

Beyond the Text: A Methodological Lens for Critical Reflection on Professional Learning Policy in Context

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Beyond the Text: A Methodological Lens for Critical Reflection on Professional Learning Policy in Context

Abstract: Teacher professional learning (PL) is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of educational improvement, yet many PL policies remain overly prescriptive, standardised, and disconnected from the complex realities of teaching. This article introduces a policy analysis toolkit designed to support more critical, context-sensitive engagement with PL policy. Grounded in a pragmatic meta-model of professional learning and underpinned by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the toolkit examines how policy texts construct teacher agency, professional autonomy, and collaboration across macro, meso, and micro levels. It provides a structured yet flexible set of guiding questions and linguistic tools to uncover the ideologies, assumptions, and power dynamics embedded within policy language. In applying the toolkit to a national policy document from the Republic of Ireland, the analysis reveals tensions between democratic and managerial discourses and highlights how policy language can simultaneously empower and constrain teacher learning. While the analysis is limited to textual interpretation and does not capture the lived enactment of policy, this toolkit makes a significant methodological and practical contribution. It equips policymakers, school leaders, and educators to better understand and navigate PL policy, and fosters a more critical, reflective stance toward the discursive construction of professional learning in times of educational disruption and change.

Keywords: Professional Learning, Policy Analysis, Critical Policy Research, Professionalism

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Introduction

Teacher professional learning (PL) has long been recognised as a key lever for enhancing educational quality (Boylan *et al.* 2023). Yet, it faces several persistent challenges that can limit its effectiveness (Poekert *et al.* 2020). For the purpose of this paper, the term teacher professional learning is used to acknowledge the various professional development processes and experiences that may lead to professional growth and change (King *et al.* 2023a). Many existing PL policies internationally have been critiqued for being overly prescriptive, one-size-fits-all, and insufficiently responsive to the diverse and dynamic needs of educators (Mockler 2022). Often, these policies are shaped by top-down mandates that prioritise accountability measures and standardised outcomes over meaningful teacher engagement and contextual relevance. This critique flags the need for policy analysis scholarship, particularly in periods of change and uncertainty, to challenge and refine these approaches. Policy analysis offers a structured approach for critically examining how policies are constructed, whose interests they serve, and what underlying assumptions they reflect. By identifying gaps, inconsistencies, and unintended consequences, policy analysis can illuminate how PL policies might fail to support teachers effectively, especially when swift adaptation and resilience are required. A significant limitation of current PL policies is their frequent reliance on standardised models that do not account for the specific contexts in which teachers operate (Kennedy 2015). These models often emphasise compliance with national or regional standards rather than promoting teacher agency and reflective practice (Mockler 2020; Barron *et al.* 2023), which is where the PL may happen (King *et al.*, 2023). As a result, teachers may find themselves constrained by rigid frameworks that do not fully address the complexities of their roles or the unique needs of their students (Evetts 2009; Evans 2014; Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009; Kennedy 2015). This approach can also lead to superficial engagement, where teachers participate in PL opportunities merely to fulfil requirements rather than as part of a meaningful, self-directed

learning journey (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2009; Desimone and Sajjadi 2025; Goodwin 2020; Mockler 2020, 2022; Sachs 2016; Leonard and Roberts 2016). This narrow perspective overlooks the importance of sustained, cumulative growth in teacher knowledge, which is essential for fostering transformative change in classrooms (Poekert *et al.* 2020). In turbulent times, these limitations become even more pronounced (Stevenson 2023). Considering these critiques, we argue that policy analysis scholarship is essential for analysing and challenging PL policies. A robust policy analysis framework can bring issues to light, prompting practitioners and policymakers to consider how PL policies can be made more responsive to diverse contexts and better aligned with the realities teachers face. By rigorously analysing PL policies, scholars and practitioners can advocate for more flexible, equitable, and responsive approaches that empower teachers and ultimately contribute to a more resilient and adaptive educational system (Darling-Hammond *et al.* 2017; Louws *et al.* 2018; Mockler 2020, 2022; Sachs 2016). This paper offers a policy analysis toolkit for researchers, policymakers, school leaders, and educators to support critical and empowered engagement with PL policy. We use the Republic of Ireland (RoI) policy context as a case study for the application of the PL policy analysis toolkit, specifically in relation to continuing teacher professional learning. The RoI operates a centralised education system, with the responsibility for education policy relating to early years, primary and post-primary education sitting within the Department of Education and Youth. The Teaching Council of Ireland was established in 2006 as a statutory body which regulates the teaching profession and drives policy development across the teacher education continuum. This includes the *Céim* (meaning “step: in the Irish language) Standards for Initial Teacher Education (ITE), which outline the requirements for the accreditation of initial teacher education programmes, *Droichead* (bridge), which provides a framework for the induction of newly qualified teachers and *Cosán* (pathway), which relates to continuing teacher professional learning after the induction phase. While *Céim* and *Droichead* are embedded within the

education system, *Cosán* is due for implementation from 2027 (Teaching Council, 2025). These three policies will be revisited in the Theoretical Perspectives section, where we critically examine their underpinning assumptions, challenges, and implications for professional learning policy and practice in Ireland.

Towards the development of a policy analysis toolkit

The development of the policy analysis toolkit in this paper involved a systematic approach over a range of developmental steps. First, we identified an existing conceptual model for PL as a foundation of the analytical toolkit. In considering a suitable conceptual model, key literature was examined in order to identify relevant concepts to inform a theoretical basis for analysing PL policies, including Boylan *et al.* (2018), Strom and Viesca (2021), Kennedy (2014), King *et al.* (2023a) and Merchie *et al.* (2016). The pragmatic meta-model developed King *et al.* (2023a) for planning and evaluating PL, was identified as a suitable component of our policy analysis toolkit for a number of reasons. Firstly, it addresses the broad complexity of PL identified in the research literature and situates these within the context of the macro, meso, and micro levels of the teacher PL system. Secondly, it draws from previously established theoretical frameworks (King, 2014, 2016; Poekert et al., 2020) that support evidence based approaches to PL design and evaluation. This rationale for choosing this model is further discussed in the theoretical underpinnings section below. For the other component of our policy analysis toolkit, a selection of methodological devices that support a critical and in-depth analysis of PL policies was made. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was identified as a primary analytical tool due to its focus on uncovering power dynamics and implicit assumptions within policy language (Fairclough 2001, 2003, 2010; Luke 1995, 2002). CDA's emphasis on examining the text, discursive practices, and social context aligned with the need to understand not only what policies say, but also how they shape and are shaped by

broader educational and societal forces. Drawing then on the theoretical foundations and methodological tools, a series of guiding questions were constructed to shape the analysis of PL policies. These questions are designed to explore various dimensions of PL, including context, teacher agency, collaborative learning, and outcomes, and to assess whether policies acknowledge the multi-level contexts that influence PL. The paper applies the toolkit to analyse a national policy text in the RoI to illustrate its practical application and the comprehensive insights that can be yielded from its analysis.

