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Current reforms in the Maltese and Scottish educational contexts can only be fully implemented if teachers radically transform the way they teach. Teacher professional learning is the only mechanism that policy makers, school leaders and administrators have to achieve this. Teacher professional learning is, above all, situated within the specific social workplace environment of teacher practice. Thus, schools need to be recognised as important sites of professional learning for teachers. In Malta and Scotland teachers were asked about their professional learning to identify how the learning environment within individual schools affects professional learning. In both countries, collaboration and school leadership were key components in determining a school's learning environment. Data analysis led to the production of examples of expansive and restrictive features. Policy makers, school leaders and administrators can use these features to examine how schools operate in terms of helping or hindering professional learning in the school environment.

Old abstract

While teacher professional learning has been gaining more and more attention across the world from policy makers, regulatory bodies and individual practitionersMalta and Scotland have been making major changes to their school education systems. have also increased the significance of teacher professional learning. As teacher professional learning is, above all, situated within the specific social workplace environment of teacher practice, schools need to be recognised as important sites of professional learning for teachers. Sixteen teachers in Malta and ten teachers in Scotland were interviewed about their professional learning perspectives and experiences. The research aimed to identify how the learning environment within individual schools can facilitate or hinder their learning. In both countries, collaboration and school leadership were key components in determining a school's learning environment. Analysis of the data led to the production of examples of expansive and

restrictive features in school learning environments. Policy makers, school leaders and administrators could use these features to examine how schools operate in terms of helping or hindering professional learning in the workplace environment. Policy makers need to consider more closely the implications for teacher professional learning when devising policy. The current reforms in the Maltese and Scottish educational contexts can only be fully implemented if teachers radically transform the way they teach. We argue that an overlooked arena for teacher professional learning is within the school itself and through support and expansive workplace features practitioner learning and changes in practice can be facilitated.

The importance of environment for teacher professional learning in Malta and Scotland

Introduction

The rationale underlying this inquiry rests on the understanding that teachers' beliefs, and the meanings they ascribe to their social worlds, impact on their behaviour and their disposition towards learning. Learners actively construct knowledge and make sense of their worlds (Novak, 2010), thus it is necessary to consider how teachers construct their learning experiences, rather than how teachers engage in professional development programmes. As professionals, teachers' perceptions of professional learning will have a profound impact on how their professional learning is organised and on the contexts within which this learning takes place.

Teachers' learning is directly influenced by their social, cultural and professional environment, and by their professional identity. Learning is an ongoing process which can take place in all sorts of situations. Indeed, teachers learn at work in the absence of any programme or structure for learning (Hoekstra et al, 2007; Meirink et al, 2009). This inquiry, therefore, examines schools as important contexts within which teachers learn and aims to identify how the learning environment helps or hinders this learning.

There are major differences in the geographies and populations of Malta and Scotland, but there are similarities in terms of their education systems – both are in a period of great change and have reduced budgets for schools. While Malta is the most densely populated country in the European Union (National Statistics Office, 2014, p. xiii), Scotland has one of the lowest population densities (National Records of Scotland, 2012, p.16). Scotland is part of the United Kingdom but it has always

had a separate school system with different schooling structures and school examinations (Bryce and Dickson, 2013). While the two countries' geographies, climates and size differ, both countries have recently undergone a major overhaul of their school education system.

Education reforms

A series of reforms in the education system in Malta (EURYDICE, 2015) have culminated in 'The National Curriculum Framework' which the Ministry of Education and Employment launched in December 2012. The policy framework includes principles and objectives of the national curriculum, emphasising educational practices which affect teaching and learning practices, and providing direction at college and school level. A learning outcomes framework is currently being developed for the school curricula, which will impact on the way teachers plan, teach and assess. In Scotland, both school and teacher education are in the midst of great changes. A new common curriculum framework, from early years and primary school through to the end of secondary school and including community learning (ages 3 to 18 years), called Curriculum for Excellence, has been introduced and this is the biggest change to Scottish school education for many decades (Scottish Executive, 2004). The Donaldson Review (2010) of teacher education in Scotland has led to changes in initial teacher education, career long professional learning and partnership working between education authorities, schools and universities. For example, teachers in Scotland now have to undertake annual Professional Update under the auspices of the independent General Teaching Council for Scotland (2015).

