Investing in Social Capital to Embrace Formative Assessment

Gertrude Tabone

Abstract

The absence of a collaborative culture and the sporadic use of formative assessment are frequently encountered challenges in Maltese primary schools. This research investigates how primary school leaders in one state college are supporting social capital to enhance the quality of teaching and learning through formative assessment. Data was collected by means of an online focus group interview, followed by semi–structured interviews. The data was analysed through the thematic analysis approach using Microsoft Excel to colour–code the themes that emerged. The themes capture the realities as interpreted by the college primary school leaders within their environment. Findings reveal that the assessment and curricular reforms, combined by the pandemic circumstances, are stimulating the educators to join forces and work collectively. Collaborative opportunities and formative assessment are supported and promoted by the school leaders. This study unveils the importance of collaborative inquiry, through the co–teaching cycle methodology, to impact the quality of daily practices.

Keywords

Social Capital, Formative Assessment, Thematic Analysis, Collaborative Inquiry

Introduction

The Maltese educational policies (National Inclusive Education Framework, MEDE, 2019; the National Curriculum Framework for all [NCF], Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012; and For All Children To Succeed [FACTS], MEYE, 2005) are encouraging school leaders to invest in social capital to improve teaching and learning: "school leaders need to focus on developing a collaborative culture which draws upon the range of professional skills and capabilities found among the different members of their school" (Ministry of

Education and Employment, 2012, p. 55). Notwithstanding, Attard Tonna and Calleja (2018, in Said Pace, 2018, p. 80) declared that teachers are indifferent towards collaborative practices in professional learning. Hence, this study provides an insight on the value of developing professional relationships to activate formative assessment practices to impact teaching and learning.

Being a Head of Department in Assessment for Learning (HoD AfL) within a state college, the researcher proposes collaborative inquiry to model social capital while managing the formative assessment implementation gap (Said Pace, 2018, 2020; Giordimaina, 2020; Schembri, 2020). Collaborative inquiry enables social capital because it stimulates educators to team up regularly to analyse pedagogical aspects, in this case formative assessment. Through evidence of students' work and peer observation, they collectively seek strategies to enhance their practices to improve students' learning. These collective practices reinforce DeWitt's (2016) claim that "collaborative leadership includes the purposeful actions we take as leaders to enhance the instruction of teachers, build deep relationships with all stakeholders and deepen our learning together" (pp. 3–4). Thus, working alongside the practitioners will model how leaders can empower educators to motivate the intended change in daily practices.

Literature Review

The Benefits of Social Capital

Barth (1990) expresses how collaboration can be effective only if "adults talk with one another, observe one another, and help one another, [otherwise there will be] very little change" (p. 32). The policy document FACTS (MEYE, 2005) was meant to change the professional educational approach "from one of isolation to that of collaboration and collegiality" (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2013, p. 20). This policy created time and space for school leaders within the college to interact purposefully with each other to discuss, share, and take collective informed decisions through the Council of Heads. This change brought more support to the school leaders, which will eventually build more trust and stronger relationships across schools.

Social capital improves the educators' skills and knowledge. Leana's (2011) seminal work affirms that when professional practitioners are given the opportunity to have purposeful, frequent, and structured interactions, they gain access to each other's human capital. Thus, individual educators learn more when being members of a functional group, rather than when working in isolation (Visone, 2018; Bezzina & Cutajar, 2013). Consequently, Hargreaves and Fullan (2013) conclude that social capital impacts the students' achievement. Social capital raises the quality of teaching and learning through joint work, peer observations, and constructive feedback. The educators feel safe to implement innovative practices when being engaged in collaborative inquiry, which is substantiated by collective responsibility. Hence, as Visone (2018) argues, "social capital can reduce pedagogical gaps among educators, bringing quality instruction to scale across a school" (p. 160). In this respect, social capital generates a sense of collective accountability where educators refer to the students as "our" and not "my" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Ronka, 2007).

Ultimately, social capital is beneficial because it produces positive feelings (Roffey, 2010). Although social capital is not tangible, it is visible on the educators' facial expressions, audible in their tone of voice and expressed through their joint activities. Collaborative initiatives allow for the appreciation of each other's expertise, professional dialogue, and collegiality, which adds value to each other's endeavours. Once the educators recognise the fruition of this collegiality, they become committed to the organisational members and professional values. The bonds become more cohesive and conducive to professional satisfaction and to a reduction in emotional stress (Shah, 2012).