Theoretical underpinnings

The concept of PL is often misunderstood and misapplied (Boylan *et al.* 2023). For example, in the RoI, national policymakers have recently adopted the term “professional learning” to refer to centrally provided support for teachers, which mainly includes transmissive models of professional development, such as workshops, seminars, and short courses (e.g. Department of Education 2024). However, PL is a complex process that involves bringing about change to teachers’ beliefs, knowledge and practice to improve student learning (Brennan *et al.* 2024; Opfer and Pedder 2011). Therefore, PL is a non-linear and complex process (Strom and Veisca 2021) which is unlikely to be achieved through once-off or short-term courses (Kennedy 2014; King *et al.* 2023a). Professional development does not necessarily result in professional learning, which is dependent upon several key elements, including alignment with teachers’ specific contexts and needs, active learning, sustained engagement over time, and opportunities for meaningful collaboration (Desimone 2009; Timperley 2007). These features are necessary considerations for professional learning that can transform teacher learning (Boylan *et al.* 2023; Kennedy, 2014). Therefore, professional learning relates to both the processes and outcomes that support teacher growth (Boylan *et al.* 2023; King *et al.* 2023a). While the evaluation of PL can be an elusive concept and often superficial (King, 2014), there is a growing body of

literature that offers tangible frameworks to support deeper analyses of impact (Boylan et al., 2018; Rawdon et al., 2020). However, the literature cautions against universal application of any one framework, instead advocating for selection of a suitable model based upon context and purpose (Boylan et al., 2018; King et al., 2023a). Following this advice, we chose the pragmatic meta-model of King *et al.* (2023a) as a theoretical foundation for the development of our toolkit to guide PL policy analysis. Our choice is influenced by the employment of a complexity perspective within this model that highlights how PL operates within and is influenced by macro (national/societal), meso (organisational), and micro (individual) levels. This perspective is valuable to policy analysis which emphasises the interconnectedness of these layers and the systemic factors impacting PL (Opfer and Pedder 2011; King 2016). This comprehensive approach is useful for situating PL policies within the multifaceted educational systems they intend to serve. Drawing on Dewey's theory of inquiry, King *et al.* (2023a) advocate for a flexible, adaptive approach to PL, which accounts for the practical realities of teacher learning. Dewey's pragmatism, characterised by reflective inquiry and continuous adaptation, provides a solid foundation. Specifically, by centring on inquiry as a means of navigating the complexities of PL, policy texts should be examined to see if they support adaptive, context-sensitive learning processes that accommodate the evolving nature of teaching. The meta-model also identifies the significance of agency and teacher autonomy within PL. PL policies must not only facilitate teacher engagement but should also empower educators to be active participants in their own professional growth. The emphasis on teacher agency directly supports the examination of how policies either promote or restrict teachers' ability to shape their learning experiences. This aspect is critical for PL policy analysis, as it is important to explore if policies enable teacher autonomy, which is widely recognised as essential for sustained professional growth (Brennan and King 2022; Kennedy 2014).

This model also advocates for a situated, collaborative approach to PL, and incorporates elements of social learning theory, emphasising the role of professional communities and collaborative inquiry in fostering reflective practices (Brennan and Gorman 2023; Brennan *et al.* 2024; Lave and Wenger 1991). This focus is especially relevant for policy analysis in determining the extent to which policy promotes or hinders peer collaboration within and across education settings, specifically assessing whether policies support environments conducive to shared reflection and community-driven learning. Finally, the meta-model's attention to both immediate and long-term outcomes of PL supports a comprehensive analysis of policy effectiveness. King *et al.* (2023a) consider the temporal dimensions of PL, stressing the importance of assessing both short-term impacts, such as teacher response and satisfaction, and long-term outcomes, including changes in instructional practice and school culture (Guskey 2000; King 2013). This approach can guide policy analysis, exploring if existing policies account for the sustainability of PL efforts, making it a helpful lens for analysing whether policies truly foster meaningful, enduring improvements in teaching and learning.

