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# Teachers' experiences of transformative professional learning to narrow the values practice gap related to inclusive practice

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## ABSTRACT

The literature supports transformative models of professional learning and development (PLD) such as professional learning communities (PLCs). However, there is a research gap relating to PLCs for inclusive practice. This paper draws on findings from a qualitative study with 10 teachers in an urban primary school in the Republic of Ireland, who engaged in a PLC for inclusive practice facilitated by one of the researchers. Two years later the researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with nine of the original participants and five classroom observations to explore if and how teachers can sustain inclusive practices in changing times. The findings evidenced sustained changes in teachers' individual and collaborative practices, affirming an argument that PLCs can support teachers to develop and sustain inclusive practices in the longer term. This paper offers a conceptual framework for prospectively planning PLCs to narrow the values practice gap for inclusive practice.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## KEYWORDS

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## Introduction

Teacher engagement in professional learning and development (PLD) does not automatically result in transformative practice (Kennedy, 2014). In order to result in meaningful teacher change, PLD must challenge previous assumptions and create new meanings (Timperley, 2011), as well as empower teachers to use their agency to align their values and practice (King, 2019). However, a dearth of effective PLD opportunities for teachers has been reported as a challenge to inclusion (Florian, 2014; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2015). Noteworthy is that PLD is not a linear process (Keay, Carse, & Jess, 2019), as much professional development is 'provided' via transmissive models (Kennedy, 2005, 2014; Murchan, Loxley, & Johnston, 2009) which do not yield significant changes in teacher learning (Dogen & Yurtseven, 2017; Kennedy, 2014). In contrast, models of PLD which include 'collaborative professional inquiry models' that allow for 'increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency' show promise for transforming teacher learning (Kennedy, 2014, p. 693). Professional learning communities (PLCs) (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006), cited as an example of such models (Kennedy, 2014), can succeed in

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building teacher capacity for sustainable improvement (Dogen & Yurtseven, 2017; Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & Mckinney, 2007; Stoll et al., 2006). While there may be no universally agreed definition of PLCs (Hord, 1997), it is generally accepted that they involve a community of teachers who commit to a common vision of enhancing their own practices to improve student learning, by working collaboratively to problem-solve identified issues (Dogan, Pringle, & Mesa, 2016; Hairon, Wee Pin Gog, Siew Kheng Chus, & Wang, 2017). Underpinned by the work of social learning theorists (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and situated in experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991), PLCs can foster collaborative relationships, which, when situated within schools, may lead to school cultures becoming more collaborative (Holland, 2021). However, there is a danger that a collegial community could only serve to embed existing practice if it fails to challenge current teaching thinking and practices, for example, through critical dialogue (Parker, Patton, & O'Sullivan, 2016), or if it fails to focus on meeting students' needs (Timperley, 2008).

There is broad consensus in the literature on the key characteristics of effective PLCs such as: a shared vision; collaboration; a focus on student learning; reflection and inquiry; and de-privatisation of practice (Dogan et al., 2016; Stoll et al., 2006). Enhanced teacher learning for, and implementation of, new practice is the corollary of well-structured PLCs that evidence these characteristics (Dogan et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Such PLCs encompass key elements of transformative PLD, including a focus on student outcomes, continuous teacher learning, teacher leadership, and reflection and inquiry (Haiyan & Allan, 2020) that supports the construction of new knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Added to this in the context of the PLC in this study is the situated and experiential nature of the learning, with teachers engaged in meaningful activities relevant to their situation. It is important to note that the path to developing PLCs is not without challenges, which may include school culture obstacles, ineffective school leadership, organisational barriers and external influences such as performance and accountability agendas (Dogan et al., 2016), reflecting the complex nature of collaborative PLD in schools. Fundamentally, effective school leadership which creates the conditions that support a learning culture within the school is the cornerstone of both successful PLCs (Stoll et al., 2006) and inclusive schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

While the research base on PLCs is reasonably substantial, there have been calls for further empirical studies to illuminate the extent to which they can support teacher and student learning (Hairon et al., 2017). In particular, there is limited research on how PLCs can enhance inclusive teaching and learning. The trend for developing PLCs for school improvement in the US during the 1980s and later in the European context did not extend to using PLCs to develop inclusive school practice. The lack of attention to PLCs for inclusive education in policy discourse is myopic considering that collaborative PLD can support whole-school reform (Harris & Jones, 2010) and PLCs have shown to result in enhanced efficacy and practices related to inclusive practice in schools (Brennan, King, & Travers, 2019; Pugach & Blanton, 2014). This paper addresses this research gap by building on a previous qualitative case study with eight classroom teachers and two school leaders in an urban primary school who engaged in a PLC for inclusive practice facilitated by the lead author (Brennan et al.,

2019). It draws on findings from revisiting the same school two years later to explore if and how teachers can sustain inclusive practices over time, as research has previously confirmed the lack of evidence of sustainability of practices arising from PLD in the longer term (Jones, 2020; King, 2014, 2016).