Considering Factors

Relationships are fundamental for social capital, thus observing the actual school context is crucial. The school leader needs to identify the existing informal relationships, reinforce them through social activities, and eventually, organise them into formal professional relationships as "collaborative cultures must always be informal because without investment in underlying relationships, collaboration will be stilted, forced and even damaging" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012, p. 114). The school leader needs to learn about the educators' attitudes, expertise, interests, and concerns to gain insights about the clustering of educators into functional and efficient teams when time is appropriate, for

mutual benefits and their learners, as is recommended by the NCF (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 44).

These insights are gained through frequent interactions, which subsequently develop trust and respect. When the educators realise that the school leader is approachable, perceptive, and supportive, they start trusting, feel valued and, consequently, committed to collaborate to embed the new practices in their everyday teaching experience (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). This is a process which takes time; thus, the school leader must be patient yet determined to achieve a collaborative culture.

Moreover, it is essential to stimulate "a combination of pride and humility" (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018, p. xv) among the educators throughout these structured, collaborative meetings. Pride is about appreciating each educator's expertise and recognising that everyone has valuable competences to contribute to the team. Contrastingly, humility is about acknowledging that none of the members know everything. Consequently, the educators will experience strength and satisfaction in the established relationships.

Collaboration needs to be genuine, active, and ongoing. Hattie (2012) stresses that "teachers, like students, need to debate and agree about where they are going, how they are going, and where they are going next" (p. 185). Collaborative inquiry, as Sharratt (2019) claims, "provides CLARITY in how to strengthen and refine expected, effective practices that empower all learners and learning" (p. 72). To accomplish this, Leana (2011) found that school leaders who support the educators with "time, space and staffing" were more effective in generating social capital and student achievement. Hence, these frequent, purposeful professional and collaborative opportunities can take place during the weekly curriculum time (MEDE, 2017, Clause 12.2).

It is recommended that these meetings are facilitated by a school team member who keeps the discussions focused on pedagogical matters to ensure meaningful and productive actions. The Canadian Education Association (2014) states that "collaborative inquiry holds potential for deep and significant change in education. Bringing educators together in inquiry sustains attention to goals over time, fosters teachers' learning and practice development, and results in gains for students" (p. 1).

The final consideration when investing in social capital is the establishing of protocols to maintain a safe environment during the collaborative meetings. Everyone must feel comfortable in the team and value the constructive feedback from a friend. Every team member needs to keep in mind that the purpose of these weekly interactions is to keep developing their learning as a community of professionals (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 55) and take informed decisions based on relevant collective judgement and professional discussions.

Middle Leadership Matters

The role of the HoD AfL is to support educators to implement a learner–centred approach using formative assessment practices. This curricular support is provided through dialogue with the educators, while being a beacon of good practice by modelling, disseminating, and engaging in active learning. This support is coordinated along with the school leaders according to the school's needs. The team of HoDs in AfL fosters a collaborative culture within the team and across other departments within the respective college to impact the schools' professional development. This collaborative support conveys the idea to the educators that formative assessment is not an add–on but an integrated process that supports daily learning experiences, as recommended by the NCF.

Satariano (2015) found that Maltese educators are knowledgeable about formative assessment; however, the "crucial strategies such as the sharing of success criteria and self and peer assessment were very rarely implemented" (p. 271). This implies that the educators have not yet embraced the notion that through formative assessment the learner is empowered and considered "as an active agent in the process of knowledge acquisition" (Bada & Olusegun, 2015, p. 66). This shift of learning responsibility is recommended in the Learning Outcome Framework document (2015), in National Lifelong Learning Strategy for Malta (2014–2024), and in the Respect for All Framework (2014). As Leahy and Wiliam (2015) explain, "changes in practice are so slow", especially the implementation of formative assessment, because they challenge the ingrained practices (pp. 17–18). Hence, these authors suggest that teachers need to be supported and held accountable to improve their practices, "not because they are not good enough, but because they can be better" (p. 20).