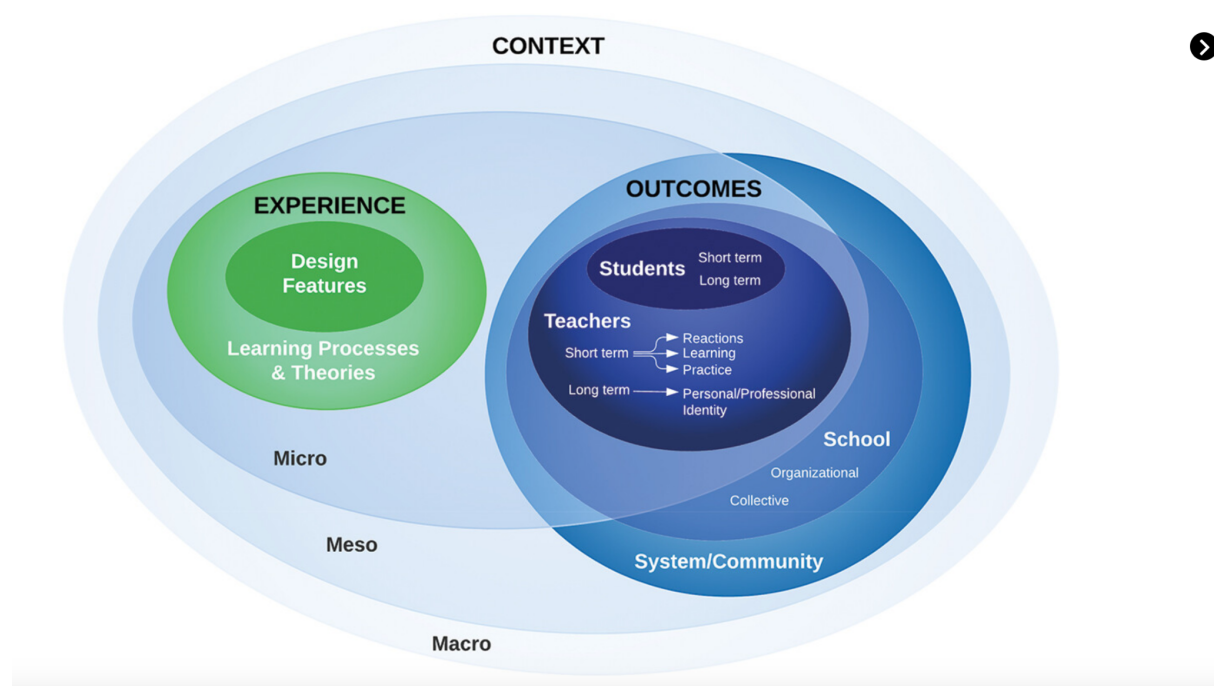


Figure 1: Professional learning meta-model with context, experience, and outcomes (CEO) constructs (King *et al.* 2023a)

Our analytical toolkit also refers to Kennedy's (2015) framework for the analysis of PL policy. In this framework, Kennedy draws on Sachs's (2001) discourse of professionalism to make visible the tensions at play. Managerial professionalism, which dominates many official policy texts, tends to prioritise compliance, competence, and outcomes that can be measured. Teachers, in this framing, are positioned as efficient, accountable workers whose learning is directed towards externally determined goals. By contrast, democratic professionalism opens space for teachers to be seen and to see themselves as active participants in shaping their professional growth and the wider purposes of education. Building on this, Kennedy (2015) suggests that PL policies often reflect managerial and democratic discourses and that these are not always neatly aligned. A policy might use the language of agency and empowerment, for example, while simultaneously embedding mechanisms of accountability that constrain professional judgment.

These above contradictions do not occur in isolation but are symptomatic of the dominant ideologies that sustain a broader "neoliberal cascade" within education, embedding market-oriented logics, accountability, and performativity as taken-for-granted norms across policy and practice (Mockler 2020, p. 167). In the Irish context, they are deeply entwined with the enduring influence of neoliberal rationalities that have come to define how teacher professional learning and teacher education are conceived, governed, and enacted. Drawing on Ball (2016, p. 1049), neoliberalism is understood as a "complex and contradictory" system of thought and practice that reorders education through the technologies of "Market," "Management," and "Performance". These technologies work together to embed market values, such as

competition, efficiency, and accountability, into the very language and organisation of education. As Ball observes, neoliberalism in Ireland has taken root not through radical reform but through incremental and cumulative shifts; a “ratchet” of managerial initiatives, standards frameworks, and accountability measures that, over time, have reshaped teachers’ subjectivities and educational purposes (2016, p. 1048). The effects, he argues, are not only structural but deeply personal: neoliberalism transforms teachers into “shape-shifting portfolio persons,” responsible for self-surveillance, continuous improvement, and the production of measurable outcomes (2016, p. 1054). Within the Irish context, this rationality has been consolidated through successive reforms that normalise audit, regulation, and technocratic control under the guise of professional autonomy. Ball (2016) highlights how Ireland, influenced by the Anglo-American policy zone, has imported the logics of “PISA envy” (p. 1048), evidence-based policymaking, and “quality assurance” to legitimise performative accountability and standardisation (p. 1051). According to Ball (2016), these processes are reflected in a raft of policies, including the Teaching Council’s policy texts, which recast teacher learning and initial teacher education within a discourse of measurable competence and system alignment. Such reforms “do not simply change what we do; they change who we are,” reframing education as an economic instrument and teacher professionalism as compliance with externally defined standards (Ball, 2016, p. 1050). Building on Ball’s analysis, Mooney Simmie’s work (2021) offers a sustained critique of how neoliberalism has reconfigured teacher education policy in Ireland, particularly since 2012. Through critical discourse analysis of policy texts in curriculum, inspection, and teacher education, she argues that Irish education policy has produced a “micro-managed system of limited performativity” (2021, p. 439). Within such policies, teachers are invited to “speak in the distorted tongues of quasi-scientists”, while their professional identities are reshaped through “a moral madness of a business-like logic” (Mooney Simmie 2021, p. 430). Teaching Council policies are, in her view, emblematic

of a “tapestry of consensualism and essentialism”; texts that appear empowering but operate within narrow empiricist and normative assumptions that exclude critique, philosophical inquiry, and socio-political awareness (Mooney Simmie 2021, p. 435). These analyses of Irish education policy reveal a consistent and dominant rhetoric of quality, standards, and accountability that serves as a technocratic façade that obscures the erosion of professional judgment, critical reflection, and the broader democratic and ethical purposes of education (Ball 2016; Mooney Simmie 2021; Delahunty 2024). Within this paper and drawing on these perspectives, we adopt a critical stance toward market-driven and technocratic reforms that instrumentalise education and narrow its moral and democratic purposes. In line with Ball’s (2016, p. 1056) call for educators to be “wide awake” to neoliberal incursions and Mooney Simmie’s (2021, p. 447) advocacy for an “alternative politics of refusal and principled resistance,” we approach CDA as a means of making visible the ideologies that enable or constrain professional learning. This orientation informs both our analytical toolkit, methodology and interpretation.