## Policy context

Inclusion in education has increasingly become part of global hegemonic discourses evidenced by the growth of policy developments internationally. In particular, inclusion features very strongly on the agenda of the United Nations as reflected in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 1994) and, more recently, the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016) which highlights inclusion and equity for quality education for all under Sustainable Development Goal 4. It recognises ‘inclusion and equity in and through education as the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda’ (p. 7). In the 1990s many countries internationally viewed inclusion as including learners with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools (Connor, 2014). The Republic of Ireland’s (RoI) response to UNESCO’s 1994 framework and a subsequent key national piece of legislation, the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs [EPSEN] Act (Government of Ireland, 2004), resulted in an increase of learners with SEN attending mainstream schools. Current statistics indicate that students with an identified SEN make up 20% of the mainstream primary and post-primary mainstream school population. Of the total 66,932 mainstream school teaching population, 13,530 or 20% of teachers are in a special education teacher (SET) role (Department of Education, 2020). As there is no obligation for SETs to have a qualification other than initial teacher education in the RoI, there is no data available on the percentage of SETs who have completed a postgraduate programme in special and inclusive education.

Initially, students in the RoI diagnosed with SEN had additional support provided in the form of access to support teaching in a withdrawal setting for a specified number of hours per week or attending a special class within a mainstream school. What followed was a significant increase in the number of special classes in mainstream schools alongside maintaining the existing number of special schools.

More recently, however, the focus has deservedly shifted from learners with SEN being present in mainstream schools, to learners participating in and making progress in mainstream classes and schools. The most recent shift in policy in the RoI has been towards a more inclusive model of practice emphasising ‘whole school and classroom support’ for all students (Department of Education and Skills, [DES], 2017, p. 8) regardless of a diagnosis of SEN. This aims to include all those traditionally marginalised or excluded from education as emphasised in the (UNESCO, 2016) policy document. It also paves the way to respond to the RoI’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) in 2018, which places inclusion firmly as a human right with an emphasis on full inclusion in a mainstream class in a mainstream school. Central to this new model in the RoI is a recognised need for PLD for all teachers to enable them to support the needs of all learners (National Council for Special Education

(NCSE), 2014). While policy has endorsed this, the reality is somewhat different, with little, if any, additional and transformative PLD available to all teachers to support the implementation of the new inclusive model, thus leading to a values practice gap.

Equally important for narrowing this gap is sharing expertise and collaborative problem-solving to influence beliefs, values, attitudes and practices (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). How to foster such collaborative practices in the RoI context is less clear in the absence of access to PLD for all teachers and the continued focus on developing individual human capital using transmissive models of PLD (Kennedy, 2005, 2014). Currently, SETs have access to some PLD opportunities and research has acknowledged the positive impact of such PLD on these individual teachers, but highlighted a knowledge gap for mainstream class teachers in these schools (King, Ní Bhroin, & Prunty, 2018). Arguably the expertise exists in the schools and needs to be shared (Ainscow, 2020). Furthermore, all pre-service teachers in Ireland have two mandatory modules on inclusion as part of their four-year undergraduate degree and one mandatory module on the two-year professional masters in education. Despite this, a recent report on the inclusion of these modules in pre-service education clearly shows a gap where teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion are positive, but they still lack the confidence to implement inclusive practices (Hick et al., 2019), reflecting findings from other international research (Florian & Camedda, 2019). Pre-service teachers, however, who undertook a major specialism in inclusion and SEN did demonstrate efficacy related to inclusive practices (Hick et al., 2019). The imperative for PLD to narrow the gap continues and this paper aims to explore and understand the transformative potential of PLCs for developing and sustaining teachers' PLD for inclusive practice over time.

## Developing inclusive practice

In the RoI, there is recognition that changes have not sufficiently occurred at the deep structures of the school to bring about change in teacher attitudes, school ethos, culture and practices that are inclusive of all learners (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). While this can be attributed to a plethora of reasons, the perception of learner differences as deficits that need remediation remains a pervasive influence. This view can lead to individualising failure within students, rather than viewing difficulties in learning as problems for teachers to solve (Florian, 2014; Mac Ruairc, 2016). Support from school leaders is central to creating the conditions for cultures conducive to inclusive schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Mac Ruairc, 2016). Furthermore, inclusion depends on generating change from teachers with support from leadership above (King & Stevenson, 2017). The development of inclusive practice begins with the mindset of teachers and schools, challenging the hegemonic assumptions regarding ability, and the development of a sense of responsibility for including all learners (Ainscow, 2014). It also requires teachers to have the skills and confidence to enact their inclusive values (Hick et al., 2019) and share their expertise (Ainscow, 2020). In this regard, teacher PLD to support the enactment of inclusive pedagogy is imperative.