In both countries reforms were being planned and implemented before the economic crisis of 2008 but even with reduced education budgets at schooland municipal level the changes have gathered

pace. In Scotland the curricular reforms were designed to produce rounded citizens ready to learn and adapt in the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century. The ensuing teacher education reforms are partly aimed at enabling teachers to deliver this more ambitious curriculum, and partly in response to the international evidence that the more highly educated the teacher workforce, the higher student attainment becomes. In Malta the reasoning behind the reforms was similar - to improve students' results for their own benefit but also to support the Maltese economy.

As the brief overview above demonstrates, both the current Maltese and Scottish educational contexts are characterised by changes which can only be fully implemented if teachers radically transform the way they teach. This is an example of how the way educational policies are devised and implemented can impact significantly on teachers' practices and teachers' professional learning experiences. Teachers need to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to critically analyse their own professional role within the wider context of teaching, and to take stock of their learning.

As Lenz (2011) observes, being a member of society signifies becoming an agent of development and change, not just adapting passively to given circumstances. Some of the changes in the two educational systems will impact on the choice of professional learning to be pursued and on the importance which particular strategies gain in teachers' classroom activities. For example, if teachers are to dedicate time every week for curriculum development, they will need to work more closely together, they may wish to meet colleagues from other schools, and to participate in national and international programmes. Furthermore, there is increasing pressure on teachers to develop learner-centred pedagogies focused on learning through experimentation, systematic thinking, problem solving, critical thinking and skills to effectively navigate in knowledge networks (Mompoint- Gaillard, 2011). Teachers are under greater pressure to develop new responses to evolving social and community needs. Teachers will, therefore, need to be highly adaptable and teacher professional

learning initiatives will have to generate the required knowledge, skills and attitudes (ibid).

With all these changes to teaching and learning practices it is important to explore how professional learning is understood by teachers themselves and how they see it being supported at a local school level in terms of enabling teachers to learn and sustain their own learning dispositions.

Theoretical framework

This research is based on a situative and socio-cultural understanding of learning. To understand a complex social practice such as teacher professional learning, it is necessary to examine the situations in which knowers find themselves (Vygotsky, 1986), and recognise that cognition is both socially and culturally situated, Recent research in classrooms and other settings (Flores, 2005; Gherardi, 2009; Lave, 2009; Lieberman and Pointer Mace, 2010; Liestol, 2011) suggests that learning (in general) is far more contextual, social and distributed than earlier learning models had proposed. Individuals learn and gain knowledge through their lived experience of participation in the world. From this perspective learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting one's own deeply social nature as a human being.

This perspective has important implications for understanding the way teachers learn. It suggests that teachers learn from and with others in particular ways. We also see a need to recognise professional practice as a public contribution to be shared, used, shaped and understood by the community. This has implications for the design of professional learning. When learning is considered as part of social practice, attention is focused on the structure of social practice rather than the structure of pedagogy as the source of learning. When understood in this way, learning is not necessarily or directly

dependent on pedagogical goals or official agenda, even in situations in which these goals appear to be a central factor (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In research which attempts to answer the 'how' of teacher learning, learning is conceptualised as a change in cognition that can lead to changes in teaching practice (Hobson, Malderez, et al, 2009; Lave, 2009; Levin and Nevo, 2009). This cognitive strand sees teachers as active constructors of knowledge who make sense of the world and learn by interpreting events through their existing knowledge and beliefs. Hence, teacher learning can be partly defined as active processes in which teachers engage. These changes can become evident in the knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of teachers and relate to the acquisition of new skills, new concepts and new processes embedded in the work of teaching (Fishman, Marx, et al, 2003; Davis and Krajcik, 2005). Whilst accepting this theoretical position as a basis, teachers' behaviour can also be motivated by less rational aspects which involve their histories, needs, affectations and dispositions (Shanks, Robson and Gray, 2012). By taking these notions into account we are challenging the traditional conceptualisation of teacher professional learning as formal activities or events which take place inside or outside the school.