Analytical approaches

Policy is constructed, understood and mediated through discourse, discourse which is intended to preserve power (Arnott and Ozga 2010; Luke 1995, 2002). The development of discourse and its growing importance in a globalised policy field has given rise to the emergence of discourse analysis as a valuable policy analysis tool (Fairclough 2003, 2010; Rogers 2017; Taylor 2004; Weiss and Wodak 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2009). CDA has been adopted as a primary analytical tool due to its ability to reveal the power dynamics, ideologies, and assumptions embedded in policy texts, including professional learning policy texts (Akalu 2014; Barron *et al.* 2023; Gorman and Furlong 2023; Hunt and MacPhee 2020; Kennedy 2007). CDA is not just a linguistic tool; it is a methodological framework that allows researchers to

examine how language in policy documents constructs, reinforces, or challenges existing social structures and educational practices (Dressman 2008). By using CDA, our policy analysis toolkit can provide a deeper and more nuanced critique of PL policies, going beyond surface-level content to uncover the broader implications and effects of policy discourse. CDA (Fairclough 2003) has been adopted in this analytical toolkit for several reasons. First, CDA is well-suited for examining the language and discourse of policy documents because it reveals the underlying assumptions and ideologies embedded in the text. In the context of PL, policies are often constructed within specific political and ideological contexts that prioritise certain educational goals, values, and practices over others (Kennedy 2015; Mockler 2022). By using CDA, this toolkit can identify these hidden assumptions, providing insights into how policies construct roles and how they legitimise certain forms of knowledge and pedagogy. CDA allows the toolkit to investigate how policies position teachers, whether as passive recipients of directives or as active agents in their PL, and how this positioning reflects broader ideological stances (Barron *et al.* 2023). By analysing the language and structure of policies, CDA can expose how certain groups or viewpoints are marginalised or privileged within the discourse. This is particularly relevant in PL policy analysis, where the roles and voices of teachers, students, and policymakers can be framed in ways that either empower or disempower them. As Fairclough (2001, 2003) notes, language in policy documents can naturalise particular ideologies, making them appear self-evident or common sense, which can mask the complexities and contestations underlying educational policies. Through CDA, the toolkit can challenge these taken-for-granted assumptions and explore alternative viewpoints that may be silenced or overlooked in policy discourse.

CDA is adept at exploring how policies construct social roles, which is essential for understanding the implications of PL policies for teachers. For instance, policies that position

teachers as passive recipients of externally imposed knowledge may reinforce a hierarchical view of the system, where teachers are seen as implementers rather than creators of knowledge (Kennedy 2015). On the other hand, policies that emphasise teacher agency and collaborative learning can empower teachers by recognising their expertise and promoting professional autonomy. By adopting CDA, this toolkit can analyse how language choices in PL policies construct teacher roles. For example, are teachers framed as lifelong learners who are capable of self-directed growth or depicted as needing constant oversight and evaluation? CDA can reveal whether policies are written in a way that supports a professional culture of reflection, collaboration, and agency or whether they reinforce a compliance-based model that limits teachers' professional learning. Understanding these constructions is vital for assessing how well PL policies align with the goals of fostering sustainable, teacher-driven professional learning.

CDA's focus on intertextuality, how texts are referenced and influenced by other texts, provides another essential dimension for this analytical toolkit. Policies do not exist in isolation; they are part of a broader web of texts, including previous policies, academic research, and political speeches (Fairclough 2003). By examining the intertextual links within PL policies, CDA can uncover how policies draw upon and contribute to prevailing educational discourses. This helps to contextualise policies within broader socio-political trends. For example, a PL policy that frequently references international standards or global benchmarks may be influenced by a neoliberal discourse that emphasises competitiveness and measurable outcomes. Through CDA, the toolkit can investigate these intertextual connections and assess how policies align with or challenge dominant educational ideologies. Additionally, CDA allows the toolkit to consider the broader sociocultural context in which policies are situated,

recognising how social norms, cultural values, and political pressures shape and are shaped by policy discourse.

Finally, CDA helps assess how language choices in PL policies might impact their enactment. Policies often include specific terminology, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies that can shape how teachers interpret and respond to policy directives. For instance, a policy that repeatedly uses terms like ‘accountability’ and ‘performance’ may create a high-pressure environment focused on evaluation. In contrast, a policy that emphasises ‘collaboration’ and ‘reflection’ might foster a more supportive and developmental atmosphere. By examining the language of policies, CDA can provide insights into whether the discourse of a policy aligns with the goals of empowering teachers, supporting collaborative learning, and promoting long-term professional growth. Taken together, the pragmatic meta-model of professional learning (King et al., 2023a), drawing on existing theoretical perspectives on neo-liberalism and the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013), provides the dual evidence-based foundations for our work. Drawing on these, we have devised a pragmatic analytical toolkit that enables policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to interrogate how professional learning policies are constructed, enacted, and experienced across system levels. Collectively, the pragmatic meta-model of professional learning (King et al., 2023a) and the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013) have informed the development of a pragmatic analytical toolkit designed to illuminate how professional learning policies are framed and enacted across system levels.

Policy toolkit

The policy toolkit includes a series of questions (Table 1) which are designed to reveal the power relations, ideological frameworks, and contextual factors that underpin PL within policy.

By applying a CDA lens, the questions uncover the often-hidden assumptions and discourses that shape PL policies, including how they reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies like neoliberalism, accountability, and standardisation. That said, the questions are not purely theoretical but are framed in a way that makes them highly practical for a range of stakeholders involved in PL. They are applicable across the macro, meso, and micro levels, enabling stakeholders to critically analyse PL policies from multiple perspectives. At the macro level (e.g. policymakers), the questions can be used to assess whether national policies and frameworks are inclusive of teachers' needs and reflective of the contextual challenges faced by schools and teachers. Policymakers can use these questions to ensure that PL policies promote teacher autonomy and professional growth without imposing rigid, top-down accountability measures. At the meso level (e.g. school leaders, PL external facilitators, inspectors and superintendents), the questions serve as a tool to evaluate whether institutional approaches to PL are empowering teachers and to what extent PL policies at this level are balancing accountability with professional growth and adapting to their specific school environments. At the micro-level (e.g. teacher), the questions help as a reflective tool to better understand how their PL is influenced by wider systems and structures, helping them advocate for more personalised, empowering learning opportunities. Thus, these questions provide a flexible, critical guide that can enhance the effectiveness and relevance of PL across all levels.

It is important to note, however, that the answers to these guiding questions are unlikely to be binary or clear-cut. Rather than revealing a simple either/or distinction, such as autonomy versus accountability or managerialism versus democracy, these questions often surface tensions, overlaps, and contradictions within policy texts. Therefore, the analytical toolkit encourages interpretation along a continuum, where elements of both empowerment and constraint may coexist and where mixed messages may be common. This complexity is not a

limitation but a reflection of how PL policy, and policies more broadly, operate in practice - layered, negotiated, and often inconsistent (Braun et al. 2011; Ball 1993; Ball et al. 2012). Recognising this allows stakeholders to engage with policy in a more nuanced and critical way, identifying moments of alignment, dissonance, and possibility across different levels of the system.

