Towards effective subject leadership in a rural primary school by developing collaborative teacher learning

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Abstract

This research explores the development and improvement of foundation subject leadership within a rural primary school. This study was conducted over a 3-month period and explored how collaborative teacher learning could improve the development of teacher's leadership. The aim of this research was to help accommodate the improvement of foundation subject leadership in the unique setting. A rural school is typically defined as a school with less than 100 pupils (Cade, Ferguson, Gale, Holt, & Neaum, 2018). The implications of this are that in these settings there are significantly less staff, which in turn increases workload and lowers staff effectiveness. This research explores the use of collaborative learning as a means to help problem solve subject leadership with little staff. This research shows how this approach can have a positive impact; however, it can be viewed that this project is a starting point to help plan for further development of research within this area.

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1. Introduction

This research aims to explore how subject leadership can be improved through collaborative teacher planning. This project stems from a challenge I recently encountered on arriving in a small rural school. Working with the headteacher on the school improvement plan, I was given the responsibility for supporting the individual subject leads in improving pupils' attainment across the curriculum. This challenge therefore has three elements: the structure of a rural school; the subject knowledge to support pedagogy; subject leadership. I have spent the majority of my teaching career working in a city school where teachers have one subject to lead. In my three years there, I rarely shared my subject with the staff as a whole. This was to be expected however, as my first year was as a newly qualified teacher and my third year coincided with the start of the pandemic which caused the focus to shift as a whole school towards online learning.

This past academic year, I moved from my city school of 14 classes, to a small rural school with only 3 classes. I found the workload for subject leadership to be far greater due to staffing numbers being significantly lower. Through conversations with the headteacher, I learnt of the school's improvement target to develop foundation subject leadership. Foundation subjects within the curriculum are art and design, history, geography, computing, PE, modern foreign languages, relationships and sex education, music, design and technology, and RE. The school's Ofsted report in 2017 stated that, although planning in science and across the wider curriculum had improved, teachers were not always adequately equipped to teach pupils the knowledge and skills that they need to understand all subjects in depth. As a result, pupils' attainment in subjects such as geography and history were inconsistent across the school. It was agreed with the headteacher that the focus for this research would be centred around the improvement of subject leadership in a rural school.

The first of the three elements are the setting of a rural school and what challenges a school of this size and structure faces, and how his may impact the success of subject leadership. Rural schools, in the context of this research, is defined as a school that has fewer than 100 pupils (Cade et al., 2018). This school setting comprised 66 pupils during the time this research took place. The school is located within a village that is situated approximately five miles outside the Oxford City ring road. This village has a small population and therefore has lower than average turnover of children for the primary school. This means that the school must work hard to recruit pupils outside of the catchment area. Successful recruitment of pupils is predicated on the promise of good academic outcomes, the use of the local assets (such as the city's museums and other cultural facilities) located a mere15 minutes away, and the use of the natural surroundings such as nature reserves. The mixed year group classes provide children who haven't achieved their year group outcome to revisit this the following year with ease. For example, a Year 2 child who hasn't passed their statutory assessments can revisit the gaps in the Year 2 curriculum in Year 3, within the same class. It can provide children with a pace appropriate to their learning and avoid the feeling of being rushed through the curriculum.

However there are many factors which challenge rural schools when responding to and implementing government policies. One factor is limited finances, another is limited staffing, and another is limited resources. Rural schools have less but have still managed to provide the same as schools that are in the government's framing for policies. The reason I am intrigued by my own educational setting is that the nature of it, although seemingly at a disadvantage, does manage to deliver good academic outcomes and respond positively to government policy.

This leads onto the second area of exploration, and how to improve foundation subjects. The need in my school was to improve the knowledge of the subjects so that they could be taught in greater depth. It is mandated in the government's inspection handbook that schools

are to teach a wide range of subjects to equip pupils with the knowledge they will need to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019b). There is a push on all subjects, including foundation subjects, to be taught because in the past it has been noted countrywide that there has been too much focus on maths and literacy outcomes (Spielman, 2019). The National Curriculum states that schools are to provide a broad and balanced curriculum to avoid the narrowing of foundation subjects (DfE, 2014). This means ensuring that different subjects within the curriculum are well led and delivered, and that they hold significant importance towards children acquiring sufficient knowledge to enable them to succeed in life. However, the challenges that a rural school faces means it needs to have creative solutions in place to aid development of subject knowledge amongst staff, if the school is to successfully work towards the improvement of knowledge of subjects by staff.

Finally, the third, is the management of these subjects in a rural setting. Recent statistics show that primary schools have on average 282 pupils (DfE, 2019b). This means that on average there are 1-2 subjects to lead per teacher. Being in a setting where there are 3 teaching staff members, plus a teaching headteacher, means that there is an average of 4 subjects per teacher. Therefore, to respond to the Ofsted's improvement guidance, the teaching staff have twice as much knowledge and expertise to improve, compared with the 1-2 average nationally. The social aspects of learning and what potential knowledge can be gained, lend itself to aid the whole staff in developing foundation subject teaching. This has been chosen because the nature of this research is to be collaborative and it provides a good fit with the nature of the solution for staff in my setting. The aim for this research is to collaborate and develop the subjects we lead as a whole team so that it can deepen knowledge, improve pupils' attainment and lessen the workload.

2. Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature reviews the three aspects of this research focus; rural schools and how they are unique in their structure; subjects taught within the primary curriculum; how to manage the development of subjects within a rural school setting by exploring the use of collaborative teacher learning.

First, there will be an exploration on subject leadership in the curriculum. I aim to explore the focus on this topic and why it has become a focal point for all schools across England. I will aim to explore the reasons for the encouragement of teaching separate subjects within the National Curriculum. This explores research before the implementation of the 2014 National Curriculum so that the arguments posed in more recent years can rationalise why improving subject leadership is important. Second, I will explore the literature around rural schools and highlight the many unique features of these settings, and how this directly impacts teachers in rural schools. I aim to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of how these settings, although at a disadvantage due to size, can still adapt to these constraints. Throughout the literature there is a strong emphasis on collaboration and problem solving. Third, I will explore collaborative teacher learning. I have chosen to explore this as literature in the Rural school's section encourages collaboration. I will explore the benefits of how teachers can work together to improve their knowledge and understanding within subjects.

2. 2 Subjects, and the curriculum

The role of a subject leader in a primary school can be varied. A subject leader across the years has had many names, and much speculation of what is needed from them. Subject

leaders have influence over curriculum development and planning, help to clarify purpose, share curriculum planning, supporting the aims and values of the school, providing curriculum advice for colleagues, monitoring their subject, and building a shared commitment between teachers to support curriculum developments (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004). To lead subjects within the curriculum, it is important to understand why it holds much more focus for teacher's today. The Education Inspection Framework (2019) is used across all educational establishments in England, from Nursery to Secondary schools. It is used by school schools to help create, deliver and assess their teaching in relation to this. The EIF (2019) states that for subject leadership:

"teachers have good knowledge of the subject(s) and courses they teach. Leaders provide effective support for those teaching outside their main areas of expertise" (EIF, 2019 p.9)

There has been much discourse around the topic of foundation subjects. Over the years it has been highlighted that schools are lacking the leadership and knowledge to deliver these areas well enough to help raise standards. In 2007 a report was released by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector which commented on the lack of foundation subject knowledge by teachers and tasks being designed and delivered with little understanding (Gilbert, 2007). She commented on the lack of leadership around subjects and commented on weak monitoring, rigour and evaluation which ultimately hindered the improvement of academic outcomes (Gilbert, 2007). The DfE White Paper (2010) that stated there was too much non-essential knowledge for children to learn and not enough rigour in the knowledge that was essential (DfE, 2010). These comments were made during the time of England's implementation of The National Strategies, which were a set of professional teaching programmes aimed to support the improvement of teaching and learning in literacy and maths in primary schools. These strategies had widely been viewed to dominate timetabling and as a result of this, affected the time dedicated to teaching of foundation subjects. Research around the National Strategies commented that although schools were problem solving this issue

theoretically, in practice they lacked confidence to make the curriculum changes (Ofsted, 2005).

Over 10 years later the discourse in the government has still argued this point. Nick Gibb wrote in a collection of essays for the Policy Exchange (2015) about the power of knowledge for young individuals and the growing problem of a narrowing school curriculum. He stated that schools were in favour of teaching to the test through fear of accountability and the priority towards teaching foundation subjects were low (Policy Exchange, 2015). More recently, this argument is further supported by a government article by the head of Ofsted that stated schools are continuing to narrow the curriculum to push pupils through testing (Speilman, 2019). As a result of this, pupil's broader knowledge around other subjects is lowered (Speilman, 2019).

However, since the National Curriculum came to England in 1988 there has always been an argument for effective subject leadership. Although Hammersley-Fletcher (2004) states what a subject leader does which is supported by Gilbert (2007)., there is an issue that can be deduced around knowledge for subject leaders, which in turn can affect the quality of leadership. In 1992 a report was published stating that there was ineffective subject expertise amongst primary teachers (Alexander, Rose, & Woodhead, 1992). Today, this can be interpreted as still being an issue as it is still inspected by Ofsted today in the EIF (2019).

Policy makers have guided practitioners to understand that knowledge in the subjects delivered needs to be well understood by children and adults. This is exemplified in the EIF (2019) and states that teachers are to "have good knowledge of the subject(s) and courses they teach" (p.7) and that "learners develop detailed knowledge and skills across the curriculum" (p.8). The need for a good understanding of the knowledge that is being taught is not new for teachers, the teaching standards in England state that teachers must "have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas, foster and maintain

pupils' interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings" (DfE, 2011, P.11). What can be implied is that when teachers have good subject knowledge, then the standards of children's attainment are raised. This is further proven by a 2007 study, that explored the quality of subject teaching across 241 primary schools across England (Ofsted, 2009). The study stated that the weaknesses in the subject knowledge of teachers had a direct impact on the level of achievement of children (Ofsted, 2009). One of the main findings from this study was that good subject knowledge amongst teachers was by chance and not through good leadership. The study stated that where there were weaknesses in subjects the schools provided little support for leaders to carry out effective implementation of their subjects (Ofsted, 2009).

