

# The Outcomes of Collaborative Whole-School Professional Development on Teachers' Inclusive Practices in a Mainstream Secondary School

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## ABSTRACT

The outcomes of a collaborative whole-school model of professional development on teachers' learning to enact an inclusive education initiative, in a mainstream post-primary school explores the outcomes of whole school collaborative professional development on teachers' learning in terms of the degree and quality of teacher change in relation to inclusive practices, in this instance specific to level two learning programmes (L2LPs) and what factors facilitated or hindered teachers' learning for enacting inclusive practices. The findings of this paper highlight the potential of facilitated PD to empower teachers to develop greater levels of knowledge, skills, and experience of inclusive practice to enable collective decision-making and enhanced planning and teaching for all learners. Though aimed at a specific programme (L2LPs), the authors believe this research has wider implications for supporting mainstream teachers build capacity in their inclusive practices generally.

## KEYWORDS

CPD, Inclusion, Inclusive Practices, L2LPs, Policy Enactment, Professional Development, Teachers' Attitudes, Teacher Change, Whole-School Collaboration

## INTRODUCTION

The positions teachers take and how they approach teaching are critical factors in any policy initiative to improve inclusive education. The quality of learning, teaching, leadership, and curriculum is dependent on the vision, commitment, and capacity of the teachers who bring the curriculum to life (Sugrue, 2011). However, teacher education for inclusion has inadequately prepared and supported teachers to enact inclusive practices in their learning and teaching (Brennan et al., 2019; Forlin, 2010). Thus, there needs to be a reorientation of professional development to align with inclusive education approaches to ensure teachers have the necessary pedagogical capacities to create inclusive classrooms and enact

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curriculum reform (UNESCO, 2009). Coherent and contextually relevant professional development in which teachers are asked to commit to educational policy initiatives is essential, particularly if they require a change in teachers' values and beliefs. For effective learning to take place, teachers must be active rather than passive recipients of their professional development to be motivated to engage with and take ownership of their own learning (The Teaching Council, 2016).

This research takes place in Ireland and focuses on a curriculum pathway within the Irish post-primary sector for students with general learning disabilities (GLD). This study considers the outcomes of a collaborative whole-school model of professional development on teachers' learning to enact the Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LPs), an inclusive education initiative that was designed specifically for students with GLD in mainstream post-primary schools. The purpose of this research was to design and facilitate a collaborative whole-school model of professional development that would impact the enactment of an inclusive education initiative, the L2LPs. This paper presents findings pertaining to teacher learning. Findings in relation to teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices in relation to L2LPs are reported elsewhere (Flood & Logan, 2021). The following questions relating to teachers' learning were addressed using a single school case study approach:

- What was the degree and quality of teacher change in relation to inclusive practices, in this instance specific to L2LPs?
- What factors facilitate or hinder teachers' learning for enacting inclusive practices?

## **CONTEXT**

### **Level Two Learning Programmes**

Broadly aligned with Level 2 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, which recognizes basic developmental learning with appropriately supported direction, the L2LPs were introduced as part of Phase 1 of the new Framework for Junior Cycle (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2014). The Framework for Junior Cycle is a foundation for post-primary schools to plan quality, inclusive, and appropriate education programs with enhanced learning experiences for every student, including those with special educational needs (SEN). The aim of the L2LPs within this framework is "to make the curriculum more accessible to students with special educational needs" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2016, p. 6), in this instance, students with low mild to high moderate GLD. The underlying principle of inclusion is promoted in the L2LPs by advocating a student-centered and flexible approach to planning and assessment. A Level 2 Learning Programme (L2LP) is designed to meet the strengths and needs of the student in the context of the student's school. L2LPs consist of five Priority Learning Units (PLUs) that are designed for up to 250 hours of student engagement per PLU (Department of Education and Skills, 2015). This constitutes 60% of the student's curriculum program, facilitating student participation in other curricular and social areas.

The L2LPs recognize the foundations for inclusive education established in Irish legislation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2014). They are underpinned by the same principles, statements of learning, and key skills that form the structure of the Framework for Junior Cycle. The intention of the L2LPs is that students participating in L2LPs in mainstream post-primary settings engage with their individual L2LP in their mainstream classes and, where appropriate, through small group or one-to-one classes.

### **General Learning Disabilities**

Mild, moderate, and severe/profound GLD are the criteria used for students to participate in L2LPs and Level 1 Learning Programmes (L1LPs) at Junior Cycle. The L1LPs are designed for students with learning disabilities in the low moderate and severe/profound range of ability. They were introduced

as part of the Framework for Junior Cycle and have been available to schools and students since September 2018. Internationally, there are differences between definitions of these learning disabilities (Special Education Support Service, 2008) (see Table 1).