The guiding questions in Table 1 offer a structured toolkit to guide the analysis of the policy with the intention of uncovering contradictions. The CDA linguistic devices in Table 2 provide a toolkit for interrogating the language and uncovering the underlying assumptions within the document. Some of these devices will be more applicable than others, depending on the nature of the text (Fairclough 2003; Halliday 1994). For example, metaphors, often used to convey abstract concepts or persuasive ideas, are more common in political discourse. In contrast, policy documents tend to favour more technical and procedural language, with devices like modality, which express degrees of obligation and command, being more common (Fairclough 2004; Jørgensen and Phillips 2003).

Table 1: Guiding Questions

Question	Rationale	Levels
To what extent (low / moderate / high) does the policy construct power relations between different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, school leaders, teachers) within the framework of PL?	Understanding how power is distributed across macro, meso, and micro levels helps reveal whether a policy is top-down or promotes a more participatory and collaborative approach to PL. It also helps unpack the potential constraints teachers face and whether they are treated as professionals capable of influencing their learning context or as merely implementers of external mandates.	Macro: This question explores how national or state education authorities, such as a government (department) (e.g., national, state, district) or a statutory organisation (e.g., teaching council), wield power over schools and teachers. <i>Does the policy's language reflect a centralised control structure, where teachers are subjects of policy mandates, or does it advocate for distributed leadership and greater teacher input into national reforms?</i> Meso: The question examines how schools and educational institutions manage or lead/support? PL. <i>Is the school leadership empowered by the policy to shape the PL landscape, or do they merely act as intermediaries between national bodies and teachers?</i> Micro: This question looks at individual teachers' roles in decision-making about their PL. <i>Are teachers supported in making decisions about their PL, or are they passive recipients of PL initiatives designed at higher levels?</i>
To what extent (low / moderate / high) does the policy reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies, such as	This question is crucial for identifying how dominant ideologies shape PL policies across all levels. Neoliberal discourses tend to prioritise efficiency and accountability, often at the expense of teacher agency.	Macro: This question focuses on how the policy reflects or challenges national/state/district priorities like accountability and standardisation.

neoliberalism, accountability, and standardisation, in shaping PL?	By critically engaging with this question, one can assess whether the policy perpetuates these ideologies or offers alternatives that promote meaningful, autonomous professional growth.	<i>Does the policy promote neoliberal values by emphasising measurable outcomes, efficiency, and competition, or does it resist these trends by focusing on professional autonomy and critical reflection?</i> Meso: This question explores how schools and institutions adopt or resist dominant ideologies. <i>Are schools driven by performance metrics (e.g., test scores) when shaping PL, or do they encourage reflective practices that prioritise teacher growth over quantifiable outputs?</i> Micro: The question addresses how individual teachers experience and internalise these ideologies. <i>Are teachers encouraged to engage in PL for intrinsic, reflective purposes, or is their learning shaped by external pressures to meet performance targets and accountability measures?</i>
To what extent (low / moderate / high) does the policy balance the tension between individual teacher agency and external accountability measures?	This question is important for understanding whether policies constrain or enable teachers to have ownership over their PL. Autonomy is critical to meaningful PL, and policies that overemphasise accountability measures can undermine teachers' ability to engage in learning that fosters professional growth, creativity, and critical reflection.	Macro: This question assesses how national/state/district policies balance the need for standardisation (e.g., ensuring all teachers meet certain criteria) with teachers' ability to direct their learning. <i>Does the policy provide teachers with flexibility in choosing PL pathways, or does it impose rigid accountability measures that limit autonomy?</i> This reflects how state priorities (e.g., quality control, accreditation) might clash with or support teacher empowerment.

		Meso: The question explores how schools manage the tension between accountability (e.g., external evaluation) and allowing teachers to pursue self-directed PL. <i>Do school policies enforce strict PL requirements that align with state priorities, or do they allow for more flexible, teacher-led learning opportunities that reflect the professional needs and interests of individual educators?</i> Micro: The question examines how individual teachers navigate the tension between personal learning goals and institutional or national accountability pressures. <i>Do teachers feel they have the autonomy to pursue PL that aligns with their interests and teaching philosophy, or are they primarily focused on meeting external criteria set by their schools or national bodies?</i>
To what extent (low / moderate / high) does the the policy make assumptions about the purpose of PL, and how are these assumptions framed across different levels?	This question is important because the assumptions behind why PL is pursued affect its design and implementation. If PL is primarily viewed as a means to fulfil institutional or national/state/district goals, the personal and developmental aspects of PL may be neglected. A more holistic approach would integrate both professional and personal growth, aligning with teachers' intrinsic motivations.	Macro: This question uncovers the underlying assumptions about why PL is promoted nationally. <i>Is the policy framed as a tool for improving student outcomes, raising national education standards, or enhancing teacher professionalism?</i> Meso: The question investigates whether schools and educational institutions see PL as a way to improve organisational performance, meet external

		expectations, or genuinely foster teacher learning and growth. <i>Are institutions focused on achieving compliance with external standards, or do they prioritise teacher learning as an end in itself?</i> Micro: This question looks at how individual teachers perceive the purpose of their PL. <i>Are they engaging in learning to meet institutional or national requirements, or do they see it as a personal and professional endeavour that enhances their teaching practice and career development?</i>
To what extent(low / moderate / high) does the policy acknowledge and address the complexities and contextual realities (e.g., economic, cultural, political) that influence PL?	Acknowledging contextual complexities is crucial for ensuring that PL policies are equitable and relevant to teachers' diverse experiences. Policies that fail to address these complexities risk being exclusionary or irrelevant to teachers working in challenging or non-mainstream environments.	Macro: This question explores how macro policies consider diverse contexts. <i>Is the policy flexible enough to adapt to these realities, or does it apply a one-size-fits-all approach?</i> Meso: The question examines how schools and institutions deal with contextual complexities within their PL policies. <i>Do institutions recognise the diverse needs of teachers, especially in under-resourced schools or culturally diverse contexts, and how does the policy enable them to address these differences?</i> Micro: This question addresses whether teachers feel the policy allows for PL that is relevant to their specific teaching contexts.