What can be understood about the curriculum across England, is that knowledge can be viewed as a tool, like a language of knowledge that can be spoken and traded amongst all, which is paramount in helping the future of young individuals. Therefore, for children to have good knowledge, then it must be taught to them in schools. The work of Bourdieu (1986) explores the function of schools in society and it being transformative for an individual's future, he writes of the embodied capital a person holds to explain the role schools play. This embodied capital can be explained as knowledge that is learnt and acquired, this knowledge can be used to gain an institutionalised state in the form of qualifications such as GCSE's (Bourdieu, 1986). What this translates to, is that schools are the places where this building of, transmission of, and exchange of knowledge for institutionalised states takes place. Therefore, the emphasis on what and how well we teach has a direct impact on pupil's futures.

Similarities in the principles that Bourdieu has can be draw across into foundation subject teaching in primary schools. The National Curriculum's (DfE, 2014) documentation stresses the importance of supporting disadvantaged pupils, or rather those with a lower embodied state. What can be observed in the new Education Inspection Framework (2019), is a focus

on teaching for meaning to the pupil so they can use this knowledge, and not solely on pupil outcomes for a test. The expectation is the same across all stages of schooling, which makes primary teaching demanding when ensuring all subjects are taught to the expected standard. It states that the curriculum should have the intention of providing all learners with the cultural capital and knowledge they need to succeed in life and when cross referenced with the EIF that states teachers must have excellent subject knowledge, it creates a huge pressure on Primary teachers to deliver this given that they can teach up to 14 separate subjects (Ofsted, 2019b, 2019a). This can inevitably create problems when teaching these foundation subjects. A report released by the Department for Education 9 years prior to the EIF, and 4 years prior to National Curriculum in 2014, commented on the prescriptive nature of the curriculum (DfE, 2010). The report commented on the need for a new approach to the National Curriculum that allowed for "a model of the knowledge that allowed all children to master core subjects at every key stage" (DfE, 2010, p.10). What his suggests is that teachers are expected to understand multiple subjects in enough depth to allow for pupil's mastery.

One approach to address this issue is that the curriculum should be taught in an interconnected way with themes across all disciplines. This approach has many attractive qualities for teaching and learning. It allows for knowledge and skills from one subject to be used to support other subjects, which in turn can strengthen understanding across multiple subjects (Hayes, 2010). Additionally, making links across disciplines is widely recognised as an attribute of excellent learning, which facilitates good outcomes for pupils (Claxton, 2002). However, this may not always ensure that all subjects are taught effectively. In a longitudinal study around primary cross-curricular teaching, the data showed that there was limited and inconsistent discrete teaching of foundation subjects (Boyle & Bragg, 2008). What this study showed was that cross-curricular teaching was adopted as a solution towards timetabling constraints towards the of teaching foundation subjects. Little time was dedicated to teaching foundation subjects separately and a theme of excellent teaching was only seen in

English and Maths which was taught predominantly discretely (Boyle & Bragg, 2008). What can be seen from this research is that foundation subjects can be taught ineffectively through weak teaching approaches. It is argued that cross-curricular teaching loses the identity, specialism and depth of what subjects are being taught (Kelly, 2013).

Teachers must have a strong subject knowledge so they are able to draw links across subjects that are meaningful, logic and authentic to have the desired effect for cross-curricular teaching (Barnes, 2011). Therefore, what is seen in the new guidance for schools is a more disciplined and discrete approach to teaching each foundation subject. However, a research review of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) comments on a research study of the impact of school inspections on teaching by Ehren et al. (2015). It highlights that curricula in schools have the tendency to narrow teaching to respond to a more prescriptive and discrete nature to support school development, which in turn discourages teachers from experimenting with the teaching of subjects (Ehren et al., 2015; Ofsted, 2019a).

However, the argument for teaching discretely may be an indication of teachers' subject knowledge and understanding. In an independent review of the curriculum, research showed that there was no difference between discrete and cross-curricular teaching and argued both had their place (Davies, 2009). This could have been an indication that teaching itself wasn't -and isn't - the issue, but what knowledge is taught and how it is delivered could be a problem. An example of this in the Ofsted (2009) report about subject leadership that was highlighted was how teachers commented that they felt confident teaching history, yet they demonstrated little knowledge around inquiry skills and effective assessment when observed in lessons. When this was investigated more, it was found that subject leaders in this area provided little focus on discussions of assessment, how to set appropriate teaching tasks, but did manage resources well (Ofsted, 2009). What can be indicated here, is that the

argument for discrete subject teaching is a way of managing and improving subject knowledge in response to evidence that suggests weak teaching of foundation subjects.

The argument towards subject leadership can be further understood when exploring the National Curriculum and its guidance. It is stated in guidance offered by the government that it should be clearly delivered by the teaching of coherently planned subjects that are sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge (Ofsted, 2019b). Therefore, taking this into account, subject leadership can play an important role within this issue. There is a strong agenda from the DfE for rigour of knowledge in subject disciplines, which could be seen as a way of creating consistency for pupils in regards to better teaching for understanding, and as a result to support children's futures (DfE, 2010). Therefore, in theory, if subject leaders create strength in each subject, they can support a stronger capital amongst individuals to help give them the best start in society. From this, what can be suggested and argued is that in the curriculum, knowledge can be viewed as an important structure amongst pupils to help their futures. Gibb (2015) discussed the work of Hirsch (1985) and highlighted that there was a need for a common stock of knowledge in schools so that we can understand each other better as a society. Taking this into account, the significance of subject leaders becomes more apparent. Subject leaders are crucial in establishing clarification around knowledge of what is taught and how it progresses (Kitson & O'Neill, 1996). If teachers do not understand the reason behind the objectives in each subject, then they will fail to teach what needs to be taught (Hirst, 1974). Once this is established by subject leaders, then developments can be planned by individual teachers so that children can experience quality teaching that is consistent (Kitson & O'Neill, 1996). It is argued that if knowledge is well organised into domains, that is linked with experience and concepts, then we are better able to provide a positive future for society (Young, 2014). The job of a subject leader can hold much deeper meaning as they must plan the curriculum area and work with teachers to create an agreed approach towards teaching strategies to help develop this (Kelly, 2009). However, a report released by UNESCO (2019) showed that

the curriculum was still narrowing across both primary and secondary schools, and the curriculum by upper secondary level was not broad enough to provide the knowledge and skills for young people, and as a result of this they were struggling to find employment.

2.3 Rural Schools

Recent research has shown that 20% of primary schools in England are rural schools (The Key, 2018). Despite this, there has been limited research about rural schools in recent years. Yet, there is a uniqueness about rural schools which makes it an interesting setting to explore. They are structured and managed in different ways from urban context schools purely due to the number of pupils and number of school staff. A main feature of a rural school is its geographical remoteness. Geographically, they are in isolated rural areas and access public transport can be limited, something which in turn creates a negative effect on teacher recruitment and retention, and on the numbers of pupils in the local area (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019). The geographical locations of these schools means that the recruitment of pupils must be from outside the area. Research from The Key (2018) states that out of 513 UK schools, 38% have pupils travelling as far as 10 miles and 8% travelling up to 20 miles. This occurrence happens because the rural areas are populated by long standing residents which in turn affects the pupil numbers. Moreover, many newly qualified teachers find teaching at rural schools a challenge as they are required to have a high level of expertise upon entry, or the workforce is much older (The Key, 2018). The number of pupils and the stage a teacher has reached in their career has a direct financial impact on the school.

Another issue affecting rural schools is pressure around finances. In rural schools, financial struggles are closely linked to the number of pupils recruited and cost of teaching staff. Rural schools have significantly less funding due to the size of the school (DfE, 2019a). This naturally creates even more pressure for good teaching of all subjects in rural settings, as

these settings must recruit outside of the rural are to maintain numbers and funding because they are funded per capita accordingly to the number of pupils (Walker, 2010). Rural schools must market themselves well to help attract more pupils. A main marketing point for rural schools in recruiting pupils successfully from beyond the catchment area is the promise of good academic outcomes (Bagley & Hillyard, 2015). However, the pool of expertise in rural schools can be limited which can create issues when teaching for good academic outcomes (McPake, 1998). In addition to this, research has shown that some rural schools have responded to financial constraints by employing newly qualified teachers to help towards financial deficits (DfE, 2019a). This means that by employing newly qualified staff, there is a lack of subject expertise due to lack of teaching experience. This then creates a problem where the inevitable lack of subject expertise, and lack of experience of mixed age teaching, of newly qualified teachers puts a large amount of pressure on the staff who are already in place (Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). The Key (2018) provides comments from headteachers who state that this may seem like a money saving tactic but in reality, money will need to be spent on CPD and cover for a newly qualified teacher to become more knowledgeable. The low number of staff. and the level of expertise and funding can create educational isolation due to the challenges of location which can result in limited access to resources for school improvement (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019).

There has been some government recognition towards this issue and in the 2016 School's White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' it explained the importance of school collaborations to help improve good academic outcomes in response towards the setting of a rural school (N. Morgan, 2016). It encouraged small schools, who were standalone schools, to join a multi academy trust (MAT), to ensure the long term success of small schools and increase and improve the breadth of the curriculum (N. Morgan, 2016). This is supported by more recent government research that encourages management strategies to help overcome limitations of a small school which includes samples from schools that have joined MATs and schools who are not. It advises towards the sharing of leadership of

subjects and resources across schools through professional relationships regardless of being a part of a MAT (DfE, 2019). The research showed the views of 21 small schools, 12 of which being in a MAT showed an overall positive attitude towards collaborating with other schools. However, when this data was further explored, standalone schools were reluctant to join MATs and preferred collaboration with schools with which they had a sustained historic relationship (DfE, 2019a). Additionally, it has been suggested by The Church of England that rural schools should join formal groupings, such as MATs, so that schools can share resources and the pressures that come with being a rural school (Cade et al., 2018). This notion of collaborating with other schools is not a new notion, Harrison and Busher (1995) comment that to ease the pressures of rural schools and help avoid educational isolation, cluster schools should be created to support one another. They state that rural schools should tackle joint curriculum activities and share resources (Harrison & Busher, 1995).