## Inclusive pedagogy

Inclusive pedagogy refers to meeting the needs of all learners in the classroom while avoiding stigmatisation of difference (Florian, 2014). Its enactment in the classroom can be supported by the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) Framework (Florian, 2014), which arose from research on how teachers effectively implement inclusive pedagogy. The IPAA outlines three key teacher assumptions central to enacting inclusive pedagogy, which closely align with the values outlined in the Profile of Inclusive Teachers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), 2012). Firstly, teachers must reject deterministic beliefs about ability and view learner differences as inherent aspects of development. The role of teacher attitudes is central in this regard, as those who have positive attitudes towards inclusion are more likely to adapt their teaching to accommodate individual differences (Copfer & Specht, 2014; Forlin, 2010). Secondly, teachers need to believe in their capabilities to include all learners (Hick et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2015), and so a gap often exists between values and practices.

Thirdly, teachers must commit to collaboration with colleagues to provide inclusive education (Florian, 2014). Collaboration is one of the most effective approaches for including all learners (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Ní Bhroin & King, 2020), for sharing challenges and finding solutions together (Ainscow, 2020; Pijl & Frissen, 2009), reflecting the importance of social learning theory and situated and experiential learning theories. Inclusion is essentially a social process within the context of each school (Chapman, Ainscow, Miles, & West, 2012). However, this can be challenging in the context of a profession where 'isolated practice still predominates', with teacher autonomy and privacy being valued more than collaborative practice (O' Sullivan, 2011, p. 112). While teacher collaboration may have increased in recent years in the RoI, for example through models of co-teaching, what is less clear and highly important is the quality of that collaboration (Hargreaves, 2019). Collaboration is arguably most effective where teachers are being empowered to collaborate and not forced, in what Hargreaves called 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves, 1994). Perhaps the challenge with collaboration is linked with teacher efficacy related to collaborative practices, which was highlighted by Pantic and Florian (2015) as one of the least important areas of competence reported by teachers. Similarly, in a recent mixed methods study (n = 83) on the impact of PLD on teachers' knowledge, skills and practices related to developing individual support plans to support inclusion, collaborative practices were deemed to be challenging, resulting in Ní Bhroin and King (2020) proposing a framework for developing specific competencies to support collaborative practice, effective team functioning, communication, and values and ethics. Effective collaboration among teachers can enhance teacher learning resulting in the use of more innovative pedagogies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013) and improved self-efficacy (European Commission, 2013), signalling the important potential of PLCs for transformative learning. However, teachers need to be supported to develop collaborative practice (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). The development of each of the three assumptions given here is paramount to teachers implementing inclusive pedagogical approaches and will be dependent upon access to transformative PLD that results in meaningful teacher change.

## Teacher change

While teacher change may seem simple, it is widely recognised as a complex process in the research on teacher PLD (Opfer & Peddar, 2011). It is generally agreed that in order for teacher PLD to be effective, changes must be evident in beliefs, practice and student outcomes (Guskey, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Some literature on teacher change argues that it is linear, with changes in beliefs and attitudes only occurring after change in student outcomes is observed (Guskey, 2002). However, there is a growing body of research which suggests that the nature of the change relationship is cyclical, as change in one element depends on change in another, with potential for change to occur at any point (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Rouse, 2008). In considering the cyclical nature of teacher change for inclusion, Rouse (2008) proffers a reciprocal relationship among knowing, believing and doing in relation to PLD for inclusive practice. Teachers will vary in terms of knowledge, beliefs and practice. However, the development of two elements can impact the third. For example, PLD that results in the development of teacher knowledge and practice can consequently impact beliefs and attitudes. Conversely, teachers may have positive beliefs about inclusion before being supported to implement new practice, which is likely to result in enhanced knowledge. Given the complexity of teacher change and the necessity of meaningful changes to practice (Timperley, 2011) as well as a global emphasis on developing inclusive schools (UNESCO, 2016), it is important to consider how PLCs, as a model of collaborative PLD, can make professional learning transformative.

## Transformative professional learning and development

Models of transformative PLD are considered to be those which are collaborative, reflective and inquiry based (Kennedy, 2005, 2014), underpinned by a variety of learning theories such as social learning theories (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and situated and experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This emphasis on collaborative practice aligns well with the call for social learning processes (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) to support inclusion. Adopting this view and exploring research related to PLCs for inclusive practice revealed a gap (Pugach & Blanton, 2014), which led to the first phase of this research study reported in Brennan et al. (2019). This involved one of the researchers undertaking a study to explore the impact of a PLC on teacher professional learning for inclusive practice in a primary school in the RoI. Having explored the literature on PLCs and inclusive practice, the researcher adopted the use of the IPAA Framework (Florian, 2014) as the focus of the PLC to support teachers' professional learning around inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, to support the transformative model of PLD, the researcher adopted Parker et al.'s (2016) signature pedagogies of critical dialogue and public sharing of work within communities of learners. Findings from this study revealed that 'engagement with inclusive pedagogy in a PLC, underpinned by critical dialogue and public sharing of work, positively impacted teacher attitudes, beliefs, efficacy and inclusive practice' (Brennan et al., 2019, p. 1). The PLC was supported by the researcher as an external facilitator during this phase of the study. However, it is worth noting the research gap relating to the impact of PLD and sustainability of practices over time (Jones, 2020; King, 2014, 2016), especially in the absence of an external facilitator

which was deemed essential to the success of the PLC in the first phase of this study (Brennan et al., 2019). Groves and Ronnerman (2013) suggest that teachers who are supported by an external facilitator for a year have the capacity to continue practices and lead others in their own schools. This led to phase two of this study, which set out to explore the following research question: [How] can teachers sustain inclusive practices over time?