The continuous provision of the HoD AfL support is crucial during the implementation process, thus Clarke (2021) affirms that "school leaders have to share a vision of the power of formative assessment and be committed to supporting its development in as many ways as possible to maximise its success" (p. 130). This support can vary from periodical meetings that focus on specific formative assessment strategies and techniques to experiential support like the co-teaching cycle. According to Leahy and Wiliam (2015, p. 22), it takes a minimum period of four weeks "for teachers to plan and carry out a new idea in their classroom". This finding enlightens the school leaders and HoDs to allow time and space for the teachers to "reform from within" and not through the "wisdom of the outsider" (Leana, 2011, p. 33). Said Pace (2018, p. 81) identifies that the time allotted for curriculum development for the primary school teachers is often taken by support services, leaving no time for the teachers to inquire, plan and reflect collectively, which is threatening the school's professional capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). The school leaders must focus on the professional learning priorities, support them, and protect them from any disruptions during curriculum time.

Activating Lateral Capacity

When school leaders, HoDs and teachers teach and learn alongside each other, they achieve improvement. Fullan (2011), Hargreaves and O' Connor (2018), and Sharratt (2019) all echo the importance of collectiveness, of a whole systematic collaboration through reflection of practice, sharing of expertise, inquiry, observations, feedback, and continuous professional development. The key to achieving these collective practices is visibility. Hattie (2015) insists that "learning has to be visible if we want it to occur and improve – among students, among teachers, among the school leaders, and within the school system" (pp. 26–27).

Learning walks, co-teaching cycles and lesson studies allow this visibility to occur because through these professional practices the educators, willingly open their classroom doors, and their teaching becomes a shared learning experience that builds lateral capacity. These peer-based observation models are powerful and recommendable because they are "evidence-proven professional learning practices" (Sharratt, 2019). Thus, the educators enhance the quality of teaching as they develop critique views that prompt them to

question the effectiveness of their current practices and ways to improve on them. Moreover, they promote teacher leadership. Through the collected evidence, gained knowledge and, most importantly, the shared feedback, the educators feel empowered that they can take informed decisions to impact teaching and learning. O'Leary (2016, as cited in Haines & Miller, 2016) claims that "peer-based models of observation … offer the potential to enhance pedagogic understanding and in turn contribute on the ongoing process of teacher development" (p. 134).

It is of utmost importance that any type of peer-based models of observation that are adopted by the school are agreed upon by the involved educators. These peer observations are to be considered as a developmental process; thus, protocols and operating norms need to be identified to establish a safe risk-taking learning environment. Throughout the process the teachers need to be supported by consciously skilled and competent educators, so that change occurs proficiently, systematically, and reassuringly.

Once the HoD in AfL acknowledges that the educators are competent about the formative assessment process and the educators feel confident that they can work interdependently with their colleagues, a shift of collective responsibility occurs. The educators become empowered through collective autonomy to gain more ownership in the change process. They keep developing while pursuing continuous collaborative inquiry, hence activating lateral capacity.

Research Methodology
The current intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995), carried out in one of the ten state colleges on the Maltese islands, was designed around this research question: "How are school leaders investing in social capital to embrace formative assessment in primary schools?" The research participants were selected by convenience sampling since the researcher had an established professional rapport with them. The six research participants are primary school leaders who believe in formative assessment, as over recent years they requested the researcher's support in their schools. Moreover, most of the participants have been leading this college for more than two years; thus, they can relate to its network realities and provide information that aligns with the socially constructed epistemology. In the interpretivist and constructivist approach, the researcher is attached to the study and findings are influenced by one's

perspectives and values (Al–Saadi, 2014). This justifies the privilege felt by the researcher. As an HoD AfL supporting the college, the author could identify what is functioning and not functioning and why, thus enabling her, as a researcher, to pose relevant questions to probe into the research issue. The data findings will then inform the HoD AfL how to provide a better service. Thus, the double role of the author will be generating mutual benefits.

Methodological triangulation was adopted because more than one qualitative method was applied to collect the data. Flick (2018) claims that "triangulation should produce knowledge at different levels, which means they go beyond the knowledge made possible by one approach and thus contribute to promoting quality in research" (p. 23). In this respect, this research study used the sequential design method where the focus group interview informed the planning of the semi–structured interviews.

Research Methods

Focus Group

To abide by the mitigation measures in relation to the pandemic situation, the interview with the college primary school leaders was held online. The main advantage for the participants was that the interview was conducted in their own office, which facilitated logistics planning for the researcher. However, multiple distractions by ongoing calls, visiting staff, or email notifications caused inconvenience. Notwithstanding, the online interview permitted video recording, upon the participants' consent, which was convenient for transcriptions.