One area of this is the school's organisation of pupils to provide mixed year and key stages, which creates challenges when teaching the curriculum. Research by The Key (2018) showed that 69% of schools out of 345 had mixed year classes and 39% stated that the challenge for teaching mixed year classes was 'high'. This is due to the pressures of teaching a National Curriculum that is age related in a school in a setting that is not structured in the same way. It creates complexities around teaching and learning and it can be argued that rural schools have been placed in a position where they must respond to policies that have been created in urban contexts, and for rural schools this creates limitations towards teaching for good pupil outcomes (Brundrett, 2006; Corbett, 2016). On the one hand, this means that the age related specific subject requirements of the National Curriculum, and the nature of rural schools being comprised of mixed key stages and ages, creates extra demand for teachers when planning and teaching (Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). This means that teachers have extra work to organise and teach the curriculum in a way that matches their key stage.

On the other hand, this problem can create better solutions. For example, past research on the teaching of the literacy hour by Fisher (2000) in rural small schools highlighted a key quality of small schools that is still relevant to teaching in this setting today. The research stated that, although teaching was responding to a government initiative that was aimed towards age related teaching, the problem solving of teaching mixed age classes in response to this provided greater pupil outcomes (Fisher, 2000). To support this, it has been argued that in rural schools, lower attaining children are more likely to be proportionately matched with their teaching and learning as opposed to lower attaining children in urban schools (Phillips, 1997). This could be due to the levels of planning ant attention towards the curriculum that a rural school faces with mixed years group classes. In addition to this, a case study of 9 rural schools in the UK commented that headteachers were much more knowledgeable of the demands of the National Curriculum unlike their counterparts in urban schools where delegation of subjects was given to subject coordinators (Galton, Hargreaves, & Comber, 1998). What this evidence suggests is that, although there are many challenges that rural schools face when teaching, there is a requirement for problem solving that can impact the school positively when it comes to teaching.

The roles and responsibilities of a rural primary school are shared amongst fewer staff, which creates a much higher individual workload. An urban teacher's professional demands can range from curriculum, statutory assessments, teaching and learning whereas a rural teacher's demands can encompass the aforementioned in addition to being a site manager or a caretaker, an organisational decision maker, or a bursar (Harrison & Busher, 1995). In an effort to save money, most headteachers of rural schools also have teaching responsibilities. 92% of 509 respondents in the 2018 study by The Key stated that they teach in a range between half a day a week to up to more than 3 days a week. This creates significant management demands and can hinder the improvement of the school as there is less time to implement any changes (Dunning, 1993). However, this can end up being

beneficial for the school as it lends itself to more understanding from the headteacher about teachers and their practice. This then allows for practical leadership strategies to be created by the headteacher as they are putting them into practice alongside other staff members (Vulliamy & Webb, 1995).

Research conducted around the national curriculum in rural small schools stated that professionals were much more knowledgeable about the demands of the national curriculum than their counterparts in larger schools as they had to lead many more subjects (Galton et al., 1998). This can be further supported and interpreted by research from Phillips (1997) which attests that rural schools can provide good pupil outcomes. She stated that low attaining children in rural schools were proportionally matched in rural schools (Phillips, 1997). What can be interpreted from Galton et al. (1998) and Phillips (1997) when analysing the two in tandem is that because teachers in rural schools know more about each subject they teach, this then has a direct impact on teaching and learning. However, there is contradictory research to suggest that good pupil academic outcomes are a reflection of the socioeconomic backgrounds that the pupils come from and not the effectiveness of the school (Flecknoe, 2003). Yet, more recent research stated that rural schools in Cornwall have low socioeconomic backgrounds in geographically isolated areas and these schools maintain good academic outcomes from good teaching (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019).

Therefore, when it comes to the problem of improving subject leadership it can be understood from the literature so far that rural schools face many challenges. In an attempt to be financially sustainable, rural schools must battle with finances and choose between more expensive staff, or cheaper less knowledgeable staff. The pressure of good teaching is amplified as a rural school's survival depends on the enrolment of new pupils. The literature points towards the same strategy, and states that in order to lessen the pressures and demands, rural schools are to collaborate with other professionals. Therefore, the next

section of the literature will look at how teachers can work together to improve their subject knowledge and subject teaching by collaboratively working together.

2.4 Collaborative teacher learning

When improving subject leadership, the basis for the argument for working collaboratively is so that this can support the development of the subject throughout all staff and to encourage each other in gaining better knowledge for better pupil outcomes. The topic of collaborative teacher learning theorises how the sharing of knowledge between teachers can help information build and flow, and how this is directly influenced by relationships and interactions between individuals (Meijs, Prinsen, & de Laat, 2016). Much research on teacher learning is focussed within a particular area of practice or expertise (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). However, the context of leadership in a rural school means that there are multiple areas of expertise per teacher. Professionals move between different boundaries, for example, different establishments, job roles, and cultures (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). The knowledge each individual brings to a setting and exchanges to help construct new knowledge can be defined as relational expertise (Edwards, 2011). This is based on the engagement with the knowledge that underpins one's own boundary as well as the ability to understand what others who are from a differing expertise from another boundary might offer (Edwards, 2011). The process of relational expertise meeting with boundaries is where common knowledge can be built amongst professionals.

This can also be described by Wenger (2000) as an interplay between social capabilities and personal experience that combine personal information, the knowledge of the distinct area, which creates an evolution of common knowledge. Communities of practice (CoP) allow for the collective development of knowledge in a common domain which frames the social structures of learning in a slightly different way. CoP provides a framework that can help explore and assess the effectiveness of professional communities. A CoP is described

as members of a domain, in this case primary school teachers, who engage in activities and discussions to help each other (Wenger, Trayner, & de Laat, 2011). They build relationships which help them learn from one another and they care about working in their domain together (Wenger et al., 2011). Much like Vygotsky (1978) and the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD)., CoP has the same principles: it explores the space for learning, and it aims to assess the flow of information and the manifestation of group identity through the generation of old and new knowledge (Wenger et al., 2011). Wenger (2000) conceptualises the idea that a community of practice has three modes of belonging: engagement, doing things together; imagination, which is the act of building an image of ourselves, community and the world; and alignment, which is the checking of processes to be aligned within the community so that it is sustainably effective.

Another way in which this process can be explored is by using Vygotsky's sociocultural commentary which provides a landscape in which social contexts of teacher learning can be defined more clearly. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development encompasses the theory of the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). The ZPD can be explained as the primary activity space in which learning occurs and explores the idea of the present level of knowledge and the potential knowledge that can be learned when working with others (Vygotsky, 1978). What can be understood from the ZPD with regard to development and learning is that it is a complex process that takes place internally with the learner. Itis then mediated through tools to support a shared understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD can be defined as:

"the distance between the actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978, pg. 86)

This can be further explained as the actual development of a learner, in this case teachers, and is the initial access point into the social learning zone known as the ZPD. When the learner works with a person of a higher access level it can scaffold the recipient to internalise the context, and thus, creates new learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

What makes CoP particularly suitable when exploring the development of subject leadership in a rural school, is the notion of leadership within a CoP. As rural schools have limited staffing, the theory of CoP helps to argue that, although not focussed within the context of subject leadership, understandings and knowledge are diverse within a CoP and are not solely based on the traditional hierarchical approach of leadership (Wenger, 2000). This is similar in theory to the work of Spillane (2006) who also argues that the collective interactions of school leaders, followers and a situation are beneficial to enable successful outcomes. Again, this theory focusses on the process of collective leadership, and is not outcomes-focused (Spillane, 2006). It describes that inattention to leadership practice leads to a focus on structures which inhibit the development of teachers (Spillane, 2006). Spillane (2006) talks about the coordination of leaders and followers and how these roles can be interchanged, and Wenger (2000) opens this perspective much more widely. Wenger's (2000) particular focus on boundaries holds particular significance when exploring the context of teacher learning for subject leadership. The boundaries in this case can be synthesised with subjects within the curriculum, as these boundaries connect communities and offer learning opportunities (Wenger, 2000). In this context, boundaries can be understood as the different subject leaders and the relationship between competence and experience which can help to develop knowledge. Within the three modes of belonging the boundary process can be explored through: coordination, whereby processes are evaluated on their effectiveness within the community; transparency, whereby the meaning of the boundaries is shared amongst each other; negotiability, whereby perspectives within the boundary processes are two-way (Wenger, 2000).

This theory can be particularly useful when considering the recruitment of newly qualified teachers in rural schools in an attempt to save money financially and when networking with other school's proved less favourable amongst staff (DfE, 2019a). Evidence exists to suggest that communities of practice and collaborative teacher learning have a positive impact on teacher development (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). It has been shown that newly qualified teachers benefitted from problem-solving in a team amongst each other (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011). However, the lack of expertise can only support development teachers so far. This is demonstrated by research with newly qualified teachers who participated in a learning community. The data suggested that changes made to practice in teaching was slow and could have benefitted from having a more qualified professional in the group (Meyer, 2002). In addition to this, the mode of belonging, engagement, was crucial in the professional development of PE teachers (MacPhail, Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2014). It was highlighted that the higher the level of engagement between teachers, the more successful the community of practice (MacPhail et al., 2014). This could argue against the research of Meyer (2002) as the research from MacPhail et al. (2014) highlighted that it was the more experienced teachers who failed to engage. This evidence shows that communities of practice have a balance between the measures, the modes of belonging, and the participants within the community of practice. Another study of teachers' collaborative professional learning highlighted that they felt more comfortable to take risks, trust was built up more amongst teachers, and provided a vehicle to extend teachers' teaching repertoire (Patton & Parker, 2017). What can be deduced is that even if a person in the community is new, or lacking in knowledge, the boundary process can show positive development professionally if there is engagement. Additionally, a benefit of teachers with less expertise could align and show transparency much more easily to support the development of the CoP.