## Methodology

This research was conducted in the RoI, where over 90% of primary schools are publicly funded by the Department of Education. A case study design was deemed most appropriate for this research as it allows for the rich and detailed examination of a phenomenon in a real environment (Stake, 1995). The case in this study was a group of teachers in the 'bounded context' of a PLC focused on developing inclusive practice (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Given the socio-cultural nature of PLCs, underpinned by social learning theories (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and situated and experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991), the case study design offered elucidatory insight into the impact of the PLC on teacher learning for inclusive practice situated in one school. Case study design allowed for describing the 'complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 253). While case studies are not generalisable, much of what can be learned from the in-depth study of a single case may be general, in part through merging knowledge from familiarity with other cases (Stake, 1995).

In the first phase of the study, 10 participants engaged in monthly PLC meetings over a six-month period to support the implementation of new inclusive practices in their classrooms. In particular, teachers chose to develop differentiation through choice as a shared focus, which affords learners opportunities to choose how to demonstrate their learning and their level of engagement. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including observation of classroom practice, field notes and interviews. Self-reported teacher data tends to dominate the PLC research and it is important that such data is validated with direct observation (Dogan et al., 2016). The inclusion of observation of practice in this study therefore enhanced data triangulation.

Two years later, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine of the original participants, along with five classroom observations to explore if and how teachers can sustain the new practices over time. Ethical approval for the research was secured from Dublin City University at the outset of the study. Table 1 presents pseudonyms for each teacher and other relevant characteristics, including the teaching roles during the initial and follow-up studies.

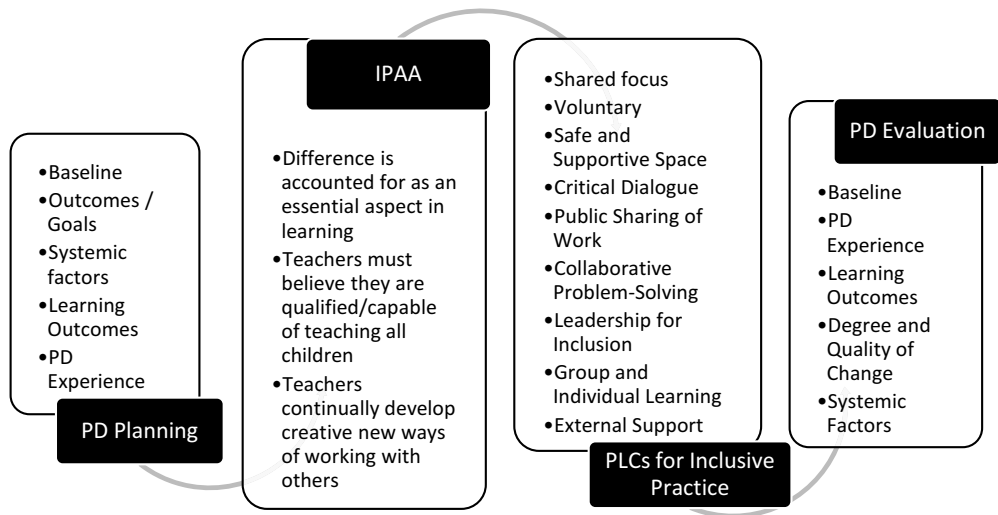
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The conceptual framework (Figure 1) underpinning both the initial and follow-up studies was informed by the IPAA framework (Florian, 2014), pertinent literature relating to creating and sustaining effective PLCs (Harris & Jones, 2010, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008), effective pedagogies for teacher professional learning (Parker et al., 2016) and key research regarding planning and evaluating PLD (King, 2014, 2016). The IPAA framework was used as a tool to support understandings of inclusive pedagogy and its enactment, while the key characteristics of



**Table 1.** Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Teaching experience study 1	Teaching role 2015/2016	Teaching role 2017/2018
Diane	4– 7	Junior Infants (4/5 years old)	6 <sup>th</sup> Class (12 years)
Hilary	4– 7	Junior Infants	4 <sup>th</sup> Class
Kieran	8– 10	Senior Infants (5/6 years)	Junior Infants
Rebecca	1– 3	Senior Infants	Autism Class
Niall	1– 3	1 <sup>st</sup> Class (7 years)	Autism Class
Niamh	4– 7	3 <sup>rd</sup> Class (9 years)	Special Ed. Teacher
Anne	4– 7	3 <sup>rd</sup> Class	Non-participation
Emily	1– 3	4 <sup>th</sup> Class (10 years)	1 <sup>st</sup> Class
Deputy Principal	11+	Administrative	Administrative
Principal	11+	Administrative	Administrative

**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework (Brennan et al., 2019).

effective collaborative PLD were considered in the development of the PLC. As outlined in the literature, while PLD that is planned and evaluated is more likely to result in transformative learning, there is a dearth of research on its evaluation (King, 2014). Therefore, the evidence-based planning and evaluation PLD frameworks were central to the design of the study.