Collaboration has emerged as an important strand from the socio-cultural perspective on teacher learning (Orland-Barak and Tillema, 2006; Eatona and Carboneb, 2008; Fullan, 2008; McNally and Menter, 2009; Johnson, Lustick, et al, 2011; Fang, Lee, et al, 2012). It is widely believed that the most powerful forms of professional learning occur in schools among teams of teachers who intentionally and collegially learn together, and work collaboratively as part of their commitment to the successful achievement of their students (Hirsh and Hord, 2008). Thus, working relationships among teachers can make a substantial difference in the opportunities available for their professional learning and development (Smylie, Miller, et al, 2008). This collaborative perspective can be realised through partnerships, networks and other collaborative arrangements. Programmes organised in the learning

contexts of teachers, often in collaborative settings such as learning communities, are increasingly popular (Whitford and Wood, 2010; Priestley, Miller, et al, 2011). In collaborative settings, teachers can exchange ideas or experiences, develop and discuss new materials and receive feedback from colleagues (Meirink, Meijer, et al, 2007).

Wenger (2009) maintains that learning is also an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of one's communities. In the same manner, professional learning is rooted in the need to belong, to make a contribution to a community, and to understand that experience and knowledge are part of community property (Lieberman and Pointer Mace, 2010). Research suggests that teachers' professional commitments are enhanced when there are strong teacher communities promoting shared norms of practice (Talbert and McLaughlin, 1996).

A situative understanding of learning has been used in this research. The concept that teacher learning is situated in given contexts and cultures is particularly important because very often teaching experiences, as embedded within contexts of regions, history and culture, are varied and unique and so is the learning which occurs within these experiences. As Borko (2004) maintains, professional learning for teachers occurs in many different aspects of practice, including their classrooms, their school communities, and professional development courses or workshops. Such a perspective draws upon a learner-centred approach, one which encompasses a wide diversity of learning contexts and strategies. This leads Borko (2004) to affirm that in order to understand teacher professional learning, it must be studied "within these multiple contexts, taking into account both the individual teacher-learners and the social systems in which they are participant" (p.4). This stance has profound implications for the conceptualisation and organisation of professional learning. It can be argued that since various settings for teachers' learning will give rise to different kinds of knowing, teachers need opportunities to experience learning in new and different contexts. According to

Putnam and Borko (2000) an optimisation of learning opportunities, in terms of including the unique and varied contexts in which teachers learn, would render teaching practice more effective.

Methodology

This inquiry focuses on particular learning contexts and situations which generate specific learning experiences, while an identified group of teachers define the boundaries of the research. The primary method of data collection in both countries was semi-structured interview. This method enabled the researchers to focus on the meaning that participants make of their social reality and the meaning they give to particular phenomena. The research sample consisted of:

- Malta - Two interviews with 16 teachers from 3 different schools and an online community in which teachers held discussions about their professional learning

- Scotland – Two interviews with 10 new teachers from 10 different schools, their official continuing professional development (CPD) documentation and two online questionnaires sent out to 167 teachers

Qualitative methodology was chosen as it offers the possibility of presenting a multi-layered perspective of the nuances of social reality that does not privilege those in authority (Hesse-Biber 2010). As the methodological focus is qualitative the findings from this study are not generalisable. However, the findings may be generalised in a different sense by contributing to the creation of theories and applying them to other settings or contexts (Brannen 2005).

The interviews were all audio-taped and transcribed ad verbatim. Teachers were each interviewed twice over the course of a school year. The data was organised, accounted for, explained and made sense of in terms of the teachers' definitions of the situation. The qualitative data was analysed using

an iterative process with the compilation and coding of data. The results from the two studies were then brought together to see the differences and similarities between teachers' accounts of their professional learning. A mixed methods approach was used in the Scottish study with the analysis of the quantitative data leading to the shaping of the interview schedule and the qualitative data from the questionnaires being analysed alongside the qualitative interview data using the same codes and sub-codes. The response rates for the questionnaires in the Scottish study were 31.7% for the first questionnaire and 28.7% for the second. While the teachers in the Maltese study had varying lengths of service those in the Scottish study were all new teachers. Research ethics requirements of the University of Aberdeen were followed in both studies with informed voluntary consent given by all respondents and anonymity ensured through the use of pseudonyms and other measures to protect participants' identity. The authors collected the data separately, one in each country, and then worked together in the analysis and writing up of the research.