		<i>Are the realities teachers face in their daily practice reflected in the PL opportunities provided to them?</i>
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Table 2: Key linguistic devices (Fairclough 2003, 2004; Jørgensen and Phillips 2003)

Device	How to apply	Examples
Modality	Modality refers to the use of modal verbs (e.g., must, should, can, may) and expressions that convey degrees of certainty, possibility, or obligation.	Macro: Does the policy use strict modality to mandate compliance (e.g., “teachers must complete accredited programmes:)? Meso: Are institutions given discretion to adapt PL to their local contexts, or are they bound by rigid directives? Micro: How are teachers’ decisions about their learning shaped by modal expressions? Are they “encouraged” or “required”?
Passive Voice	Passive voice constructions can obscure who is performing an action, which can dilute responsibility and power dynamics. In policies, this is often used to hide the agents behind decisions or processes.	Macro: In macro policy, passive voice may conceal the policy author’s role in imposing certain PL standards e.g., “PL will be provided”. Meso: At the institutional level, passive voice may downplay the role of school leaders in enforcing PL initiatives. Micro: How does passive voice obscure the level of choice teachers have in their PL e.g., “PL is required”.
Intertextuality	Intertextuality refers to the way a text references other texts, discourses, or policies. This can reinforce authority by linking PL to broader policies or accepted discourses.	Macro: Does the policy link PL to international educational standards or discourses (e.g., OECD, PISA)? Does it borrow language from other macro policy frameworks? Meso: Are schools expected to align their PL initiatives with macro policy frameworks? How are these frameworks referenced to justify school-level decisions? Micro: Are teachers’ learning paths shaped by intertextual references to other standards, frameworks, or performance discourses that reinforce certain ideologies?

Presupposition	Presupposition refers to the assumptions embedded in the text that are presented as common sense or universally agreed upon, without being explicitly stated.	Macro: What presuppositions about the purpose of PL are embedded in macro policies (e.g., improving test scores, meeting economic needs)? Are these assumptions presented as self-evident? Meso: Are there assumptions about institutional roles in PL, such as the idea that all schools can implement PL in the same way? Micro: How are teachers' motivations and needs presupposed in policy discourse (e.g., assuming all teachers value standardised learning outcomes)?
Lexical Choices	Lexical choices (specific words and terms used) can reflect power relations, ideologies, and values.	Macro: Does the macro policy use controlling language (e.g., "must comply") or empowering language (e.g., "teachers are encouraged to explore")? Meso: Are institutions framed as enforcers of PL mandates or as facilitators of teacher-driven learning? What lexical choices suggest these roles? Micro: How is the teacher positioned in the language of the policy? Are they framed as passive recipients ("must follow") or active agents ("choose, engage, reflect")?
Metaphor: Framing concepts through comparison	Metaphors can shape how we understand abstract concepts by comparing them to more familiar ones. I	Macro: Are macro policies framing PL as a competitive process or as a developmental journey (e.g., "lifelong learning")? Meso: How do institutions adopt metaphors to describe their PL processes (e.g., "building capacity")? Micro: What metaphors frame teachers' individual learning experiences?

Application of the Policy Analysis Toolkit

This analysis applies the five guiding questions to examine a professional learning policy from the Irish context in which the authors are situated: *Cosán: Framework for Teachers' Learning* (Teaching Council 2016), hereafter referred to as the *Cosán* framework. This policy is positioned at the macro level as a national policy text. This policy focuses on formalising teacher professional learning, which is currently voluntary after the induction phase in the RoI (King *et al.* 2023b). It employs key CDA devices, including modality, passive voice, intertextuality, presupposition, lexical choices, and metaphors.

How does the policy construct power relations between different stakeholders within the framework of PL?

The *Cosán* framework positions the Teaching Council as the authoritative body overseeing teachers' PL. The document explicitly states, "the Teaching Council, as the professional standards body for teaching in Ireland, has a statutory role to promote and regulate the teaching profession" (p. 2). This reference to its roles, such as "promote" and "regulate", transforms actions into abstract concepts, emphasising the Council's control over the PL process. Intertextuality reinforces the legitimacy of the Council's role by referencing prior policies, such as the *Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education* (p. 2), embedding the *Cosán* framework within an established policy tradition, alongside legislation such as the Teaching Council Act: "the Council will have the statutory power to review and accredit programmes relating to the continuing education and training of teachers" (p. 23). This reference to previous policies and legislation strengthens the Council's authority by positioning it as part of a broader regulatory system, reinforcing its power over teacher PL. However, the framework also attempts to balance this power dynamic by emphasising consultation with teachers: "The framework has been shaped by consultation and collaboration with teachers and other stakeholders" (p. 2).

This shows an attempt to include teachers' voices in the development of the policy, reflecting a more participatory approach. Although the ultimate control remains with the Teaching Council, the collaborative language suggests a level of teacher input, potentially reducing the top-down nature of the power structure.

In what ways does the policy reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies, such as neoliberalism, accountability, and standardisation, in shaping PL?

The *Cosán* framework largely reproduces neoliberal ideologies through its focus on accountability and standardisation, yet it also introduces flexibility and innovation, which represent a challenge to overly rigid interpretations of these ideologies. The document emphasises that PL must be aligned with broader educational goals, stating, "Professional learning should be linked to teachers' needs, students' needs, and school needs" (p. 7). This arguably reflects a neoliberal emphasis on accountability, where PL is tied to measurable outcomes in the education system. The lexical choices of "quality assurance" and "accreditation" (p. 23) also highlight the focus on external validation and performance metrics, which align with neoliberal discourses of efficiency and standardisation. However, the framework also challenges these ideologies by promoting a degree of teacher autonomy and innovation. The document notes that the framework will allow for "innovative approaches to accreditation" (p. 24), indicating that the Council recognises the need for flexibility in how PL is assessed. This openness to innovative and diverse approaches suggests that the framework is not entirely bound by rigid standardisation but is open to more creative and individualised pathways for PL. Furthermore, the framework encourages a variety of learning modes, stating, "Cosán will facilitate teachers in identifying opportunities for quality learning" (p. 7). This emphasis on supporting teachers in identifying their own learning opportunities reflects a shift away from a purely top-down, standardised approach to one that accommodates individual teacher agency within the broader accountability framework. While external validation remains

crucial, there is space for personalisation and choice, challenging some of the more rigid aspects of neoliberal ideology.