The purpose of this focus group interview was to bring together a small homogenous group of primary school leaders working within same college to reflect upon the asked questions, while the researcher observed their "attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic" (Denscombe, 2010, p. 115). The participants are colleagues, hence, interacting with each other, which is central to this method (Morgan, 2010), occurred automatically. This interaction in the focus group enriched the data, while it reinforced the theoretical perspectives of this study about symbolic interactionism, through created shared meanings and group dynamics. This implies that the interactive exchanges generate sharing and comparing thoughts about the topic because the participants perceive their own actions in the reactions of others (Morgan, 2019).

Contrastingly, the group dynamics may generate "group think", which is unfavourable when in–depth information is being sought. Apart from having strong personalities taking over at times, making it difficult for some members to participate, there may be members who choose to remain silent, or conform to the responses of the others when their opinions are opposed to the prevailing ones, not to confront their colleagues (Leask et al., 2001). Thus, the subsequent semi–structured interviews were an asset to align these adverse reactions and to triangulate the data.

Semi–Structured Interviews

The six individual semi–structured interviews were held a week apart from the focus group interview. Each interview was held online, which was the new norm of professional meetings during the pandemic crisis. Upon the consent of each participant the interviews were video–recorded, which allowed the interviewer to be engaged in the conversation and, more importantly, to be an active listener. When taking that attentive and confident stance the interviewer established a positive relationship, which assisted the interviewees to feel comfortable to express their views. In this respect, the interviewer must be "sensitive", "nimble" and "knowledgeable" (Adams, 2015, p. 493) about the discussed issues to be able to consider how best to proceed with the questioning. This responsiveness in semi–structured interviews offers a "flexible approach to the interview process" (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 310). The interviewer can explore spontaneous issues raised by the interviewee, and the wording of questions can be modified for facilitation and clarification purposes (Berg, 2009). Moreover, prompting and probing questioning techniques are used to encourage the interviewee to provide further details about their thoughts. At this point the interviewee might impart information that was not divulged in the focus group interview.

Although interviews have the possibility for bias, the researcher was constantly conscious to minimise such risks. Verification strategies were observed to ensure validity and reliability in qualitative research (Morse et al., 2002). The researcher is responsible to constantly check and adjust along the research process "to ensure that the results are robust" (Spiers et al., 2018).

Data Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and King (2012), thematic analysis is an effective method, which investigates "the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights" (Nowell et al., 2017). Thus, this qualitative data analysis was adopted because it is congruent with the epistemological stance of this research. Table 1 delineates the six–step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which guides the researchers step by step; however, one must remain responsive at each developing stage by keeping revisiting and refining accordingly in order to obtain reliable and valid results.

Table 1

Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Multistep process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data; reading and re–reading data. Noting patterns and meanings linked to the research questions.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding noteworthy features systematically across the data set.
3. Searching for themes:	Organising codes into prospective themes and sorting data to each prospective theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking for the alignment of themes, codes, and data. Generating a thematic map of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Refining themes and analysis. Generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	Final analysis, selecting persuasive extract examples to align with research questions and literature. Report writing.

Note: Adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 77—101.

Raw data was inputted in cells using Microsoft Excel, and was then filtered by colour codes, as delineated by Bree and Gallagher (2016). An inductive approach was used, meaning that each piece of data was coded without any predetermined coding plan. This initial process provided a meaningful structure for data analysis which facilitated the sorting into prospective themes and subthemes. Themes were established from a collation of codes that displayed a characteristic which was significant and compelling to the research question. A worksheet was created for all the sorted data to allow the researcher to review each performed step while consolidating and condensing the evidence. This thorough process enabled the merging and triangulation of the collected data, which caused vigorous findings that, consequently, needed to be interpreted comprehensively.

Findings

The Learning Outcomes approach (MEDE, 2015), along with the COVID–19 pandemic, challenged the status quo in the primary schools. In this case study, the research participants (RPs) declared that they are observing a shift in practices, from teachers working in isolation to a collaborative approach, and from summative assessment to formative assessment. These changes need to be nurtured to be sustained.