The aims of the research

The primary aim of this research was to understand how teachers in two different national contexts engage in professional learning on an individual and collegial basis. A second aim was to explore whether teachers' identity as learners influenced the way they engaged in professional learning. With data drawn from the two different contexts, we did not intend to compare or contrast teachers' actual professional experiences as influenced by their context, but rather to understand how teachers, in different contexts, learn. We considered how their work environments impact upon their learning. We were interested in the how, when and where the teachers were learning rather than the what (or content) of their professional learning.

Findings

As part of the research we explored the ways that teachers understand and conceptualise their professional learning and how they see themselves as learners.

1. **Teachers as learners**

While this is not the focus of this paper it is important to consider how the teachers in the two studies thought of themselves as learners. The teachers expressed their need for professional learning in relation to the challenges they feel they need to address in their classes, and also in relation to previous learning experiences and current competences. The data demonstrated that teachers are faced with a number of challenges on a daily basis. The teachers noted they are often required to modify their practice in order to employ their knowledge and skills effectively and to develop approaches necessary for learning to teach in an ever-changing reality. This leads them to a sense of needing to use as many opportunities as possible for learning and for continuous professional growth.

> **Rita:** *If you don't attend training for them, you'll get stuck in a rut and would not know how to approach the class the right way. And ... today you cannot just work on workbooks like, you need certain knowledge so you can give a certain input apart from the books*.
>
> Interview 1 (Malta)

Teachers referred to learning from trial and error, for example using technology in an activity for the first time or trying out something they had observed a colleague doing.

John: better to try and find a way of making it better than not to try it at all through being

scared to try.   Interview 2 (Scotland)

Teachers spoke of learning from their classroom experience, through discussions with colleagues,

from reflection and self-evaluation, from the observation of colleagues, from being shown how to do

things and from formal professional development activities. While the teachers in Scotland did refer

to some formal events such as training on specific technology, Masters courses, and other courses,

the majority of what they talked about when discussing their professional learning was related to

collaboration with and observation of colleagues. The teachers referred to learning in school on their

own or with other teachers, thus leading us to consider the teachers' learning environments.

2. Teachers' learning environments

Teachers' learning can be directly influenced by their social, cultural and professional environment,

and by their professional identity. The learning environment of a school can be understood through

the level of collaboration that takes place and a key factor in the expansive and/or restrictive nature of

the school can be the school's leadership. These features will be considered in turn.

Collaboration

The level of collaboration in the schools was noted by each of the teachers in their interviews. In

some schools there were high levels of collaboration between teachers, while in others there was

markedly less collaboration.

Christa: *... Sometimes we have meetings with Heads of Department ... and from these*

things one learns a lot. That is, that one hour a week I think is useful but then it must

come from you as well. If you have a free lesson like, you won't go and lock yourself

somewhere and stay marking copybooks or something like that the whole time. It is important to socialise with other teachers and ... you share and speak to them because ... Yes ok it is true, you would have many other things to do, correcting and planning ... I for instance take a lot of work home with me. That means that my work definitely does not end at half past two. Because I take a lot of work with me home. But it is important to speak with other teachers. That is, it must also be your own initiative to find the opportunity to do that thing.

Interview 2 (Malta)

Charmaine: *You share ideas right, at the same time, as we are saying, if you are in a situation you tackle it in a particular way, maybe someone else tackles it in a different manner and you find that it is a better strategy, or you say no, the way I tackled it is good in my opinion; I'd prefer my way of tackling it.*

Interview 1 (Malta)

Ellen: *So I was saying I find that [teacher learning community] quite a good way of learning because it's … it is professional talk and very focussed, but it's in an informal setting. And I think it's very good to find out what's happening in other schools*.