How does the policy balance the tension between individual teacher agency and external accountability measures?

The Cosán framework reflects elements of neoliberal ideology, particularly through its emphasis on quality assurance, accreditation, and system accountability. For example, the policy states, “The Teaching Council must also give reassurance, through the national framework, about the quality of that learning. Its accreditation role will be a key element in that regard” (p. 23). The use of the word “reassurance” is significant; it implies a need to justify teacher learning to the public, reflecting a market-oriented logic in which the profession must be seen to deliver value. Lexical choices like “quality assurance” and “accreditation” further support this reading, suggesting an approach to professional learning that is aligned with performance, regulation, and measurable outcomes.

At the same time, Cosán introduces language that supports teacher autonomy and flexibility. Statements such as “innovative approaches to accreditation” (p. 24) and “Cosán will facilitate teachers in identifying opportunities for quality learning” (p. 7) imply support rather than control, with a recognition that professional learning can take many forms and should be responsive to teachers’ contexts. This signals a more democratic orientation, where teachers are positioned as active participants in shaping their learning. Still, this sits within a broader framework of oversight and system assurance, and these more flexible elements do not override the structures of accountability set out in the policy. Taken together, the framework reflects a layered approach. It does not fall neatly into one ideological category but instead carries elements of both control and agency.

What assumptions does the policy make about the purpose of PL and how are these assumptions framed within this macro-level text?

The *Cosán* framework assumes that the primary purpose of PL is to enhance teaching quality and improve student outcomes. The document asserts, “Cosán will facilitate teachers in valuing their learning and in prioritising learning that benefits them and their pupils” (p. 9). This presupposition frames PL as instrumental to achieving measurable improvements in the education system, positioning PL as a tool for enhancing teacher effectiveness and driving student performance. The framework also assumes that PL is a continuous, long-term process, referring to it as a “pathway” (p. 2). The metaphor of a “pathway” suggests that PL is a journey with defined milestones, referred to in the policy as “goals” (p. 13). This indicates a conception of PL as a structured and goal-oriented process. The framework also acknowledges the intrinsic value of PL for teachers’ personal and professional growth. By stating that “Cosán will ensure that the learning is relevant to teachers and their learning needs” (p. 7), the document highlights the importance of aligning learning opportunities with teachers’ individual goals. This suggests that PL is not solely about improving student outcomes but also about fostering teacher growth and enhancing job satisfaction.

To what extent does the policy acknowledge and address the complexities and contextual realities (economic, cultural, political) that influence PL?

The *Cosán* framework provides limited acknowledgement of the broader economic, cultural, and political contexts that shape PL. While the document notes that PL should meet the needs of teachers, schools and students, it does not explore how these needs may vary based on teachers’ socio-economic or cultural contexts. The framework assumes that PL can be uniformly applied across all contexts, with little consideration for the disparities in resources and access to opportunities that may exist between different schools. Despite this, the

framework's flexibility in allowing for "varied learning opportunities" (p. 8) offers some recognition of the different contexts in which teachers operate. By supporting various forms of learning, the framework suggests that teachers can engage in PL that suits their particular circumstances. However, this flexibility is not fully developed in the document, and the emphasis on standardisation and quality assurance processes (p. 23) may limit the extent to which contextual factors are truly addressed. The framework does not engage with the broader political dimensions of PL, such as how national education policies or political decisions might affect the availability or structure of PL opportunities.

Intertextuality

To understand the discursive position of *Cosán*, it is also necessary to locate it within the wider continuum of Teaching Council policy in Ireland, which spans ITE (*Céim*), induction (*Droichead*), and continuing PL (*Cosán*). Although officially framed as a coherent developmental pathway (Teaching Council 2011), these policy texts represent distinct and, at times, competing constructions of professionalism, autonomy, and accountability. *Céim* (Teaching Council, 2020) reflects the most managerial expression of policy within the continuum. The partnership between the Teaching Council and the higher education institutes (HEIs) is discursively positioned as collaborative, yet structurally functions as regulatory (Mooney Simmie 2021). HEIs are positioned as both partners and subjects of oversight, tasked with enacting professional standards that are externally prescribed (Gorman and Furlong 2023). Within this framework, ITE is not only a process of professional formation but also one of institutional compliance, aligning with the broader neoliberal tendency to equate quality with performance and accountability (Ball, 2016). At the induction stage, *Droichead* introduces a softer, more relational discourse centred on mentoring, professional dialogue, and school-based support. The mentoring process, however, remains structured by formal procedure and verification mechanisms, ensuring that even within a discourse of mentorship, evaluation and

standardisation persist. *Cosán*, as the analysis illustrates, occupies a more ambivalent position within this continuum. It represents the least prescriptive of the three frameworks and gestures toward a discourse of teacher autonomy, flexibility, and self-directed inquiry. This reflects the lengthy consultative process that took place between the Teaching Council, Teacher Unions and wider stakeholders. However, while *Cosán* appears to offer greater autonomy, it remains situated within a policy context that is fundamentally shaped by managerial rationalities. Its language of reflection and empowerment operates within the same overarching system that privileges accountability, performance, and measurable assurance. In this sense, *Cosán* does not signify a break from *Céim* and *Droichead* but offers a rearticulation of control through softer means. The policy continuum, therefore, does not move linearly from regulation to autonomy; rather, it redistributes control through increasingly subtle forms of governance, and ideologically remains tethered to system imperatives of improvement and compliance (Mooney Simmie 2021).

Discussion and Implications

The policy analysis toolkit presented above, grounded in CDA devices and guiding questions, offers a structured yet flexible tool for examining how PL is constructed, justified, and communicated in policy. Its application across macro, meso, and micro levels supports a deeper reading of how language shapes professional roles and responsibilities. Educational policies are not neutral; they are written within particular political, economic, and social contexts, and they carry assumptions, often implicit, about what teaching is, what teachers need, and who decides (Ball 1993, 2016; Ball et al. 2012; Sachs 2016). The toolkit invites stakeholders to reflect on these assumptions and to consider how language can signal, enable, or constrain different forms of professional learning.