2.5 Conclusion and research questions

I raise a main point made in the exploration of literature around subject leadership, namely that primary school teachers have to master many subjects and are expected to do so at a good standard within the EIF. When looking at the limitations and strengths of a rural school, it can be understood how staffing can have an impact on the level of development when leading foundation subjects. The quantity of foundation subjects in correlation to the number of staff forms the bedrock of the issues for rural schools. The workload for a small staff size in this setting is demanding. The EIF framework advises schools to ensure their staff have good subject knowledge in the subjects they teach (Ofsted, 2019b). Yet, allowing the time for staff in a rural school setting to develop this knowledge, whilst dealing with the daily teaching demands of the job, is difficult to manage. The impact of low staffing numbers in a rural school means that there is a possibility of lower expertise in foundation subject leadership and teaching, and newly qualified teachers can create a bigger gap within this problem (The Key, 2018; Wilson & Brundrett, 2005). Yet, there are still the demands of the government guidance for rural schools to comply with and this creates a much higher workload for staff. Staff in these settings have been encouraged to collaborate with nearby schools in MATs, however the research showed that some schools were reluctant to do so, or unable to due to geographical isolation (N. Morgan, 2016; Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2019; The Key, 2018).

The notion of a collaborative approach towards teachers' leadership within rural schools is promoted, and although the literature is limited it is a common thread. The terms vary across the literature such as 'cluster schools', 'MAT', and 'collaboration' and yet the common theme across the literature is a promotion of working collaboratively to support the management of challenging aspects of working within a rural school (DfE, 2019a; Dunning, 1993; N. Morgan, 2016). The exploration of collaborative teacher learning helps to further explore this suggestion. If teachers in rural schools have claimed to be at a disadvantage within the literature, then the use of this strategy should in theory support the development of the expectations of foundation subject leadership that is outlined in the EIF. The guidance

suggests that if teachers have good knowledge and provide good support for their subject, then this can be effectively deployed through the use of collaborative teacher learning. The concept of Wenger's (2000) boundary processes is particularly applicable within this argument as it can be applied to help explore how teachers with differing knowledge can bring this together and synthesise new understandings. Additionally, this can be taken further and argue against the research around reluctance of teachers to collaborate as Patton and Parker's (2017) stated that teachers felt more comfortable to take risks when learning together. Moreover, due to the disparities within the EIF guidance in relation to the setting of a rural school, allowing for problem solving in a collaborative teacher learning framework could be viewed as highly beneficial.

Therefore, the aim of this research is to help improve foundation subject leadership in a rural school by using collaborative teacher learning. This learning will take place within subject specific staff meetings that will support teachers with their planning. The following research questions will be used to help answer the question "*How can foundation subject leadership be improved through collaborative teacher learning?"*

- What are the barriers to subject leadership?
- How can foundation subject teaching be improved through collaborative teacher panning?
- Do teachers perceive collaborative teacher learning as beneficial towards leading their subject?

Chapter 3

Methodology

This section discusses the chosen methodological choices made throughout the study. This is justified in relation to the research questions outlined.

3.1 Practitioner research

The nature of this research can be defined as qualitative, which is research that has been undertaken in a natural setting (Cohen, Lawrence, & Morrison, 2017). It is the researcher's responsibility to gather data, analyse and describe the process so that answers can be found to questions (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Since I am a teacher who has undertaken the research project in my own setting and participated in the research, this form of research is known as 'practitioner research'. This can be defined in an educational setting as a systematic review carried out by a persons in that setting whereby the outcomes of such research is shared with other practitioners (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2016). The aim of practitioner research is to identify problems within your particular education setting, pose questions, and conduct research that is sufficiently rigorous enough to provide trustworthy information to support improvement of practices (Robinson & Lai, 2010). The rigour of practitioner research is dependent upon the validity of the findings, the reliability of the data and researcher transparency. From the outset I was open an honest with the participants of the study about the aim of this research, and the project was planned in with the aim of manageable and researchable portions to provide better scope for rigour (BERA, 2019; Cohen et al., 2017). However, as a practitioner involved in the data set, it was important to demonstrate objectivity. Being a researcher involved in the study has distinct benefits, namely that I have been fully immersed in the context of the study which has given me a better understanding of the issues presented (Burton, Brundrett, & Jones, 2018). Yet, a

limitation of being a researcher involved is that it is impossible to be constantly objective (Edwards, Anne, Talbot, 1995). To help mitigate this, I applied a deductive method of analysis, as the research instruments were the use of interview and analysis of the transcription data from the intervention. This will be further explained in the analysis section of the methodology.

3.2 Ethical considerations

Before I began this research, I obtained ethical approval from the University. Once this had been obtained, I asked the gatekeeper's written permission to proceed with the study (Burton et al., 2018). The gatekeeper in the case of this context was the school's headteacher. The participants were the teachers in the school, and they were briefed on the nature of the study and were given the right to withdraw and were reminded of this at the start of each session (BERA, 2019). I reminded participants at the start if each intervention session of the intention of the study so that it was clear. This was important so that participants knew what they were taking part in and had been properly appraised so they could make an informed decision regarding the right to withdraw (Flick et al., 2007). It was not possible to maintain the anonymity of the participants due to the size of the study, which is a widely recognised limitation of a small scale study (BERA, 2019). I aimed to keep the identity of the participants confidential, and the data collected to be stored in appropriately. The information was stored securely and data is to be destroyed once the research is completed as outlined in the CUREC. Each participant has been given a number in the presentation and discussion of data to help preserve confidentiality. Additionally, I ensured that participants were made aware that the study was voluntary, all intrusion of participants' privacy was avoided, additional stress with workload was lowered by planning the intervention into staff meetings, and there was no coercion on participants to behave in a certain manner (Burton et al., 2018).

3.3 Research instruments

This means that the research took place once a week amongst the three teachers and a follow up group interview. There was no escaping the fact that the sample size for the collaborative working group was going to be small. This had a huge influence on the type of research instruments I would use to collect data. There are limitations to having few participants and the interest in this field is small. The school is small, the staffing is small and there is a small number of small rural schools across England. A small sample size does provide scope for errors in the data due to its reduced power in participant numbers (Petersen, 2011). Yet, it can be argued that a small sample size is beneficial to practitioner research because within practitioner research, the nature of the interest of the problem is small (Petersen, 2011). In this case, the nature of the problem is based around small staffing numbers and how to improve subject leadership. The first research instrument used was the intervention group whereby the session was transcribed. The second was a group interview to review the impact of the intervention. The following instruments will aim to answer the following research questions.

- The research instrument of the group interview will aim to answer the question: How can foundation subject teaching be improved through collaborative teacher panning?
- The research instrument of the focus group will aim to answer the question: How can foundation subject teaching be improved through collaborative teacher panning?

The use of a interview as a research instrument has its limitations. First, as the researcher, I have created an artificial situation when conducting interviews (Cohen et al., 2017). Therefore, no matter how hard the interviewer attempts to be systematic and objective, the situation created will not be naturalistic in its data. (Cohen et al., 2017). However, it does

provide opportunity to discuss and explore issues in a structured or semi-structured manner (Burton et al., 2018). There are many advantages to using interview as a research instrument. Some advantages include the ability to adapt by following up ideas, investigate feelings, probe responses for clarification, and provide an opportunity to develop answers in a way a survey or questionnaire cannot do (Bell & Waters, 2014). However, it can lend itself towards being a highly subjective technique so analysis and question words must be considered carefully (Bell & Waters, 2014). The justification for using an interview is that it was appropriate to the size of the sample (Burton et al., 2018). If for example a questionnaire had been selected as a research tool, the short and simplified data responses would not have provided me with sufficient data to analyse. The type of interview chosen was a group interview. The interview was a semi-structured interview so that the group discussion allowed for the expansion of answers but was able to keep the topics of discussion more focussed than the focus group sessions (Burton et al., 2018). However, there are limitations with the use of group interviews. The nature of a group interview may hinder an individual's openness to share personal viewpoints, and opinions may be altered due to the dynamic of the group. Yet, in the context of this research the justification to use this method was that the nature of the school due to its size meant that the constraints of lockdown had impacted on teacher's capacity, so I felt that a group interview would be the most effective at gathering data considering the circumstances. It is argued by some that interviews may produce artificial data, however it can also provide participants with time to reflect on events and clarify meanings (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012). The questions that the participants were asked were:

1) How have you found the structure of the subject leadership sessions?
2) Do you think we have merged multiple perspectives on each subject?
3) Do you think a sense of community has been fostered amongst staff in relation to subject leadership?
4) Have the aims for you, each subject leader, developed over time?

5) How have the joint opportunities helped you to understand the knowledge other staff have?
6) Have you been able to use this knowledge? If so, how?
7) Have your own understandings of your subject developed during the staff meeting sessions?
8) What tools have helped you access understanding of others?

These questions were chosen to be in line with the design of the intervention, to help assess more openly the outcome of the intervention. The interview questions were designed in such a manner that they were general enough to cover a variety of experiences, yet narrow enough to elicit and explore each participant's particular experience (Flick, 2014). Although this data is influenced by a deductive framework from the literature, it is important not to force the data when it is being analysed into preconceived categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