Theme 1: Advocating Formative Assessment Through the Assessment Reform

This theme emerged spontaneously upon considering that formative assessment is confluent with the curricular and assessment reforms that are taking place. Educators in the primary cycle are administering continuous assessment, which depends on the norm practices of formative assessment; as affirmed by RP3, "to have valid and realistic continuous assessment, teachers need to move towards the formative assessment model". The RPs acknowledged that, through the assessment reform, equity is prevailing. The long–time dominant summative assessment system favoured those students who conformed to pen and paper testing, which justifies the high rate of early school leavers. Bugeja (2022) claims that in today's labour market students need to be equipped with soft skills, thus the shift towards continuous assessment accounts for providing various modes of assessment to recognise such skills.

Assessment needs to be regarded as an enhancer of teaching and learning. RP2 claimed that the curricular and assessment reforms are "beneficial, as they are reaching a wider spectrum from socially disadvantaged students to those who are promising learners". This highlights why the RPs are advocating formative assessment in their schools. RP1 stated, "I am blessed that the educators acknowledged that formative assessment is not an added burden but a useful tool that constantly evaluates the teaching and learning." Although the pandemic situation disrupted normal class practices, RP5 recognised that "when the practice is ingrained, whatever happens the teacher goes ahead". This statement was heightened by RP6 who stated that "despite grouping is not allowed, due to pandemic mitigation measures, peer assessment is being practised online". These declarations accentuate the NCF's principle that assessment is integral in the teaching and learning process (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012), and reinforce Clarke's (2021) earlier statement that school leaders need to share the vision about formative assessment and support its development to ensure its accomplishment.

The RPs remarked that they can observe the positive impact of the formative assessment practices and even perceive its absence in the learning environment. When formative assessment is embedded in the learning process, it generates a harmonious learning environment which induces better learning results. These observations reveal that the school leaders are competent in formative assessment, and they collect evidence to keep improving the impact of teaching on learning. RP2 underlined that "formative assessment is time–consuming and having the primary class teacher always in class is a drawback, but it is fair for the learners". RP2's consideration is significant as it is the investment in more collaborative planning time rather than instruction time that distinguishes high–performing countries from others (Darling–Hammond, 2010; Darling–Hammond et al., 2017). "Teachers need time to work together as co–planners, co–teachers, co–debriefers, and co–reflectors to implement and embed assessment practices that are transparent to and meaningful for students" (Sharratt, 2019, p. 147). Hence, Maltese teachers need less instruction time to be able to reflect on their practices and engage in collective practices to keep improving.

Theme 2: Nurturing Relationships to Establish Trust

All RPs claimed that they are united as school leaders and their established friendly relationship is beneficial for work–related purposes. RP4 affirmed, "Being a HoS it's not that an isolated role as there are many opportunities where I can discuss, seek for help and share." However, this collegial support is focused on managerial functions, as RP5 declared that "collaborative projects and joint activities are slim to none".

Subtheme 1: Support Within the School. The RPs treat ongoing communication as fundamental for developing trust and transparency in their schools. RP2 stated, "everyone is aware of the reasons behind decisions and this openness builds trust even amongst those who disagree". The RPs declared that they engage in frequent interactions to identify how best to support the staff as a group and even on an individual basis. This support ranges from professional development to promoting educators' initiatives. They acknowledged that to reinforce relationships, one must be receptive, a good listener and a co–learner. Hence, being a high–task, high–relationship leader is predominant.

According to Tschannen–Moran (2014), high–task, high–relationship school leaders develop strong trust among educators when they provide high support, because they care for relationships, combined with high challenge, as they seek school improvement. To realise the embedding of formative assessment, RP1 affirmed that after sharing with the staff clear principles drawn from the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, there was continuous professional support from the HoD AfL, in liaison with the school leader, who discusses, models and at the same time empowers the educators to make the necessary changes gradual and coherent to attain sustainability.

Another supportive strategy that the RPs are adopting is the school's Facebook page. RP1 said, "we use the public page to promote what is happening at school. We celebrate and praise the educators' hard work to boost them and to show appreciation of the good practices." This strategy is fruitful, as parents and educators alike post grateful comments that instigate positive feelings and productivity. Sharratt (2019) proclaims that celebrating small and big wins is powerful for building self and collective efficacy and for sustaining synergy. Owing to this strategy, the educators are virtually opening their classrooms, sharing the normal practices, and bringing awareness of what is going on

across the year groups. RP4 noted that this strategy is generating enriched and inspiring learning experiences for all educators. This trend is materialising visible learning, as Hattie (2015) accentuates.