Interview 2 (Scotland)

On examining the data from both contexts, researchers noted that one of the most significant factors repeatedly raised in the discussions and the questionnaires is the concept of collaboration/collegiality and how this impacted on the teacher's learning. The teachers participating in this study often spoke of their teaching methods in relation to others, in terms of how they teach similarly to, or differently

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from their colleagues. They discussed with whom they collaborate, the opportunities which gave rise to this collaboration and the challenges which arise as a result of working in a community.

Beginning teachers in particular need opportunities to learn, together with their mentors, in a supportive environment which promotes time for collaboration, reflection, and a gradual acculturation into the profession of teaching.

> **Gina:** *I want to learn from them [veteran teachers], I want them to like impart what they know into us, or into me, but sometimes I feel like they're almost against you*.

> Interview 2 (Scotland)

The teacher Gina had a central mentor as part of her induction programme rather than an in-school mentor, and this seemed to create further hurdles for her. She met her mentor weekly and then had separate weekly meetings with her deputy head teacher and head teacher. She recounted that at each meeting she would be told that the other person should be approached to answer her questions. She did not feel that her colleagues were open to new ideas or suggestions. Gina's learning disposition is expansive and she is always searching for learning opportunities, but she was stifled due to the restrictive environment within which she worked.

It has been claimed that teachers have very little shared knowledge or experiences and learning to teach is a sink-or-swim affair (Lortie 1975). Teachers' isolation leads them to adopt an attitude of individualism where they trust only their own judgements and experiences. Schools themselves can be seen to be promoting this sense of individualism if they do not facilitate sufficient opportunities for teachers to interact. This kind of attitude is apparent in the responses of one of the Maltese teachers,

Robert (T4), who believes that teachers are ultimately working on their own so they must learn to cope in that way. An excerpt from an interview with him exemplifies this sense of individualism:

> **Robert:** *I believe that the problems I see, in class, are, they can be the same problems that you or any other teacher are seeing, but the way I address them or solve them, is different from someone else's. So in theory, it is good that we know, that is how to address a dyslexic student, but then, in those forty minutes of the lesson, everybody sees how to solve his own problems ...*

> Interview 1 (Malta)

The data yielded by teachers in this research study show how school culture, power and control and leadership structures influence the workplace site. Maria (T9) points out that some schools are more open to learning than others, because they are more receptive to innovative approaches and new ideas which teachers may bring with them from other schools.

> **Gertrude:** *I learn from the people surrounding me, both those I speak to, and in relationships, the people around me. I learn because I love to read, emm television – my favourite topics are Discovery, CNN and Euronews. Emm from the computer, from the internet, today one finds a lot of ideas. A lot of 'how to', how to help me my work. Then emm, from all of these I try and try ... then I build upon it.*

> Interview 2 (Malta)

Schools should be regarded as communities, not simply as sites for personal learning, but places for both individual and community learning. Norms of individualism and professional autonomy can be supplemented by the collective values of learning communities. Teachers' professional identity can also be developed through experiences of solidarity and collective work (Diniz-Pereira, 2005), a

process through which teachers are made aware of how they can contribute to the growth of each other's professionalism. A poor sense of community within the school may not allow teachers to critically appreciate the practice of their peers. Some data collected from the Maltese context exemplifies this point. Christa (T2), for instance, did not think it possible that she could enter her colleagues' classes to observe them or that others would observe her teaching. Sharon (T10) similarly maintained that she could not think of any opportunity where she couldobserve others teaching. She felt she was in no position to "judge", and in any case, her colleagues would not like being observed:

> **Sharon:** *No. I never had the opportunity to enter somebody else's classroom. I never had the opportunity and in the same manner nobody ever came into my class. Em, I don't think everybody would like it, that's one thing I can say about some teachers, definitely they won't enjoy it.*

<div align="right">Interview 1 (Malta)</div>

This contrasts with the situation for the teachers in the Scottish study as they were all new teachers on the Teacher Induction Scheme or the Flexible Route to Induction and so were not only observed in their classrooms but also had opportunities to observe colleagues due to protected non-contact time. Four of the ten interviewees said observation of other teachers was one of the most useful learning activities that they undertook in the induction year. In the Scottish questionnaires new teachers were asked what they did in their non-contact time which is specifically reserved for continuing professional development. In the first questionnaire, 84.9% and in the second questionnaire 91.7% responded that one of their activities was to observe colleagues.

