan* (DES, 2016) contends that educational institutions must become learning organisations, continuously improving, evolving, and learning from best practice. Indeed, the objectives to improve quality, promote excellence and innovation, and increase autonomy under Goal 3 are equally applicable to the learning intentions of *Cosán*. However, under Action 73, the Irish government states its intention to publish inspection reports with clearer evaluative judgements, which would be available to parents (DES, 2016). It is therefore evident that the *Action Plan* (DES, 2016) contains a stronger discourse of accountability than *Cosán* (The Teaching Council, 2016), which could potentially undermine the extent to which Irish teachers engage in profession-led, collaborative development opportunities.

The Teaching Council was adamant that teachers' voices would be pivotal in the evolution and on-going development of *Cosán*. The intention was to keep learning in its rightful place: 'at the heart of the learning profession' (The Teaching Council, 2011: 6). The manner in which *Cosán* was produced – involving extensive consultation with the teaching profession – underscored this commitment. The consultation process was not initiated by a pre-prepared document; rather, teachers' initial views were invited before the drafting process commenced. Indeed, the two phases of consultation included workshops, stakeholder meetings, online surveys, and email correspondence. Following this, it was anticipated that teachers would engage with *Cosán* in their own contexts and future feedback would inform the ongoing evolution of the framework. Other stakeholders were represented through the Teaching Council which comprises 37 members, including primary and

post-primary teachers, and nominees from parents' associations, colleges of education, school management and the Minister for Education and Skills. In addition, there is evidence that *Cosán* was informed by extensive engagement with academic research on the importance of teacher collaboration to professional development and theories which suggest that 'teachers' learning should be socially constructed in an environment that supports teacher interdependency' (The Teaching Council, 2016: 12). *Cosán* conveys a profession-led approach to teachers' professional learning. Framed as the principal architects of their own effectiveness, teachers are 'intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their professional development and steer the course of their own learning journeys' (The Teaching Council, 2016: 7).

This is a stark contrast to the *Action Plan* which, permeated with discourses of quality assurance and performativity, aims to make the Irish education and training system the best in Europe over the next decade (DES, 2016: 1). While many schools in the Republic of Ireland are locally owned and managed by private (mainly religious) organisations, the school system is steered centrally by the Irish government through the Department of Education and Skills. Thus, the *Action Plan* was developed in a wider policy context which recognises the pivotal role of education and training in the economic recovery and continued future growth of the nation. It is interesting to note that the word 'excellence' is repeated 70 times in the *Action Plan* underlining the overall ambition of the Irish government. However, by linking education so explicitly to the economy, teachers could be construed more instrumentally as pawns in the pursuit of national economic success.

Discussion

While considered beneficial to students, teachers, schools and the wider community (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017; Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2007; Vangrieken et al., 2015), our comparative policy analysis reveals that teacher collaboration is not a government priority in all three contexts. Where teachers are encouraged to collaborate by policymakers, it is through 'deliberately designed' (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2017) activities; collaboration is reconstituted as peer exchange, peer review, peer observation, and collaborative planning and reflection. Clearly, the majority of these initiatives do not reflect a high level of teacher interdependence. Moreover, despite research evidence underlining the importance of time and trust to effective teacher collaboration (for instance, Tschannen-Moran et al., 2000), policymakers give no indication of how such working conditions might be created or enhanced. Indeed, in the context of wider proposals for the standardisation, monitoring and surveillance of professional development and practice, and increased accountability mechanisms at the school level, the development of collaborative cultures is somewhat challenged, while the outcomes of any collaborative activities are likely to be conservative. The focus of policies is predominantly on individual responsibility for professional development rather than collective responsibility for the development of the profession and the wider educational community. Drawing on the work of Lavié (2006), it could therefore be argued that the limited national policies of teacher collaboration are embedded within discourses of restructuring and school effectiveness and improvement, with the aim to create a new kind of professional suitable for a world-class education system in a competitive global economy. Only the *Cosán* (The Teaching Council, 2016) framework, constructed by teachers for teachers, could be positioned within cultural and community discourses, but the potential benefits of its proposals might be compromised by the more performance-oriented *Action Plan* (DES, 2016).