The RPs acknowledged that they support the staff through peers deliberately. Every year they cluster teachers in the year group who complement each other to improve the quality of teaching. The unprecedented lockdown and school closure in March 2020 intensified the need for peer support. Schools made an immediate shift to online teaching, and RP6 declared that "educators who were never interested in using digital tools in class had to restructure their teaching methods. These found support from their colleagues and from the SLT, hence trust was consolidated." This corroborates Hargreaves (1997), Bezzina (2004), and Bezzina and Testa (2005), who claim that collegiality helps educators to respond to complex rapid situations and to seek to improve continuously.

Theme 3: Fostering Collective Engagements

Under the new normal circumstances RP6 stated that "educators are getting used to work interdependently and they are acknowledging that it's imperative to work collectively". RP1 confirmed that co-planning is ongoing. Notwithstanding that, during the semi-structured interviews individual RPs claimed that they encourage collective planning and teamwork, as working in isolation is still a prevalent practice amongst certain educators. "Collaboration between the educators, maybe not across all year groups, increased since the coronavirus pandemic hit the country" (RP5). This pandemic crisis revolutionised the teaching scenario and opened gateways to maximise the use of technology and, at the same time, benefit from collective efficacy. "Teachers within the year group are assigning tasks, which they have agreed upon, and are uploading them on MS Teams, which is enriching and facilitating teaching and learning," claimed RP6. This practice is generating sturdy, professional relationships that stimulate social capital.

Prior to the pandemic situation, collective engagements were encouraged by all RPs through national and European projects and annual school events, because these opportunities nurture teachers' leadership skills, professional development, and school promotion. RP1 added that "under normal circumstances there are many collaborative opportunities that embed FA, those who are disinclined do not embrace them". Such opportunities can take place during curriculum time, School Development Plan (SDP) meetings, and

workshops, elaborated other RPs. As stated by Hargreaves and O'Connor, "collaboration can vary a lot, depending on what country or culture you are in" (2018, p. xiii). Hence, one must value every professional collaborative practice and evolve it to impact teaching and learning.

The following subthemes substantiate the main theme. Subtheme 1 unveils the available time where the educators can engage in collective practices, while subtheme 2 exposes the local culture which can evolve to embrace formative assessment with the right support.

Subtheme 1: Curriculum Time (CT). All RPs expressed their approval for this purposeful, regular opportunity for the educators to interact and plan during CT: "It is a need to discuss and achieve the designated goals," affirmed RP1. The RPs confirmed that they organise these CT slots by inviting specialised HoDs to lead the session with each year group or with individuals. However, RP2 decried the practice that all sessions need to be occupied and run by support personnel: "this shows a controlled mindset which is absurd". This corroborates Said Pace's (2018) finding. RP1, RP2 and RP6 stated that they keep balance between CTs led by an expert and others led by the teachers amongst themselves. Conversely, the rest of the RPs argued that if CT is not led by an expert the slot becomes Correction Time. These RPs empathise with these teachers because they acknowledge that at primary level, the schedule is tight and busy.

Notwithstanding that, to impact teaching and learning quality, teachers need this non–contact time not to have more professional learning sessions but "to interpret the evidence about their effect on each student" (Hattie, 2012, p. 191). Hence, CT needs to be focused on reflective and collective practices to embrace the fruition of formative assessment. In this respect the HoD AfL proposed the co–teaching cycle. The co–teaching cycle models different collaborative stages, co–planning, co–teaching and co–reflection, which are all empowering and impactful on the quality of daily practices; thus, they can be adopted and adapted by the educators themselves, as urged by the NCF (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 45). This cycle stimulates collaborative inquiry. Through the co–teaching cycle the teachers and HoD AfL strengthen their relationship by adopting a shared leadership approach and a joint responsibility for student learning, gain pedagogical knowledge, and engage in professional dialogues while co–planning and co–reflecting.

RP4 expressed the idea of organising CT across the primary college schools once the pandemic situation stabilises, so that educators of the same year group can integrate and be provided with an opportunity to carry out joint work, as well as have an influence and learn from each other. This idea is conceptualised to overcome the issue of solitary teachers within the teaching year group prevailing in small schools, and simultaneously support collective efficacy. As Hattie (2012) states, "we need to replace 'presentism', conservatism, and individualism with the longer–term school effects of those teachers who are 'evidence–informed' and who take collective responsibility for the success of our schools" (p. 192). This kind of networking substantiates the policy document FACTS (2015) and generates improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, as acknowledged by varied scholars (Visone, 2018; Bezzina & Cutajar, 2013).