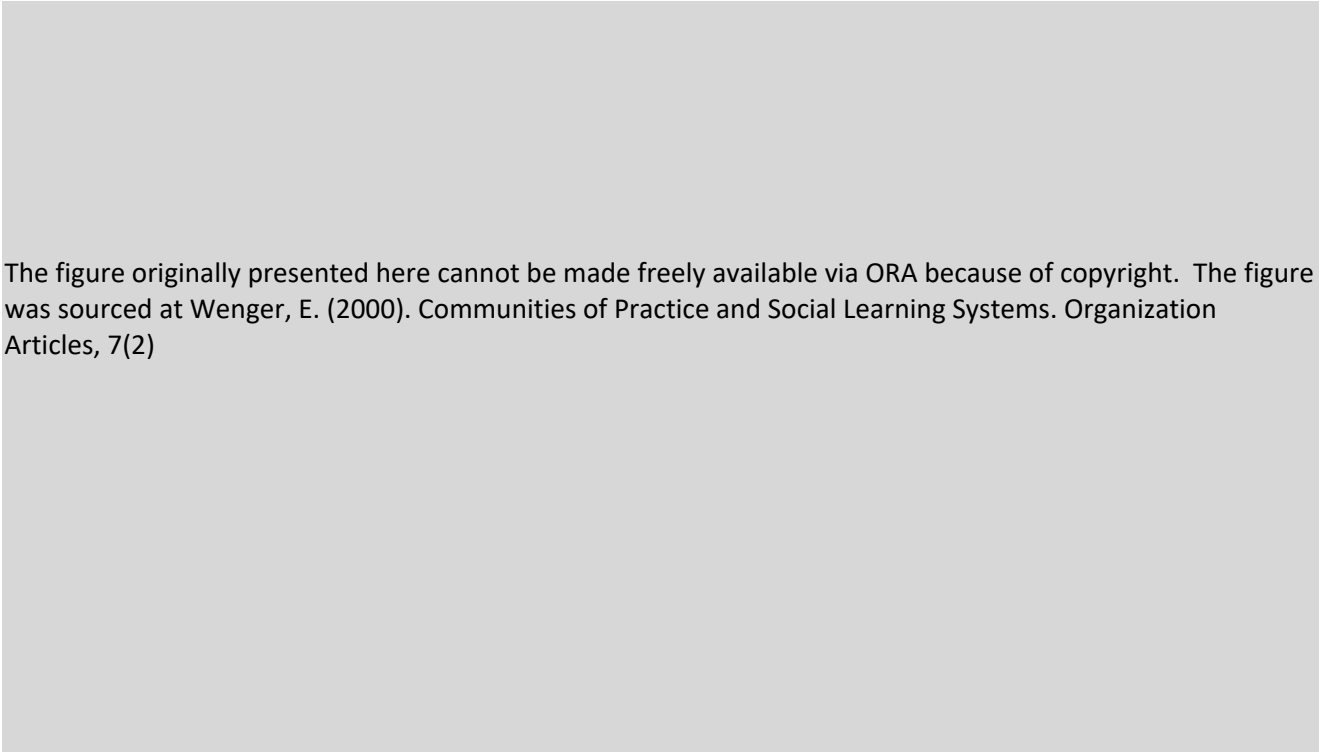
The second research instrument was the intervention, a focus group. The purpose of a focus group is to concentrate the discussion around one issue (Bell & Waters, 2014). It is said that focus groups are less intimidating to participants due to the informal structure, therefore this opens up the opportunity to discuss perceptions, thoughts, ideas and opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Taking this into account, the reason for the decision to use a focus group in this research project was to open up and explore on a foundation subject during each staff meeting. The discussion was unstructured, and each participant came to the meeting with the same focus of 'what do I know and what do I want to know as a subject leader to help the school?'. The benefit of semi-unstructured sessions this is that it allowed the participants to demonstrate their own unique perspectives on the issues raised (Burton et al., 2018). The aim of the research was to share knowledge and learn about each subject collaboratively, therefore this was the justification for the unstructured focus group approach. Additionally, it allows for better observation towards the interaction of the topic (D. Morgan,

2012). There are limitations with this type of unstructured focus group in that the participants may not be interested enough and provide little discussion, or they may be too invested and it can become difficult to moderate (D. Morgan, 2012).

3.4 Data analysis

There is a mixed methods approach towards the analysis of the data. The first of these used deductive analysis for the focus group. The data generated will provide a quantitative set of data that can be further analysed. By using Wenger's boundary matrix to analyse these sessions, it will provide a framework to code the data from the focus groups. Due to the volume of data provided by the transcript, I chose to use this approach to help focus the analysis process. The second approach is to analyse the data using a grounded theory approach. Using a mixed methods approach has been argued to support the findings of quantitative data (Gubrium et al., 2012).

The focus groups will use the theory of Wenger (2000) and communities of practice and social learning systems. By using Wenger (2000) as a priori code, it allows for a predetermined set of codes to allow for a deductive method of analysis (Cohen et al., 2017). The nature of the focus group was to begin to investigate and learn more about the foundation subjects, and through the exploration of literature around teacher learning this theory was explored. Wenger (2000) theorises three modes of belonging which inform how we take part in social learning. This is used as a framework to explore three successive elements of the social learning systems that are discussed. The elements I have used to analyse the focus group sessions are the boundary processes among the communities of practice. The theoretical framework matrix that Wenger (2000) uses can be seen in fig.1.



(Fig.1)

The engagement, imagination and alignment aspects of the matrix relate to the modes of belonging which are described as:

- ***Engagement*** is the act of a group of professionals, in this instance teachers, doing things together such as talking, or producing artifacts like documentation.
- ***Imagination*** is the act of constructing an image of oneself and community one is in, and the world, so that one can orient themselves.
- ***Alignment*** is the act of ensuring that the activities are aligned with other processes within the group so that there is a mutual coordination of perspectives and interpretations.

These dimensions of models of belonging are then measured alongside the dimensions of boundary processes. Boundary processes are the theory that when two boundaries meet, such as geography subject leader knowledge from one participant and the knowledge of

another participant that is from another boundary such as art subject leader knowledge, they offer a bridge towards new learning opportunities. Learning at the boundaries are maximised when the experience and competence of each participant is closely linked. This can be achieved if the engagement has an intersection of interest. In this case it is the development of subject leader knowledge. The engagement must consist of differences as well as common ground to help develop new knowledge. The dimensions of boundary processes are described as:

- ***Coordination*** is the act of standardising each boundary to allow for coordinated actions. This can use boundary objects such as talking or artifacts like documentation.
- ***Transparency*** is the act of ensuring the boundaries are well understood in the practices involved.
- ***Negotiability*** is the act of a two-way connection to allow for multiple voices when exploring boundaries to help make new learning occur. This is particularly useful when exploring the relationships of power among the practices.

The second method of analysis used for the group interview is a grounded theory approach. The interviews will be openly coded using the method of constant comparison, whereby the focus group interview data will be analysed without a set of predetermined codes (Flick, 2014). A set of codes will be created that will convey the ideas and views of the participants (Flick, 2014). I will use a two-step coding process that will entail an open coding to help make analytic decisions about the data and organising these into concepts (Cohen et al., 2017; Flick, 2014). The second step will be to sort these initial codes into a more focussed coding by using the most recurrent initial codes to help synthesise the data and look for meaning (Cohen et al., 2017; Flick, 2014). Methodological issues that could occur, could be that the interview data generated does not apply to the study, or that the codes I generate will not fit that of the priori codes of the deductive analysis in the focus groups. What this will

ultimately produce is two sets of data that are non-complementary and do not support the research questions. Yet, these two approaches, inductive approach using grounded theory and the deductive approach using a priori code are way of connecting and generating ideas (Flick, 2014).

However, there is a third complementary research instrument that I will use to supplement both research questions. Throughout the research timeline I, the researcher, have kept a record of observations in a research diary. It has been argued that the use of a research diary can improve the reliability of a study (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). By using this diary, it will permit me to keep my thoughts reflexive whilst conducting the analytical processes (Bloor & Wood, 2011). Yet, during this process I must aim to acknowledge personal views as a researcher in the field to help lower researcher bias (Edwards, Anne, Talbot, 1995). I feel there is a justification of contextual anecdotes from the research diary that can strengthen the exploration of the research questions.

3.5 Limitations of research

During the planning stage of this research, I had intended to conduct individual interviews with each teacher to better understand what perceptions towards what barriers they had towards subject leadership. However, due to increasing pressures at work for staff it became apparent as a researcher that it would not be appropriate to conduct individual interviews. I, as a researcher held a moral duty of care towards the wellbeing of my participants (BERA, 2019). When I broached the topic of conducting individual interviews with members of staff, two participants were reluctant due to additional stress and pressures at work as a result of the impact of coronavirus.

3.6 The impact of coronavirus and shutdown

As a result of the previous school shutdown in March 2020, I decided that this research should be planned to take into account the possibility of another shutdown. This proved to be the case and in January 2021 there was another national shutdown. Therefore, I chose to work only with teaching staff due to the climate in which this research has taken place. For example, the staff intervention around subject leadership that was intended to be recorded in person was easily changed to online video staff meetings. I wanted to maximise the opportunity to work collaboratively despite the limitations from the pandemic.

Additionally, I felt that as a teacher with a duty of care towards the children in my class, it would not be appropriate to conduct research on my students who were home learning. Primary age children faced many demands in the March 2020 shutdown and the focus during this time for online learning was on the core subjects. I did not feel the online foundation subject lessons would be a true reflection of foundation subjects. There were far too many variables per child, such as home environment, quality of electronic devices, internet provider quality, all of which could have had an impact on data collection.

Limitations of the January 2021 lockdown included:

1) Pre-planned staff meetings for the intervention being changed to staff meetings about coronavirus.
2) Audio recording being slightly harder due to the group interview being socially distanced.

3.7 Phases of research

July 2020

I met with the headteacher and decided that the research should be aimed at the school's improvement plan objective to help improve foundation subject leadership.

November 2020

After reviewing the literature I completed the final design of the intervention, CUREC approval was granted. Artifacts, such as planning and staff meeting observations were collected in a research diary from this point.

February – March 2021

National shutdown began in January 2021. The intervention took place from February, and data was collected once a week.

April – June 2021

The data was processed, and it was interpreted in relation to the literature.