The data analysis process included transcription and analysis of interview transcripts and classroom observation data. The data set was imported into NVivo 12 to support a thematic analysis approach based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). Prior to identifying themes, initial codes were generated which in essence are interesting features of the data. First-level coding involved labelling groups of words (e.g. confidence, empowerment, teamwork) and, following this, second-level coding reduced the initial codes into a fewer number of themes (e.g. collaboration, efficacy) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The codes were collated into broader themes and sub-themes which were then reviewed and refined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was predominantly inductive, as data emerged through the various stages of analysis. Relationships were then made between the emerging data and the existing theoretical underpinnings on PLCs and inclusive pedagogy as evidenced in the findings under the theme of collaborative practice. Final

analysis revealed two overarching themes related to the sustained impact of the PLC on teachers' learning for inclusive practice: individual learning (sub themes: beliefs and attitudes, classroom practice and teacher efficacy) and collaborative practice. Also evident was a third theme of enabling factors to support the implementation of inclusive practice which was made up of sub themes of leadership, school culture, time and student learning.

## Findings

The findings arising from the interview and observation data demonstrated that the positive impact of the PLC on teacher PLD for inclusive practice in the initial study was sustained by the participants two years later, despite a lack of external facilitation. Teachers in the study maintained a commitment to inclusive pedagogical approaches at an individual and a collaborative level as evidenced in the following selected responses from the teacher participants which exemplify typical responses across the participants.

### *Changes in individual learning*

Three sub-themes were identified under changes at the individual level: beliefs and attitudes; classroom practice; and teacher efficacy.

#### *Beliefs and attitudes*

The findings from the initial study evidenced a shift in participants' beliefs and attitudes towards viewing difficulties in learning as problems for teachers to solve, rather than deficits within the learner (Brennan et al., 2019). This change was sustained two years later among all of the participants, as demonstrated by Emily when talking about differentiating learning by offering learners choice:

As regards being inclusive, it [PLC] definitely changed my opinions there . . . . It isn't just that the child has a learning difficulty, it's that they have different ways of learning, and they have different abilities, so are you actually giving them something that suits their ability or are you just giving them an easier sheet . . . that's not stretching them in any way?

When Emily afforded learners the autonomy to choose tasks suited to their own preferences, she was surprised by the positive learning they displayed, a finding which was echoed among all of the participants. Emily mentioned that when she first started to use differentiation through choice, she was preoccupied with planning for learners who experienced difficulties rather than the learners she viewed as performing at a higher level:

At the beginning I was planning with him [a reluctant learner] in mind, but, as it turned out, I was actually really surprised to see how much it stretched . . . . The creative thinkers, and I was surprised as well maybe at what they picked to do. My planning of it changed as I saw . . . different people shining I guess, and, oh I can stretch them a little bit now as well.

Positive changes in student learning encouraged her to move away from pre-determining what learners could achieve. In addition, she was now considering inclusion as important for all learners, rather than a focus on those with SEN. This perspective shift was also evident among the other participants, as illustrated by Diane's comment

It [the PLC] did . . . give me a lot of suggestions for people who were, on the opposite ends of the scale, I suppose that would be over achievers, that it kind of highlighted to me as well, that I should be considering them a bit more.

In the RoI students with exceptional ability are identified as having a SEN and may need additional support from the class teacher (Government of Ireland, 1998). However, such learners can be difficult to identify and are often overlooked (Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe, 2010). The PLC influenced participants to consider inclusion as important not just for learners with SEN, but also for those who do not appear to experience difficulties, including those with exceptional ability. These changed perspectives: viewing inclusion as pertinent for all and rejecting deterministic beliefs about ability (Florian, 2014) were sustained over time and continued to manifest in the teachers' approaches to classroom practice.