The concomitant shifts towards network governance (Jessop, 2001, 2015) are enabled through historical and religious traditions of school autonomy and more recent neoliberal ideological reforms of decentralisation and deregulation. Underlining the contingent nature of governance (Jessop, 2001, 2015), 'the network' can be identified to a greater (England, the Netherlands) or

lesser (Republic of Ireland) degree across the three case studies. In these governance contexts, the policy trend is therefore to consider collaboration as an activity which extends beyond teachers and their institutions. Mirroring governing patterns in the wider professions (see Brandsen and Honingh, 2013; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2011), the school is placed at the centre of an inter-organisational network of educational and non-educational establishments, both public and private. However, this location does not support a discourse of community or increased democratisation; rather, through New Public Management practices, the explicit promotion of business links, and the language of 'sponsorship', 'partnership' and 'chains', collaboration takes on a distinctly corporate identity.

During a period of real-terms funding cuts in England, strong schools must be incentivised to collaborate; for some, collaboration in the self-improving school-led system (Hargreaves, 2010) might emerge out of financial necessity and the need to survive through economies of scale. Beyond this particular case, the general message seems to be that problems within public education cannot be solved by public educators alone. Learning from best practice means learning from best business practices. Collaboration is embedded within discourses of privatisation and corporatisation which correspond with European Union recommendations to seek out alternative collaborative partnerships to more traditional public sector associations (Council of the European Union, 2014, C183/22).

According to Jessop, meta-governance requires a 'repertoire of answers' (Orain Gipukzoa, 2016). Thus, while the network is ostensibly the principal mode of social coordination, education policy proposals in England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland suggest that governments continue to rely on hierarchical and market-oriented forms of control. In this complex 'eduscape' (Stronach, 2010), any notion of teacher collaboration must be facilitated by school and system leaders, organisations, external experts or hybrid teachers. Importantly though, national policymakers in all three contexts take the lead on the form these collaborations take. Consequently, policy discourses do not support the informal, culturally embedded and profession-led collaborations defined by scholars such as Hargreaves and O'Connor (2017), rather the managerialist, top-down development of teachers. Collaboration is being done *to* teachers, not *by* teachers. However, what is meaningful and purposeful to the wide range of stakeholders who design, implement and organise collaborative practices might diverge considerably from that understood by teachers themselves. Working with external others has the potential to both advance and dilute teacher knowledge and status within a diverse network of 'experts' from in and outside the profession. At an institutional level, these new voices have the capacity to reframe the purpose and meaning of public education (Ball and Junemann, 2012).

Conclusion

In this article, we have compared dominant policy discourses on teacher collaboration in three European policy contexts: England, the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland. Influenced by Lavié (2006), we sought to understand how national policies of teacher collaboration, through the nature of the activity and the type of collaborations encouraged, might relate to wider values on the governance of public education. Our critical analysis has revealed that discourses on teacher collaboration are limited; policies of professional learning and development align with discourses of school effectiveness and improvement and suggest the desire to create a new type of teacher. By contrast, *organisational* collaboration is promoted in various forms across the three contexts. These practices, which ostensibly encourage schools and their leaders to be more outward looking, are embedded within discourses of privatisation and corporatisation and a shift towards network governance. Clearly, in decentralised school systems, teachers and their leaders have an opportunity to define collaborative practices outside their national reform agenda. However, as teachers

adapt to employment within public-private networks, there is a need to understand the extent to which this new organisational logic shapes their day-to-day work and the development of both the profession and the wider system of education.

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Notes

1. At the time of production of this article, England, as a country of the United Kingdom (UK), was a member of the European Union (EU) (European Union, 2019a, 2019b). The UK left the EU on 31 January 2020.
2. The Dutch government was publicly reminded of this in 2008, when findings from a parliamentary enquiry into government-led educational innovations criticised its intrusion into school practices (Goetheer and Van der Vlugt, 2008).
3. Other responsibilities included promoting professionalisation and keeping competency files on teachers.

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