June – July 2021

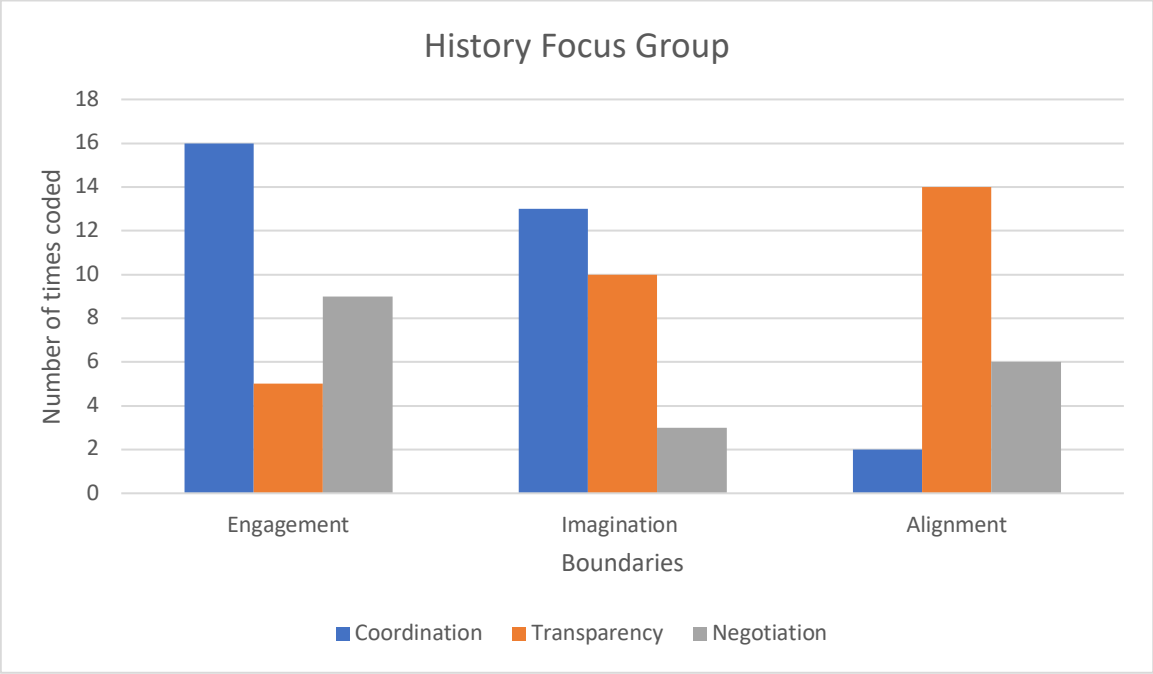
The findings were feedback to the headteacher, and further areas of research were discussed.

4. Data Presentation and discussion

4.1 Data Presentation

The first set of data that will be presented is the focus group data, whereby I will aim to answer and explore the question: *Does the use of collaboration in staff meetings help develop subject leadership?* The data presented below has been collected from the first of the three focus groups. The first subject group was that of the subject of history. The participants involved were the 3 class teachers and the headteacher. Whist coding the data I found certain boundaries pertained to certain practices within teaching. The notion of engagement coded strongly towards problem solving as a group, and initial discussions around the subject that were being developed. The notion of imagination linked to the way in which the individuals were able to communicate their understandings. I found that alignment linked to more formal processes such as planning, policies and next steps for the development of the subject.

4.1.1 History Focus Group



In this focus group, the most coded boundary was engagement and coordination. The focus group initially centered around the creation of the school's history policy. The high levels of coordination and engagement could be seen as a reflection of the problem solving that was

undertaken. The problem solving in this instance was based around what values we believed history to have in our school. Throughout the focus group, the engagement and coordination moved towards talking about the meaning behind each objective that needed to be taught. The school uses a curriculum support document for many subjects to help with what knowledge needs to be covered called a 'companion'. What can be understood from the data explored so far is that this links towards Kitson & O'Neill's (1996) argument that subject leaders are an essential tool when establishing knowledge and how it progresses. In the case of this research there was little discussion in the focus group about progression, yet there was much discussion about shared planning and ideas. During this focus group what can be interpreted from the data, is that the subject leader in this instance was able to clarify to all teaching members of the school how she believes history should be taught. The trend that could be seen in this focus group showed that for every act of coordinated engagement, the engagement and negotiability took place after an act of engagement and coordination. Within the context of this research this demonstrated that the teachers were able to coordinate differing perspectives during problem solving conversations. Additionally, the discussion to share teaching beliefs and ideas can be related to Edwards' (2011) idea of relation expertise. What was commented in the focus group meeting displays Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD where the subject leader herself comments on her present knowledge and the potential knowledge she gained:

History lead: If we hadn't have sat down together, we would have missed a lot of opportunities to develop our own ideas and how to plan something.

What this also indicates is that, although the research in the literature review commented that rural schools should preferably collaborate with other schools to support their subject development such as literature by the DfE (2019) and Harrison and Busher (1995), the act of working collaboratively within the school showed to be a positive step within subject

leadership. This data has shown that new knowledge was able to be learnt within the school staff and is perceived by teachers as a positive step to help the planning of each subject.

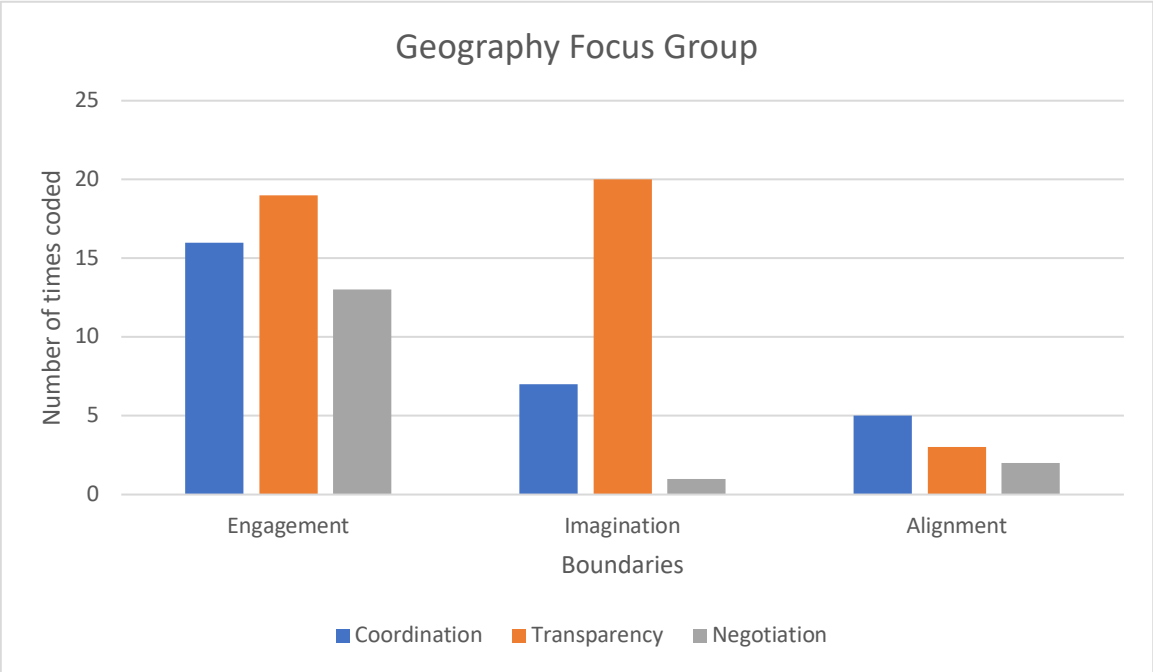
The third most coded area from this focus group was the boundary of imagination and coordination. Within the discussion, there was a focus around linking past personal knowledge to the topic of teaching history within the school. Every member of staff involved shared their own anecdotal perspective during the conversations being held. Interestingly, when exploring the data from this focus group, it closely follows dialogue relating to engagement and coordination. A common theme that arose within this boundary is that anecdotal stories shared were from all members of staff. This proved useful in the sessions to help the teachers to understand their own perspectives.

However, although the data from this focus group highlighted the boundary process of imagination and coordination there is limited literature to support this analysis. What could be alternatively interpreted from this, is that the anecdotal stories were a hindrance to the development of the subject history. This can be justified as the coding shows that the lowest boundary coded was imagination and transparency. What this means is that levels of problem solving were high with the engagement, coordination and negotiability boundary. Yet, the levels of imagination and transparency prove a disparity as it indicated low levels of understanding for common interests and needs within the community, in this case the school. This could support the Ofsted research from 2009, that stated teachers managed subjects ineffectively. This could be due to the communications being insufficient and broken in areas when analysing it against Wenger's (2000) boundary matrix. However, this finding is not discouraging as this was the first focus group session. What can be identified from this is that there was a good level of engagement and coordination which was evenly distributed throughout the entire focus group. This indicates that communication was effective and has a strong basis to be improved upon.

The second most coded area was alignment and transparency. The reason this coded area has come after the third most coded area in this discussion is that interestingly it came towards the end of the focus group session. What this data signifies is the act of cross-referencing norms and traditions played an integral role in exploring and clarifying the planning process which each teacher undertook. There was a main focus on the planning template, mainly towards the medium-term planning and how each teacher organizes the objectives and teaching ideas. From this, traditions and norms were clarified and set around weekly planning. What this refers to is the use of artifacts to help each teacher to reveal common ground within their planning process, Wenger (2000) described artifacts as crucial in connect multiple practices. Although this illustrates the connection of different practices such as varying jobs, it is applicable in this context. The teachers were able to share their own personal practices to help the subject leader understand and guide the planning process which links to Hammersley-Fletcher's (2004) viewpoint of the role of a subject leader. There we two points within the focus group where the subject leader was able to use this to then clarify with the headteacher on formal documentation and imagined ideas for future documentation. These two exchanges happened naturally within the focus group, and demonstrated quick leadership decisions. This also allowed for the headteacher to understand first-hand the teacher's perspectives to help leadership strategies as stated in the literature by Vulliamy & Webb, 1995. What is important to note at this point is that, notes in my research diary revealed that upon initial exploration of this project in the summer of 2020, the decision-making process was directed by the headteacher. Staff members were given checklists of what they needed to do but little was explored as a team in reference towards each subject. In this session, the dynamics had changed and there was a sense of collaboration amongst teachers and headteacher.

4.1.2 Geography Focus Group

The following set of data will be based around the second focus group which discussed the subject of geography. Again, this focus group aimed to explore the research question: *Does the use of collaboration in staff meetings help develop subject leadership?*



When comparing the coded data in this focus group with the coded data in the previous focus group, there are two main observations; first, the levels of engagement and coordination are similar; second, there is less alignment coded in this focus group. This shows that there was a high proportion of problem solving within this focus group, yet the lower levels of alignment could suggest that there were more consistent norms based on planning expectations. Alternatively, this could be an indication that the subject leader was unable to conduct the session in a manner that could allow for alignment. This could link to the research of Meyer (2002) and could highlight how the geography subject leader lacked the experience to engage effective learning for staff. Meyer's (2002) argument in this context could be further supported by Paxton and Parker (2017) who state that in order for a teacher's repertoire to be built up, trust must be built up amongst teachers. This context can be further explained due to the previous subject, history, to being a whole school focus.