### *Classroom practice*

The participants demonstrated continued implementation of inclusive pedagogies developed through the PLC in their practice two years after it had ended. This was exemplified by the five teachers who were observed teaching and reported by all seven teachers in the interviews. The observed participants offered 'choice' within their lessons, with consideration of learner interests and strengths evident in the options presented. Niall, Rebecca, Niamh, Kieran and Diane demonstrated sustained implementation of new inclusive practices developed through the PLC, including a responsive style of teaching, provision of opportunities for learners to choose their level of engagement and use of flexible approaches. For example, Niall, who was observed teaching a class for children with Autism, used a choice board within his lesson. This offered learners a choice of various activities for demonstrating their learning. In the interview Niall noted that the experience of participating in the PLC

challenged me to actually give the children a choice, with that choice board, that I found absolutely fantastic and I'm still using it down in the [Autism class] as well . . . they get to pick an activity . . . the activities are all [related to] the objectives for the lesson but they can choose what style of learning suits them best.

Niall observed the positive impact of choice on the learners in his class, which motivated him to continue using the new practice (King, 2016). He further elaborated that he observed improved learning outcomes in his classroom, noting that the 'quality of learning is completely different between choice and no choice'. Furthermore, the positive impact on learners enhanced Niall's efficacy for inclusive practice, indicating the cyclical nature of teacher change (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). This was a common finding for all of the teacher participants in the follow-up study, evidencing a narrowing of the gap between values and practice through the transformative model of PLD.

### *Teacher efficacy*

The increased efficacy for inclusion, evident among participants after engagement in the PLC (Brennan et al., 2019), remained discernible two years later. Similar to Niall, Rebecca had moved from a mainstream class (six-year-old age group) in the initial study to a class for learners with Autism in the current study. No special education or special class teachers engaged in the PLC, perhaps due to developing inclusive practices being

perceived as the remit of mainstream class teachers. Yet two years later, four of the participants were in special class or special education teaching roles, influenced in part by increased efficacy, demonstrating the importance of access for class teachers to PLC for inclusive practice. In the interview Rebecca reflected on the long-term impact of PLC:

I think I felt more confident in the inclusion point of view . . . especially having three boys now that are integrated into the upper grades in the school and I've even started reverse integration, with some of the kids . . . so, I think, I'm a lot more confident I suppose, in thinking that inclusion is possible.

The school had a policy of including learners from the Autism classes in mainstream classes for one or more subjects each day. Conversely, Rebecca had started to invite learners from the mainstream classes to attend her Autism class. She reported in the interview that it can be challenging to consider how learners with significant needs can be included with their peers in mainstream classes. However, she now looks 'for their strengths . . . to try and include them as much as possible'. She also conveyed a belief that her growth in confidence influenced her decision to take on the Autism class teacher role. This improved confidence in including all learners was identifiable among the participants in the interviews and observed lessons which stands in contradistinction to much research citing a lack of teacher confidence around inclusion (DeBoer et al., 2011; Rose et al., 2015), ultimately resulting in the values practice gap.

The teachers who were observed demonstrated efficacy for inclusive practice in their enactment of inclusive pedagogical approaches, for example focusing on learner needs rather than coverage of material and offering learners choice (Florian, 2014). Furthermore, most of the participants (six) noted that the engagement in the PLC enhanced their confidence to seek advice and support from their colleagues as indicated by Niall in his interview:

I wasn't afraid to talk to my colleagues and ask for support and ask for their ideas and their input in the lessons. In terms of planning, I'm a lot more open to talking to the other teachers . . . definitely not as afraid of approaching other teachers and working with other teachers and feeling that my ideas have some value, and their ideas have value as well.

Interestingly, Emily, Niall and Rebecca were first- and second-year newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the initial study who evidenced sustained efficacy for inclusion over time, owing to their engagement in the PLC. This finding is particularly important in light of recent RoI research indicating a decrease in confidence for inclusive practice among first year NQTs and suggests that collaborative cultures can support enhanced teacher confidence (Hick et al., 2019). The collaborative culture created within the PLC was highly valued by the participants and promoted enhanced efficacy for inclusive practice, evidenced initially and subsequently over time, reflecting Ainscow's (2020) call for collaborative cultures for inclusive practice.

### ***Collaborative practice***

In the initial study, all participants agreed that the collaborative culture developed within the PLC supported their engagement in open dialogue and public sharing of work (Parker et al., 2016). In the follow-up study, it was evident that this collaborative culture persisted. All of the teachers demonstrated sustained collaboration arising from

engagement in the PLC. For example, Diane remarked: ‘The people who were in the group [PLC], I could still go and ask them for their opinion on something if I wanted to . . . it does just create that safe space.’ Similarly, Hilary reported that collaboration was sustained beyond the PLC meetings. She commented that her participation in the PLC

created . . . a professional relationship, sometimes . . . you’d be really good friends with someone, but maybe not on a professional level, which is, you know, like one teacher I worked with last year . . . we were really good friends, but we never would have discussed school, having that [the PLC] would have left kind of, an imprint on certain like relationships, that like, ok we do have this in common now, and I can talk to you about this.