Teachers do not operate alone and their learning is affected by the social context or learning environment of their workplace school and the relationships they are able to forge at work. The

importance of the school as a learning environment can be appreciated from the reaction of colleagues to being observed, to sharing ideas and collaborating. After considering school workplaces as learning environments and the level of collaboration in the workplace it was possible to identify a common factor in more expansive learning environments, namely support from the head teacher for professional learning.

School leadership

The learning environment of a school is heavily influenced and shaped by the school's leadership, for example in terms of the school culture, power and control issues, staff relationships, and leadership structures. Senior management teams in schools have a central role to play in offering leadership in professional learning aimed at embedding lasting changes within classrooms.

> **Respondent 18:** *lack of support from the head teacher until late on in the year has affected my confidence the most.*
>
> Questionnaire 4 (Scotland)

It became apparent that it was extremely important for the teachers to know that they had support at hand. They demonstrated an emotional need for spontaneous, informal and personal interaction opportunities with their colleagues.

> **Odette:** *As soon as I moved into the literacy department then I got support. There were other teachers around me who had many years of experience in literacy, I can think of one in particular. And she taught me so, so much you know.*
>
> Interview 2 (Malta)

Thus teachers and their schools become a working and learning community. For example, in one school in the Scottish study the new teacher was asked if she could be observed by a colleague who wanted to learn from her.

> **Aileen:** *Um, someone's wanting to actually to come and see, um, some of my maths lessons that I've done.*

<div align="right">Interview 1 (Scotland)</div>

This showed a school that highly valued its new teacher. From the data it can be seen that the teachers' own sense of them being a learner, the level of support they had from school leaders, and the opportunity to collaborate, all impacted on their professional learning.

Discussion

From the teacher interviews we were able to see the impact that being able to regard themselves as learners had on teachers' appetite for professional learning. Jurasaite- Harbison (2009) explains that within school contexts, such professional growth occurs mainly through the practical wisdom that teachers gain when learning in their workplace on an everyday basis. Teachers are learners in their workplace in culturally specific ways, because of their different learning needs and prior experiences. Teachers are viewed as continuously growing and developing and there is an array of opportunities available to them as they construct and re- construct their roles as learners through relationships with their immediate social and physical environments (ibid).

By understanding and accepting that schools are communities where everyone is learning (pupils, teachers, head teachers and other staff) it is possible to imagine how the learning environment could encourage more professional learning. By examining the levels of collaboration, from team teaching

to discussing ideas over coffee in the staff room, it is possible to determine the expansive and less expansive or restrictive features in a school's learning environment. The teacher communities in the researched schools included different socio-cultural and teleological characteristics. When teachers chose to interact purposefully, they did it for a number of reasons. Some specifically sought out their peers for mentoring, advice and feedback. Peers are useful in that they can highlight habits in teaching practice and suggest innovative solutions to teaching problems. However, on the other hand, there is the problem that learning from and with colleagues can lead to enculturation and socialisation into existing practices rather than creating new innovative and/or transformative practice.

Learning contexts and other learning influences, such as teachers' career patterns, and personal circumstances, are central to teachers' conceptualisations of professional learning, the formation of their professional identity and their disposition to learning. Carter (1992) contends that teachers' knowledge is often considered as contextualized, in the sense that it is knowledge of the common dilemmas teachers face in classroom life. Rather than stored in terms of abstract principles, teachers' knowledge is situated in the context of classrooms and the events and activities of teaching (Marx, Blumenfeld, et al, 1998). According to Banks, Leach, et al (1999) the development of professional knowledge is brought into existence by the learning context itself - the learners, setting, activity and communication as well as context in its broadest sense. This suggests that knowledge about teaching and related practices cannot be learned independently of the situation in which it is applied. Teachers need to process and adapt knowledge according to the context they teach in, and make it part of their own personal and practical understanding of what it means to teach, rather than applying predefined prescriptions (Marx, Blumenfeld, et al, 1998).