Therefore, there were comments made that geography had not had as much time spent on it as history. This could infer that the geography subject leadership focus group's purpose was to build trust amongst teachers. Looking at this extract from the focus group, it can be seen how the teachers interacted and built trust.

History lead:	I think that for any subject it has to link back to how it impacts on the children and why they might want to use it in their lives and what purpose it has.
Geography lead:	Yeah.
History lead:	And being able to recognise what is geography in their daily lives. I guess even walking to school and stuff like that, on a basic level.
Geography lead:	Well yes, because it starts with them, doesn't it, the geography. I agree, it's what it means to them and then, only then when they've got that, they can get those bigger issues I think.
Art lead:	I think it's massive from a sociological point of view that they learn from quite a young age that they are a very small part, a small but very significant part, of the world and there are equally significant places and people, and that they are part of a very broad society that needs looking after and addressing and respecting.
Headteacher:	It's a global citizenship.

Within this focus group, the highest coded boundary was imagination and transparency and the second was engagement and transparency. When looking more closely at the data coded in this section, it is an example that shows there was not only a high proportion of the group spent problem solving but negotiating their beliefs and explaining them. In this focus group, the teachers are explaining the meaning of geography in relation to the meaning which geography can hold for children in their own lives. This discussion holds significant

meaning as it has shown to influence teachers on the values of what they teach and as a result of this impact planning. Using the Ofsted (2009) study on subject leadership where it stated that subject leaders provided little guidance on how to set appropriate teaching tasks, this evidence could suggest that geography leadership has been impacted positively as teachers are collaboratively guiding towards the same vision. In subsequent geography leadership meetings, this could be specifically honed towards improving individual lessons and discussions around assessment. In addition to this, the discussion coded within engagement and transparency provided a clear picture which demonstrated what the teacher felt confident teaching and not so confident teaching. Again, this has provided a clear picture for the geography lead to understand that teacher's particular practice.

History lead:	I find things like reading a four and six figure grid reference, and longitude and latitude and all that type of thing easier and more interesting to teach, Map reading type things.
Geography lead:	Yeah.
History lead:	But I think the other type of stuff, if you are going to do it properly, you have got to find several ways of trying how to teach it.

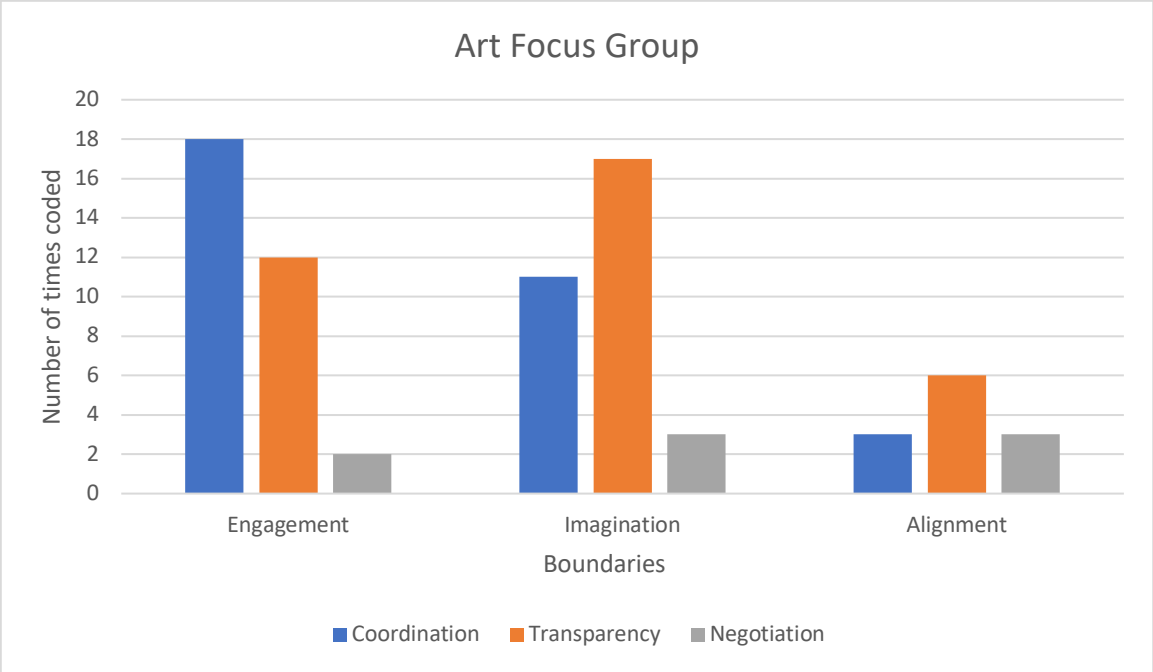
I feel that this focus group differed in function compared to the history focus group. I feel this group allowed for the building of trust and understanding of each individual's teaching. Prior to this, there had been little time spent on geography and providing windows into each other practices to align the school policy to help which can be seen in this extract. This shows that even though levels of alignment coded were low in frequency, the conversations held in relation to this aspect were important as can be seen in this extract.

History lead:	I guess when we have got the vision statement in place then what we do is a subject vision statement which will be linked based around that.
Geography lead:	I agree. It's like your pillars you lean into.
Headteacher:	So, I think after we have done this bit of work it will be interesting to go back to that vision statement again and we will see all the things that are missing but we also might look at the vision statement and say actually there are various things on the vision statement we have missed out on this.

What this data shows is that geography leadership has been improved in some areas. There were effective boundaries that were well understood across teachers, and a standardisation of coordination that allowed for a more aligned action to move forward in this subject.

4.1.3 Art Focus Group

The final focus group continued to explore the question: *Does the use of collaboration in staff meetings help develop subject leadership?*



When looking at the data for this focus group, what is most apparent is that again the levels of engagement and coordination are high, similar to the previous two groups. Furthermore, the levels of imagination and transparency are also high, and the levels of alignment are low which is similar to the previous two focus groups. What is striking is that there are very low levels of negotiation across all boundaries. What this could suggest is that there were little two-way exchanges within the art focus group. When looking more closely at the data, there are large sections of dialogue that solely have the art lead ensuring that they are transparent when explaining their subject so that it is well understood by the staff. This has provided the high levels of engagement and coordination, engagement and transparency and imagination and transparency. What is interesting to note is that what occurs after the efforts from the art lead to help construct a well understood image of their practice (imagination and transparency), is that it is followed by engagement and coordination from other members of staff. The example below highlights this point.

Art lead: I think in terms of Early Years that's another thing I have to be mindful of, keeping it open, letting the children take the lead, and I suppose that translates into other year groups too doesn't it?

Headteacher: It's really hard when the children get older, because they are less free. I think when they are young they are happy to experiment and explore and be playful, and then as they get older they get more and more reticent, and more anxious about it. They more want a set of rules that they follow so they know what to do and even one step further than that – can you do it for me?

Geography lead: I think having a space as well, where you … I am even thinking in Class Two, having some of the Turner pictures on the wall, and having some of the things they are going to use in the coming weeks to create the picture, just having that, and when they have a bit of Friday free time or if they have time in the week.

What this has shown is that the art lead's beliefs around how the subject should be taught have successfully travelled across boundaries. On one hand, it can be argued that the guidance of an Early Years approach when leading other members of staff may create extra pressure to respond to a pedagogy that isn't suitable for the setting. On the other hand, the collaborative nature of the focus group can provide space and time to problem solve this. Furthermore, personal and anecdotal stories were used to support the development of imagination and transparency. The following extract demonstrates how our own practices are influenced by all aspects of our lives (Wenger, 2000). This section of the focus group shows how the Headteacher used the image of herself, motherhood, and how this influences her perspective within the practice of teaching. This is supported by Wenger et al.'s (2010) notion that within a community of practice, relationships are built that help each member learn from one another and care about working in their field together.

Headteacher: I think it really varies as well because my children, my own boys, have been exposed to lots of art, but they are terrified of picking up a paintbrush and having a go at stuff. And definitely there is a gender issue there, girls like to draw and paint, and boys like to play football.

This section shows the teacher presenting the issue, from a personal belief towards gender and art subject teaching. With this issue presented, the history lead provides a problem-solving opportunity.

History lead: I do find the boys are less open to giving it a go. I think when it is less structured to help the boys take a risk to begin with. Then gently move towards teaching more specific, refined skills. Like in your class [art lead].

What could be seen in the data here, is that there is understanding of what needs to be taught in art and the knowledge that comes with this. Yet, throughout the focus group, there is substantial discussion based on the context of art teaching within the school setting. The children are carefully considered and personal experiences, as shown in the extract above, are used to help build a community picture amongst staff. Once these personal narratives were built, a new picture of the subject of art was constructed. This links to Wenger's theory that new knowledge within a practice can help advance shared goals (Wenger, 2000, 2010). The shared goal in this context, is the aim for staff to understand the subject they lead so they can better support the other teaching staff in the school.

There are links to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development as the teachers are sharing knowledge of artists that can be linked to teaching art in the curriculum. Throughout the group there are discussions around Rousseau, Ernie Barnes, Matisse and Turner and how they can influence and fit into out teaching. This knowledge discussed

amongst teachers could be used. and provided the wider cultural understanding for art amongst pupils.

4.1.4 Group Interview Data

This section will explore and identify the key themes that have arisen from the group interview data. The group interview was an opportunity to reflect and evaluate the teacher's perspective of the collaborative planning approach to help support subject leadership. The following chart shows the journey of how data was coded into initial categories and subsequently coded into themes. The four overarching themes that were coded were planning, teaching, leadership and knowledge.

Code 1: Planning	**Code 2: Leadership**	**Code 3: Teaching**	**Code 4: Knowledge**
Group work on planning	Being a leader	How the focus group translated to the individual teacher's class teaching	Training
Planning lessons	Management of leading the subject		Teacher agency to learn more
	Subject cohesion		
	Subject leadership		
	focus group		

Code 1: Planning

When looking at the first code, planning, what was identified by teachers was that the focus group sessions allowed for discussions around each subject outside of the allotted and planned time.