Through its use of CDA tools such as lexical choice, modality, and metaphor, the toolkit draws attention to how teachers, leaders, and institutions are positioned within policy texts. These discursive choices in policy texts often reflect dominant ideologies, particularly an emphasis on accountability, standardisation, and measurable outcomes associated with neoliberalism (Mockler 2020, 2022; Sachs 2001, 2005, 2016). However, as the application to *Cosán* illustrates, policies rarely adopt a single ideological stance. Instead, they often reflect a mix of managerial and democratic professional discourses (Evetts 2009; Kennedy 2015; Sachs 2001, 2005, 2016), where system-level control sits alongside language that promotes flexibility, innovation, and teacher voice. This toolkit does not ask stakeholders to label a policy as one or the other, but rather to unpack how and where these different discourses appear, and how they shape professional learning, in order to critically reflect on their implications for PL.

One of the strengths of the toolkit is its ability to illuminate the tension between system accountability and teacher autonomy. These tensions are felt differently at different levels of the system. At the macro level, the toolkit allows policymakers to consider whether policy language promotes democratic professionalism by supporting teacher agency or leans more toward managerialism by reinforcing compliance and external validation (Kennedy 2015, Table 2). At the meso level, school leaders and middle-tier actors play a crucial role in mediating these tensions. They must interpret policy in ways that balance institutional priorities with teachers' learning needs, which requires careful attention to how policies are communicated and enacted. The toolkit's focus on metaphor and modality is especially relevant here. Understanding whether a policy uses "may," "should," or "must" can make a significant difference in how PL is enacted in practice, alongside the toolkit's guiding questions, which can help school leaders and facilitators reflect critically on these nuances. At the micro level, teachers bring their own experiences, beliefs, and professional identities to their engagement with PL. The toolkit encourages teachers to consider whether policies align with their needs or

feel externally imposed. At the same time, it acknowledges that PL is not just about personal growth - it is also about responding to school-level and system-level goals. Effective PL policy must, therefore, strike a balance between individual agency and collective responsibility. The guiding questions are helpful here in prompting reflection on how that balance is achieved or undermined within policy texts. As King *et al.* (2023a) remind us, PL occurs within complex social, cultural, and economic contexts. Policies that appear clear on paper may be interpreted differently across settings or contexts (Ball *et al.* 2012). The toolkit helps stakeholders recognise these subtleties and consider how policies function in real contexts. Finally, while the toolkit is built around CDA, it does not claim to capture all aspects of how policy is lived and experienced. Teachers and leaders often engage with policy in informal, negotiated ways that lie beyond the scope of textual analysis (Braun et al., 2011; Ball *et al.* 2012; Gorman 2024). However, by drawing attention to how language works, this toolkit offers a starting point to open up PL policy for deeper scrutiny.

In applying the toolkit to Cosán, the analysis reveals that the tensions Kennedy (2015) identifies between managerial and democratic professionalism are not simply contradictions to be resolved but essential mechanisms through which coherence is maintained. At the macro level, the analysis exposes how Deweyan ideas of inquiry, reflection, and adaptation are rhetorically mobilised within the neoliberal policy rationalities described by Ball (2016). Policy texts invoke learning and flexibility yet embed these within vocabularies of standards, quality assurance and accountability. This dual language of empowerment and control enables policy to project democratic intent while sustaining managerial authority. At the meso level, the toolkit illuminates how this ambivalence is translated in practice by actors such as school/middle leaders and PL facilitators. The toolkit surfaces the tensions inherent in this translation work: meso actors must interpret and enact policies that invite professional autonomy but are underpinned by accountability regimes that restrict it. At the micro level, the

application of the toolkit connects with Sachs's (2001, 2016) and Evetts's (2009) work on professional identity, revealing how teachers internalise policy discourses that link professionalism to continuous improvement and evidence of performance. Teachers are positioned as reflective and self-directed, yet their agency remains bounded by external expectations of what constitutes legitimate learning (Mooney Simmie 2021). This notion of conditional agency highlights how teachers' professional autonomy is both enabled and constrained by the very discourse that celebrates it. In applying the toolkit to analyse policy, it also exposes that contradiction is not simply an artefact of competing priorities, but a deliberate and enduring feature of how policy operates. Policy sustains its authority precisely by holding opposites in play; by promoting professional trust while instituting mechanisms of surveillance, by celebrating autonomy while prescribing its limits. These contradictions are not errors to be resolved but tools of governance, ensuring that policy actors (e.g., teachers, school principals, PL facilitators, superintendents) remain both empowered and accountable, both agents and subjects within the same discursive frame.

Conclusion

In an era of increasing complexity, PL policy has become a critical site for inquiry, negotiation, and reform. While PL is widely recognised as essential to improving educational outcomes, existing policies frequently fall short of enabling meaningful, context-sensitive professional growth. International scholarship has repeatedly identified key limitations in prevailing PL policies, particularly their over-reliance on prescriptive, standardised models that prioritise accountability over professional autonomy and fail to reflect the lived realities of educators (Kennedy 2014; Mockler 2020, 2022). This article contributes to the field by introducing an original policy analysis toolkit designed to critically interrogate PL policies through a multi-layered, theoretically informed, and methodologically rigorous approach. Drawing on a pragmatic meta-model of professional learning (King *et al.* 2023a) and underpinned by

Fairclough's CDA, the toolkit is constructed to support researchers, policymakers, school leaders, and teachers in examining how language shapes the assumptions, ideologies, and power relations embedded in PL policies. Through its application to a national policy text from the Republic of Ireland, the toolkit yields critical insights into the discursive tensions that underpin PL policies - between democratic and managerial professionalism, between agency and compliance, and between flexibility and standardisation. These findings affirm the toolkit's value as both a methodological device and a form of policy literacy that enhances the capacity of education professionals to interpret and navigate policy landscapes more critically.

At the same time, the article acknowledges several limitations. The analysis is confined to a textual reading of policy and does not extend to the lived enactment or reception of PL policy across diverse educational contexts. Nonetheless, by centring questions of power, discourse, and context, the article advances knowledge in the field of PL policy analysis and responds to urgent calls for tools that help make visible the implicit structures and values shaping professional learning systems (Mockler 2022). In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of work that seeks to reimagine policy not as a fixed set of directives but as a dynamic, contested, and socially situated practice; one that must be open to interrogation, adaptation, and democratic engagement.

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