Different settings give rise to different kinds of knowing and the schools can impact on the professional learning teachers engage in, in particular the informal workplace learning which these teachers feel is so important to their professional learning. When teachers work in challenging contexts, they may be developing skills that address that reality. The interviewed teachers expressed individual preferences for professional learning experiences, indicating what they intend to achieve from such experiences and the meanings they attach to them. In the Scottish study the teachers learnt in the classroom through and in their practice but also understood the benefit of learning from and with significant others, while in the Maltese context some teachers recognised the enabling effect which their peers had on them, by encouraging them to participate in professional development opportunities.

When teachers engage with others, they can gain confidence as they realise that many others feel challenged by similar situations. A culture of collaboration in schools is beneficial, triggers further learning and helps teachers to acknowledge their learning needs and articulate their knowledge. When there is a culture of collaboration in schools, teachers benefit from support and development, more than when there are cultures denoted by individualism (Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996). As Brookfield (1995) points out, informal conversations with peers, team teaching experiences, and seminar/workshop participation can all contribute to improved teacher motivation, increased collegiality and excellent teaching and learning outcomes. By sharing their strengths and insights, teachers can benefit and grow professionally both as individuals and as a group (Dalgarno and Corgan 2007; Yang 2008). Hence, it is important for schools to dedicate time in their schedules, and adequate resources, for collaborative encounters to take place. Teacher communities do not just happen, and if schools do not facilitate these encounters, they are not valued. In turn, participants need to be highly motivated to make time to engage in teacher communities.

In the Maltese context, time constraints are often identified as the major barrier to collaboration. Time is a teacher's most precious commodity and existing demands on teachers' time can limit the opportunities available to them to engage in meaningful teacher communities. The lack of time allocated in the schools' schedules for teachers to meet and collectively reflect does not promote a collegial sharing of practice, and individual teachers have limited control over their time to be able to overcome these constraints. However, it must be remembered that time is often an easy, safe, excuse to give for not doing something difficult.

A key individual is the head teacher who has a pivotal role in the creation of a climate that is favourable to learning (Stanulis and Burrill 2004, Draper and O'Brien 2006). Head teachers in this study offered varying levels of support to the teachers. Not only through their personal interactions with the teachers but also in the decisions they made in relation to professional learning. The different approaches included supporting and providing resources for teachers to take part in outside courses, setting up working groups for teachers to collaborate in and mechanisms for teachers to share their learning.

Teachers are members of communities of practice or wider learning environments with each teacher having their own individual learning dispositions (Shanks, Robson and Gray, 2012). Teachers' learning dispositions are deeply influenced by the context in which learning happens (Alexander and Potter 2005). What teachers do, the emotional climate of the classroom, assessment practices, school structures, processes, tradition and culture all contribute to the ecology of learning that can inhibit or enhance learning. The range of pupils whom teachers teach also plays a role in the particular learning needs of teachers (Stoll, Fink, et al, 2003). Teachers have to accommodate their own personal learning and professional identity within the school environment or context that they find themselves

in. By considering both the social world teachers practise in and teachers as individuals a more complete understanding of teacher learning is possible.

We can consider workplace learning environments as offering both expansive and restrictive elements. The expansive-restrictive model can encourage people to examine their perceptions of continuing professional development and, in particular, to regard development and learning as everyday activities in the workplace (Unwin and Fuller 2003). In expansive learning environments professional development and professional learning are not confined to off-the-job events or specific training sessions at work. Features of expansive and restrictive learning environments are exemplified below (see Table i).