Art lead:	We could help by offering our ideas to each other but also making sure there wasn't any overlap in teaching.
Geography lead:	It's so nice because we are such a small school that you plan by yourself and sometimes your ideas disappear, don't they?
History lead:	And actually, when we were stood around and we came out when the alarm went off, we had a conversation about something and that sorted something else out.

What this shows is that the teacher's perspective towards the impact of the focus group is that pressure to respond to the national curriculum, policy guidance and the EIF to create good teaching was problem-solved in a community. The problem solving was fostered and challenges in mixed age teaching, as exemplified in the research from The Key (2018), are lowered through informal professional conversations. This particular conversation was held during a fire drill practice. Additionally, what this can suggest is that the community created from the collaborative subject leadership meetings, provided more scope to improve subject teaching in for each teacher in the classroom. This is supported by research from Fisher (2000), who outlined how teachers in rural schools with mixed age classes were better able to plan for good pupil outcomes.

Code 2: Leadership

The following extract from the interview demonstrates an aspect of subject leadership that shows how one teacher perceived the other teachers.

Art lead:	It started off as an ideas sharing thing, which was what we needed at the time, but then those staff meetings really honed it all in and explained why we teach it like that and out school's distinct method of teaching things.
History lead:	I think for me, the joy of it is that I can step back [*as a subject leader*] and as a result you step forward and suddenly realising that you know a huge amount.
Art lead:	But actually, it was quite a good time to share expertise and ideas.

What can be understood from this, is that this is an example of Edward's (2011) theory of relational expertise. The boundary of the history lead's prior assumption of teachers' knowledge was developed and progressed when the opportunity for the boundaries of the other teachers was met with her own.

Code 3: Teaching

The next code relates to the teacher's perspective towards the impact of the subject leadership meetings within their own classroom practice.

Headteacher:	I think it has encouraged us to be braver in what we would do as well.
Art lead:	I felt like I had ownership over my class. I've learnt a lot and the kids have really.
Geography lead:	I think I've learned some new teaching methods for history as well.

This extract shows how the subject leadership sessions have supported the teachers within their own classrooms. What can be seem in this data is the headteacher's response towards

teaching. In the research diary, comments from the headteacher were noted about the way in which she wanted teachers to deliver foundation subjects. She commented that she wanted pedagogy that was exciting for children. The comment made here could indicate that teachers have been successful in developing this skill. The comments made from the art and geography lead support this notion. In this setting, teachers aim to teach each subject discretely which means there must be strong subject knowledge for each foundation subject. The focus group has manged to begin to facilitate this for teachers. Therefore, what this could suggest for future developments is that teachers will be able to draw links across subjects that are meaningful, logical and authentic to have the desired effect for cross-curricular teaching as stated by Barnes (20110.

Code 4: Knowledge

The final code highlights the perception teachers have towards developing subject knowledge to support the leadership of each foundation subject.

Headteacher:	I wonder at what point we should have brought in some external people too? If we were to only work in this way, I would start to get anxious that we were too inward looking and not getting enough expertise from the outside.
History lead:	We need to plan the topic and have people coming in too.
Geography lead:	I think the quality of those courses are a bit iffy sometimes.
Art lead:	If it was something like practical geography, I'd love someone to come in and show me the best way to do certain things in the geography curriculum.

What can be seen here is the contrasting perspectives from staff in relation to the suggestion of bringing in training courses to help develop knowledge. There is a sense that teachers still feel that they need more support outside of the staff team. This data exemplifies the arguments made by McPake (1998) and Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2019), who argue that limited staff numbers and expertise can restrict school improvement. In the case of this data, this can be supported by the comment made by the art lead who has stated a need for more support in geography. However this group interview has provided the geography lead with a chance to support and develop their subject if they are to respond to the concerns raised by the art lead.

5. Conclusions and limitations

As a researcher, I have seen this project to be a useful starting point to improve subject leadership within a rural school setting. This research has shown that the teachers were mainly positive about the collaborative project. The nature of the collaborative group provided an opportunity for staff to plan their teaching together. The research has showed that this did prove to be useful from the perspectives of the staff. What this research showed, was that subject leadership in the school needed to have the content blocked across the year groups. There was much focus towards planning and discussing what teachers taught in other classes. The assumption could be made that there are only 3 classes in the school, which would make it easy to communicate how and what subject content was being taught. Yet, the nature of a mixed year groups showed that there was a proportionate amount of problem solving towards mapping out what content was to be taught across each class. The focus group allowed for effective practical and in the moment leadership opportunities which is supported in the literature review by Vulliamy & Webb (1995). To further support this, the research showed that subject leaders were able to understand other teacher's views towards what the teachers knew. This means that, to

continue to develop the knowledge of teachers, the headteacher's comments about improving teacher's knowledge through the use of external experts is a valid critique. This supports the arguments put forward by Meyer (2002) who stated that changes made to practice in teaching were slow when there was limited expertise or experienced professional in the group. The use of an external expert would allow for greater learning. This can be supported by Vygotsky's (1978) theories who states that when a learner works with a person of a higher access level it can scaffold the recipient to internalise the context and create new learning.

I have found that there are several limitations towards the methods in this research. The group interview as a chosen research instrument could have been more effective as individual interviews. The use of individual interviews would have provided opportunities for staff to share their perspectives better so that I could have gained a better insight towards the effectiveness of the focus group from staff. This would have helped answer the research question "what are the barriers to subject leadership?" and give more opportunities to cross reference the individual views of the teachers. Furthermore, I feel that the focus group was very unstructured could have benefitted from a written task with staff. This task could have been a simple concept map to start the focus group session to see what teachers knew about the subject and revisions made after the focus group. As a researcher I would have more indication towards each teacher and have a measure of the amount of learning the teachers had. This could have been cross referenced with the teacher perspectives for better analysis of the data. Furthermore, this would have allowed for slightly more continuity between each focus group session. The data showed in the art focus group that there was a high level of personal stories shared. Although this could be argued as necessary, there was a common theme where the dialogue focussed entirely around personal experience with limited links towards teaching and education.

Additionally, the research could have benefitted from having an action research approach so that the subject leadership focus group sessions could have another cycle of data. This would have two main benefits. First, it would provide the opportunity to reflect, and problem solve any issues with the focus group, such as the issues mentioned. This would improve the effectiveness of the focus group and have a greater impact on staff. Second, it would allow for a bigger data set so that the transcriptions could allow for more opportunities to explore how much the teachers learnt from the collaborative teacher learning focus group.

As a teacher, I have found the focus group sessions to be extremely useful in allowing me to develop my practice as a subject leader more. I was able to see what staff needed to know from my subject and as a result of this, I have been able to plan in response to the needs of the school and staff. I think potential next steps going forward for the school to help develop this approach would be to introduce monitoring of the subjects within each teacher's class. This could be something as simple as photocopied evidence from children's learning in their books. This could help provide evidence of the impact each subject leader was having in their chosen subject.

The impact has shown that this has been a positive change towards staff dynamics. Staff commented that they felt more involved with each other's practices and that this created a sense of community amongst staff. To help keep this developed for staff, the next steps for the improvement of subject leadership would be to have termly meetings in the same collaborative nature. This could be linked towards planning for the teacher's upcoming termly topic, so they have specific subject guidance and planning opportunities.

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7. Appendices

An extract of the group interview transcriptions:

Group Feedback	
Geography Lead	Brilliant! And it will be really nice because we can hear the children in the background. So, the first question is how have you found the structure of each subject? The History, the Art and the Geography – those sessions.
Art Lead	Are we talking about the overall planning?
Geography Lead	We are talking about our subject sessions. History, Art and Geography – how did you find the structure of them?
Art Lead	I found the history one extremely useful, because it was writing a topic, a history thing, from scratch and actually what I found really useful was to have an overarching question about this is the framed legacy, and then we all had a question, an investigating question for the children to work on throughout the topic and it gave a real purpose to what they were learning. So last week when I asked them "well what do you think about why she left the legacy to the school", they could then draw on things that were happening at that time in their lives. I just thought that having a whole enquiry question for each class gave a real focus to the whole topic.
Geography Lead	Yes, brilliant.
Art Lead	And without discussing it and talking about it we would have gone off on our own …. I really liked the enquiry question. It hinges everything together and works really well with the three classes and at the same time

	it didn't stymie the direction we wanted the topic to go. I felt I had ownership over teaching my class.
Geography Lead	Cool
Art Lead	But with a sort of common focus about Elizabeth Lane 250 years ago but also
History Lead	You're talking about the session before Christmas are you?
Geography Lead	Yes
Art Lead	Yes, I think that was one of the most helpful ones, when we were trying to work out what each class was going to do. We could help by offering our ideas to each other but also making sure there isn't any sort of overlap.
Geography Lead	And actually just hashing out the ideas and making sure we know who is where and doing what.
Headteacher	It was a question in action, wasn't it. Saying well, if you are going to do that, what would be appropriate for Reception, and what would be appropriate …. That's progression, isn't it? Rather that it being just a list of objectives and milestones, it was more….
Art Lead	More trying to think what it would look like for a practical lesson, or a trip, or something. Just to make sure it wasn't just a dry history topic.
Geography Lead	Yes. So the openness of our sessions … okay, brilliant.
Art Lead	And it's so nice, because we are such a small school, that you plan by yourself and sometimes your ideas disappear don't they? Someone can make one comment and you think that, that and that. I almost like the complete absence of structure because it really makes you think about the subject and communicate your ideas as Lead. I think right at the beginning

	I found it quite daunting because it was your own completely, all your own research to get your subject knowledge up, and that was quite a lot to do, but I do think it was well worth it. I've learned a lot, and I think the kids have really …. because it was *recent* history, it was really …
Geography Lead	I think that out of all of us, you did the most specific subject knowledge for the topic, because we had to find out about this very specific person and you were the History Lead so you were sort of in charge of doing that, weren't you? But through that, it really helped. OK, thanks.
Headteacher	Can I just follow up on that?
Geography Lead	Yeah
Headteacher	I think that History was the most successful of the three subjects, and I guess I am wondering whether it was in all a history topic and therefore the history brought it together or – and I hope I am not pre-empting any of your questions – or do you think it was because we were more ready to run with it in History? If it had been a Geography topic, would we have achieved as much or do you think it would have been more beneficial?