The interview data demonstrated that all of the teacher participants felt at ease approaching colleagues who had participated in the PLC for advice and support, even after the PLC meetings had ended, reflecting the power of the PLC in supporting teachers to develop communicative competencies for teacher collaboration for inclusive practice (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). The observation of practice corroborated the interview data regarding sustained collaboration among teachers. For example, observations in the Autism classes documented collaboration between Niall and Rebecca regarding planning and practice, in addition to collaboration between the teachers and the special needs assistants working in those classrooms. Another example of collaboration was observed in a lesson taught by Niamh, who had moved from a class teacher role in the initial study to a special education teacher role two years later. In her lesson with an individual learner receiving support in a withdrawal context, she demonstrated flexibility to allow the learner to bring his new language work back to the classroom for use in his class writing, supporting the transfer of learning and showing the importance of contextualising learning into classroom delivery of curriculum (Ní Bhroin & King, 2020). At the end of the observation period Niamh mentioned weekly emails between her and the class teacher to work towards common goals; in the interview, she noted the continued influence of the PLC on her practice and collaboration:

It’s [choice] definitely there now in my planning, and how I deliver a session, whether it’s the whole class, or in the resource setting. And it would be the same then when I go in for team teaching, in the maths setting as well. You know, there’d be choice there too.

It was evident that in addition to applying practice developed within the PLC in a special education teaching context, Niamh was also collaborating with class teachers to extend the practice to team-teaching classes, resulting in dissemination of new practice to others which will potentially lead to narrowing the values practice gap for others. The collaborative culture developed within the PLC, along with the following enabling factors, were identified as central to the continued implementation and development of new practice over time.

### **Enabling factors**

While not the main focus of this paper, it is important to acknowledge the enabling factors for teacher change within the study, namely: leadership; school culture; time; and student learning. Leadership has been identified as crucial to the development of

inclusive teaching and learning in schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) and was an enabling factor which was greatly valued by the participants in the initial study. In the follow-up study, Kieran reflected on the type of leadership support for the initial PLC:

[The principal] and I would have had chats . . . just, passing in the corridor kind of chats, about what we're doing [in the PLC] and things like that. But there wasn't a huge amount of oversight into it, as such, other than, knowing that [the facilitator] was coming in and we were going to meet and that we would need cover.

This comment illustrates how the school leader afforded autonomy to teachers in terms of their engagement in the PLC in a way that did not place pressure on them. However, they were aware of his support which could be drawn upon if needed, for example arranging time for meetings with other teachers to collaborate on their practice. In the follow-up study interview, the principal was very positive about the lasting impact of the PLC on teaching and learning and evidenced his continued commitment to supporting teacher learning for inclusive practice:

It is still spoken of, it's still mentioned . . . . We might be having a discussion about a particular issue and somebody might mention, well when we were doing [the PLC] you know, we came across this, let's try this. It seeds into other members of staff as well. I think it was certainly a very professionally rewarding activity for the teachers that have been involved in it and I think that our practice in the school is better as a result.

The effect of this support emphasises the importance of leadership in the development of PLCs (Harris & Jones, 2018) for inclusive practices where teachers are generating changes from below with support from the top (King & Stevenson, 2017). Closely aligned to leadership, school culture was another factor that supported teacher change. The participants observed that the culture was influential on the development of the PLC, as highlighted in Hilary's comment:

I think people are open . . . and the culture is quite relaxed and . . . people like to try new things . . . . I think there's a lot of teachers in the school that are really good friends which is brilliant in one regard, but then, you don't always have those professional conversations.

While there was a positive culture at the outset, the PLC provided a structured approach for effective teacher collaboration.

Lack of time has been well documented as a barrier to inclusion. However, in the initial PLC it did not prove to be a significant barrier due to the support of school leadership. Teachers were facilitated to attend PLC meetings within school time which was appreciated by the participants. As noted by Diane:

The fact that it was organised during Croke Park hours [mandatory non-contact time] meant it was really easy for everybody to get together. I think that's the main difficulty with trying to organise any sort of professional learning group, when do you have the time to actually get everyone together? So that was great, like, we hadn't met up in a group like that since when, you know, because it would be, after school, you wouldn't be able to get everybody together.

However, as illustrated by the comment given here, the teachers did not develop subsequent PLCs in the following academic years, which some participants attributed to lack of time and external support, perhaps emphasising the hindering impact of time and/or an internal advocate or external facilitator to keep it on the agenda (King, 2016).

With regard to student learning, all of the participating teachers reported that the implementation of new inclusive practice, in particular choice, resulted in increased motivation, learner autonomy and enhanced quality of student work. For example, Niall noted the positive impact of choice on learning in relation to a learner with complex needs in his class:

It really helps him and he feels in control, which is brilliant for him. And he feels listened to, which was a huge thing and his parents have commented on that as well, that he likes coming to school now because he feels valued and listened to, because he has that kind of choice and is learning.

In the observation of practice, it was evident that student engagement in activities was motivated by choice. Learners demonstrated interest and attentive engagement in their chosen tasks within all of the observed lessons. This positive impact of new practice on student learning encouraged the teachers to sustain these new inclusive practices, reflecting the findings of King (2016), who argued that sustainability of practices is linked to positive impact on student learning.