Table i inserted here

It has been argued that teachers need to be: willing and motivated; capable; able to engage in appropriate performances in practice; and able to learn from experience through reflecting (Shulman and Shulman 2004). If we take the first of these, being willing and motivated, we can see the interaction between the individual and the learning environment. An individual's motivation to take part in the process of learning may be determined by their previous experiences but these experiences also interact with organisational constraints in several areas: the extent to which the organisation facilitates access to knowledge and information; the opportunity it provides to practise and develop new skills; the provision of effective support for the learning process; and the extent to which it rewards learning (Ashton 2004). All of these areas make up the learning environment in a school or other workplace, hence the importance of supporting teachers and supporting school leaders in making schools expansive learning environments.

Conclusion

This research study aimed to understand how teachers in two European countries engaged in professional learning at work. It was also hoped that the findings would introduce both a learner-focused and a learning environment perspective in this field with attention paid to the specific needs of the participants, the teachers, and to situate professional learning within the specific social contexts of the teachers' practice. This contrasts with the training-focused perspective which has historically characterised much of teacher professional learning in Malta and Scotland. It is argued that recognition of the importance of the learning environment would encourage head teachers, education authorities and other statutory bodies to consider improvements in the operation of schools in order to support the professional learning that takes place on a daily basis. This support needs to be enacted in unobtrusive ways which values the learning without over-formalising it or destroying it.

In both national contexts, there were no educationally significant variations between the schools where the research participants worked. The data, however, demonstrate that the way schools organise and manage teacher professional learning, support new teachers and enable informal learning to take place can be highly influential in a teacher's engagement in professional learning. The workplace context, including its pedagogical and social atmosphere, and its community dimension, impacted on the participants through supporting and restricting factors.

Expansive and restrictive practices in schools are a tangible way for policy makers, administrators and

school leaders to view how teacher professional learning is being supported or obstructed in schools and how the learning environment can be changed to bring about greater professional learning. Although limited in terms of its generalisability, this research provides a way to explore professional learning in school workplaces and provides a tangible means to change school practices to facilitate more learning opportunities and fewer obstacles to teacher collaboration. The ideas put forward make a useful contribution to the field by allowing readers to learn from these particular, ordinary, or unique experiences. The research gives voice to the views and experiences of a number of Maltese and Scottish teachers and emphasises the need to better understand the influence of the learning environment on teacher learning. So, while lessons from this comparative study of two smaller European nations cannot be transferred directly to other countries/contexts, it does illuminate some of the challenges facing education authorities, teacher education institutions, school leaders and teachers in many countries. In particular, school leaders could consider to what extent their schools exhibit expansive features in their learning environment and understand how changing practices in the workplace can enable teacher professional learning to take place all the time and bring about the changes to school education envisaged by policy makers

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EXPANSIVE PRACTICES	RESTRICTIVE PRACTICES
Well-structured professional learning framework in school	Professional learning understood as one-off events to attend
Close collaborative working	Isolated, individualist working
Colleagues mutually supportive in enhancing teacher learning	Colleagues obstruct or do not support each others' learning
Teacher learning is part of normal working practices	No explicit focus on teacher learning, except to meet crises or imposed initiatives
Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-school experiences	Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks/ knowledge/ location
Supported opportunities for personal development that go beyond school, municipal or national priorities	Teacher learning mainly strategic compliance with school, municipal or national agendas
Out-of-school educational opportunities including time to stand back, reflect and think differently	Few out-of-school educational opportunities, only narrow, short training programmes
Opportunities to integrate off-the-job learning into everyday practice	No opportunity to integrate off-the-job learning
Support for local variation in ways of working and learning for teachers	Standardised approaches to teacher learning are prescribed and imposed.
Teachers use a wide range of learning opportunities for themselves	Teachers use narrow range of learning approaches
Aim for staff: rounded expert/ full participant and career long professional learner	Aim for staff: partial expert and compliance with teacher standards and other external obligations
Explicit institutional recognition of, and support for, teacher's status as learner	Ambivalent institutional recognition of, and support for, teacher's status as learner
Professional learning is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the individual and the school	Professional learning is used to tailor individual's capability to the school's need
Recognition by and support from the head teacher	Lack of recognition and support from the head teacher

Table i Expansive and restrictive practices in schools in Malta and Scotland, based on Unwin and Fuller 2003 p.17, Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2005 p.124 and Shanks 2014 pp.15-16.