Subtheme 2: Considering the Local Culture. Unanimously the RPs affirmed that peer–based observations were an uncommon practice. "Without blaming anyone, we tend to be competitive, wanting to be the best, hence it's difficult to accept each other's criticism," claimed RP2, whose acknowledgement was echoed across the other semi–structured interviews. Notwithstanding this affirmation, they recognised their value; thus, they do consider this possibility, but only if relationships are well–established. "I think it can be done; however, the educators need to know each other, have worked with each other, trust each other and are ready to accept critical and constructive feedback," added RP5. In this respect, RP6 claimed that educators documented peer observation in the SDP; however, there were divergent attitudes about it.

These findings reveal that the educators are not geared to expose the real–time challenges, and it is this willingness to openly share the encountered daily learning difficulties that needs to be defined to accomplish collective efficacy. Hence, to aid in the process of this cultural change, the HoD AfL is modelling the formative assessment principles while experiencing along with the educators the challenges in the actual learning environment through the co–teaching cycle. The subsequent reflective session engages the HoD and the educator in providing constructive feedback to each other about the impact of the session on the learning. This joint learning venture is being embraced by every

educator; thus, it must be sustained to attain the desired changes, as affirmed by O'Leary's (2016) earlier assertion.

Conclusion

Overall findings unveil that class teachers are modifying their insular mindset to a more collaborative one. The sudden changes in academic practices, triggered by the pandemic situation and combined by the assessment and curricular reforms, developed the urge to join forces and work collectively. This initiated the trend to use technology platforms which are sustaining relationships, among the stakeholders within the school and college, and instigating professional interactions. These are reassuring news, as the educators are approving to virtually open their classrooms and share their practices.

Educators Need More Collective Non-Instructional Time

Whilst the school leaders support collaborative opportunities, the culture of social capital in this case study is premature. A crucial element that is hindering social capital is the lack of non-instructional time. Regular CT, which is endorsed by the school leaders, is a valuable slot for educators to meet to reflect and refine their practices. Hence, this time must be structured and augmented, with periodic interventions from support personnel, to enable the educators to build professional relationships that nurture collective accountability to achieve improvement. As indicated in Darling-Hammond et al.'s study (2017), high-performing countries invest more in non-instructional time.

To nurture social capital and embrace formative assessment during CT, the educators must interpret evidential work and share their expertise to co-plan joint work that embeds meaningful assessment practices for the benefit of all the learners. Consequently, to overcome the solitary year-group educator issue in small schools, CT can be co-ordinated online across other small schools within the college, as suggested by RP4. These educators will have the opportunity to collaborate like their peers in larger schools and to experience collegiality.

Maximising Collective Engagements to Impact Teaching and Learning

This study concludes that the current peer–to–peer support is superficial because it is not challenging the status quo. The educators are collaborating by supplying material to each other and by collectively agreeing on what lessons to deliver. Although this collaboration is significant, it needs to be upgraded to collaborative inquiry in view of the local competitive culture. Collaborative inquiry provides "CLARITY" (Sharratt, 2019) as educators are aggregated to focus on a pedagogical aspect to improve the practice. As defined by the Canadian Education Association (2014), collaborative inquiry promotes teachers' professional development and attainment in learners' performance. To stimulate this collective learning culture, the HoD AfL is supporting the educators through the co–teaching cycle, which is appreciated by the school leaders and educators.

This cycle is modelling how formative assessment can be integral in daily practices within the educator's familiar context. It is activating social capital through collaborative inquiry as leader and educator are working alongside each other, acknowledging each other's expertise, and taking mutual decisions through evidence–based professional learning. This practice is nurturing collective efficacy, as it is enabling a learning experience in a supportive climate. Above all, the co–teaching cycle is being effective, as it focusses on the quality of students' learning in a collaborative professional approach. The collaborative stages are nurturing trust, as both leader and teacher are experiencing joint responsibility for student learning.

Notes on contributor

Gertrude Tabone is a Head of Department in Assessment for Learning supporting a state college, with twenty years of teaching experience in the primary sector. Currently, she promotes active learning and motivates educators to implement a learner–centred approach using formative assessment practices. She coordinates and provides curricular support, while collaborating with other departments to optimise professional learning.

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