## Conclusion and implications

This paper explored teachers' experiences of engagement in a PLC in the RoI to narrow the values practice gap related to inclusive practice. While the need for teachers to engage in collaborative practice and PLD to support inclusive practice has been endorsed by many (for example, Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Chapman et al., 2012; Hick et al., 2019), it remains challenging for some to access, participate in and result in transformative experiences. Although the literature on PLD highlights the potential of collaborative models of PLD, such as PLCs, as being transformative (Kennedy, 2014), there remains little empirical evidence on the transformative potential of PLCs for developing and sustaining teachers' PLD for inclusive practice over time (Brennan et al., 2019; Pugach & Blanton, 2014). This paper contributes to the existing knowledge base by providing empirical evidence of the transformative power of PLCs to support teachers to develop and sustain inclusive practices in the longer term as called for by Dogan et al. (2016) and Hairon et al. (2017).

Firstly, it provides examples of teachers' experiences of the PLC at an individual level where they now reject deterministic views of ability in favour of seeing the different learning abilities of their learners (Florian, 2014). This clearly evidenced a transformation of awareness or a significant shift in the 'frames of reference – sets of fixed assumptions and expectations' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58) held by teachers following sustained engagement in the PLC.

Also evidenced was a change in beliefs and awareness about what learners with SEN could achieve and that inclusion is important for all learners, not just those with SEN, reflecting a dramatic shift in consciousness which influenced their ability to change their practices (Mezirow, 2003, 2006). For example, teachers offered all learners choice related to activities to engage in, levels of engagement, and ways of representing their learning. Teachers highlighted the higher quality learning and engagement by learners when they were offered choice (Florian, 2014).

Secondly, the socio-cultural nature of PLCs, underpinned by social learning theories (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), and its impact on collaborative practice for inclusion was evident, with many teachers highlighting the development of collaborative professional relationships involving ongoing dialogue and publicly sharing their work (Parker et al., 2016). They attributed this to the 'safe space' that was created within the PLC and the development of the communicative competencies needed for collaboration (Ni Bhroin & King, 2020). Researchers observed teachers, who had changed roles from classroom teachers during the PLC two years previously to now working in an SET role, co-planning and communicating with class teachers to facilitate enhanced learning outcomes for learners. They recognised the importance of social learning processes for inclusion (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) and contextualising the learning into the classroom curriculum (King et al., 2018). Teachers were sharing their inclusive practices with colleagues, potentially leading to narrowing the values practice gap for others, an issue identified in the Irish context for many teachers (Hick et al., 2019).

Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, findings evidence enhanced teacher efficacy for inclusive practice where teachers reported feeling confident and having the necessary knowledge and skills to include all learners, which is a key tenet in enacting inclusive pedagogy that is noted as an area to be addressed (Florian, 2014; Forlin et al., 2014). This is reflective of teachers being empowered through the PLC to use their agency to align their values and practice (King, 2019), thus highlighting the potential of PLCs as transformative learning for inclusive practice. Despite the PLC meetings not continuing in a formal way and no external facilitator present, the increased efficacy for inclusive practice, evident among participants after engagement in the PLC, was still discernible two years later. Of note also is that four of the participants moved into special class or special education teaching roles, influenced in part by increased efficacy, demonstrating the importance of access for class teachers to PLD for inclusive practice. In contrast to previous large-scale research, revealing a lack of teacher efficacy for inclusive practice among NQTs (Hick et al., 2019), this research shows how engagement in a PLC as a practising teacher can support enhanced teacher confidence. This paper calls for viewing PLD for inclusive practice as something that is job-embedded and collaborative, again confirming the potential of PLCs which are underpinned by situated and experiential learning theories (Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Fourthly, findings here help address the research gap relating to PLCs for inclusive practice (Pugach & Blanton, 2014) and the research gap relating to the impact of PLD and sustainability of practices over time (Jones, 2020). However, noteworthy is the importance of an external facilitator for the PLC in year one (Brennan et al., 2019) highlighting the importance of university-school partnerships for inclusive practice whilst also acknowledging that these teachers in turn can continue to implement inclusive practices and exercise leadership for inclusive practice thereafter (Groves & Ronnerman, 2013) through collaborative relationships and practices. However, findings here indicate the importance of ongoing support for teachers as they continue to narrow the values practice gap.

Finally, this paper has endorsed findings from previous research about the enabling factors to support teacher change and sustainability of inclusive practices over time (Brennan et al., 2019; King, 2016), for example, leadership support, time for PLD, culture of the school and impact of practices on student learning. Accordingly, planning PLD to



support changes to practices in schools calls for a consideration of these enabling factors along with the conceptual framework (Figure 1) to prospectively guide the development of PLCs for inclusive practice to support teachers' experience of PLD as being transformative (Kennedy, 2005, 2014) for learners' meaning, perspectives and practices (Mezirow, 2006).

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