The L2LPs are for students with GLD in the low mild to high moderate range of ability (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2016). Students with mild GLD have an IQ between 50 and 70. Students with moderate GLD have an IQ between 35 and 50. Their developmental rate is slower than their peers, and the developmental level reached will be lower than that of their peers (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007). Students with mild and moderate GLD face multiple barriers to their learning relating to communication, basic literacy and numeracy, attention and retention, adaptive skills, and independent vocational skills (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007, 2016). However, they are not a homogeneous group; their diverse learning needs are unique to each student (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2007) and require individualized planning for their education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Impact of Teacher Efficacy on Creating Inclusive Environments

Teacher efficacy is a predicting factor of teachers' attitudes to inclusive education, with low teacher efficacy correlating with concern and negativity toward including students with SEN in their classrooms (Urton et al., 2014; Vaz et al., 2015). The successful development of inclusive education requires strong teacher efficacy in terms of enacting inclusive policies (Forlin et al., 2014). The supports students receive are decided based on their diagnosis or assessment of needs. The translation of these supports in the classroom is dependent not only on the students' needs but also on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of their teachers (Park et al., 2016). This relates to the concept of teacher preparedness and raises the issue of how teachers are prepared to enact inclusive policy through initiatives like L2LPs. There is a relationship between self-perceptions, professional development, and practices. Teacher educators' perception of teachers' confidence and competency will facilitate the connection between the professional development teachers receive and how they use their acquired knowledge and skills in their practice (Park et al., 2016). The context in which teachers interpret the policy initiative will also influence teachers' levels of engagement with their professional development. Hence, policy enactment and the importance of school-specific factors should not be overlooked (Braun et al., 2011).

Table 1. International differences in learning-disability definitions (National Council for Special Education, 2007)

Country	Ireland	UK	Australia/New Zealand	Canada/USA
Definition	Mild GLD	Moderate learning difficulties	Mild to moderate intellectual disabilities	Mild mental delay or educable mentally delayed
	Moderate to severe GLD	Severe learning difficulties	Moderate intellectual disabilities	Moderate to severe mental delay or trainable mentally delayed
	Profound GLD	Profound and multiple learning difficulties	Severe intellectual disabilities	Severe to profound mental delay

## Factors Contributing to Teacher Engagement With Professional Development

International studies on teachers' professional development (European Commission, 2007; Eurydice, 2009; OECD, 2009) indicated that in about half of European countries, teacher professional development is considered a professional duty. However, in practice, professional development is optional in many of these states (Caena, 2011). Understanding what motivates teachers to engage with professional development is important. A study of Irish and Northern Irish teachers' ( $n = 83$ ) motivation to engage with professional development found that personal, school-related, and system-wide factors influenced teachers' motivation (McMillan et al., 2016), with change starting with the individual, at the personal level, and permeating outward to reach the school-wide and then system-wide environments.

People become motivated when they perceive a link between effort, performance, and reward. Therefore, for teachers to be motivated to engage in teacher change, they must be able to make a positive emotional connection between the changes required, how attainable they are, and the perceived outcomes of the changes. Professional development should encourage teachers to explore the rationale for changes in practice, assign meaning to what they are doing, and make associations between teachers' motivations and the policy initiative to be enacted. Professional development should be cognizant of a school's mission and plan for teachers to see the relevant connections between their professional-development activities and how they support the school's inclusive-education development (Knoster, 1993). This suggests that effective professional development needs to identify with teachers' individual and school-context needs at a personal level to ensure policy enactment at the whole-school level. Thus, inclusive professional development needs to identify with teachers as teachers of subjects in tandem with promoting the concept of teachers of students.

While there is an acceptance of the necessity of professional development, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of teacher education (Guskey, 2002). The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2009) survey of teachers indicated that the proportion of teachers dissatisfied with professional development was significant. Thirty-one percent of all TALIS respondents and thirty-eight percent of Irish respondents identified teaching students with SEN as a high-priority area for professional development (Gileece et al., 2009; OECD, 2009). The Department of Education and Skills responded to these findings with the recommendation that schools and support services need to consider Irish teachers' development needs in teaching students with SEN as well as general teaching and learning areas (Gileece et al., 2009). However, the absence of research on inclusive-education professional development for mainstream teachers may promote a de facto perception that teaching students with SEN is the responsibility of a specialist special education teacher (SET).

## Professional Development to Effect Teacher Change

Preparing and supporting teachers to be effective educators pose significant challenges. Professional development is not as simple as taking expert skills and knowledge transmitted through professional-development activities and enacting them, without problems, into practice (Dadds, 2014). The aim of professional development is to effect change in teachers' classroom practices, attitudes, and beliefs and in students' learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002). Changing teachers' perceptions is a challenging process (Shevlin et al., 2013), and professional-development enterprises often struggle to bring about teacher change (Guskey, 2002; Kennedy, 2005, 2014). In Ireland, this could be attributed to the number of new initiatives introduced concurrently or in quick succession, resulting in insufficient time for effective professional development to enact one new practice before another is introduced. For example, in the first cycle of L2LPs, 2014 to 2017, schools had to introduce five new subject specifications, new assessment and reporting procedures, including new grading, and a well-being program (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, 2015, 2017). Boud and Hager (2012) stated that "learning is something that individuals do" (p. 18); it is a process whereby individuals gain a skill, knowledge, or understanding that can be brought to their practice. Professional-development activities

are the system of tasks, activities, and practices that teachers participate in. These influences share similarities with the contextual dimensions of policy enactment (Braun et al., 2011), indicating that the same considerations are required for policy- and professional-development endeavors.

Opfer and Pedder (2011b) challenged Guskey's (2002) linear model of the process of teacher change in which change in attitudes comes from teachers' experiencing and observing improved student outcomes. Rather, they view change as cyclical, positing that "changes in beliefs lead to changes in practice that bring changes in student learning that bring further changes in practice that result in additional changes in belief and so on" (Opfer & Pedder, 2011b, p. 395). The relationship between changes in this stance is reciprocal, as change in one aspect is dependent on change in another, and there is potential for change to occur at any stage of the change process. However, change in only one area may not represent teacher learning, as change in the three elements of belief, practice, and student outcomes is required for learning to occur (Opfer & Pedder, 2011b).

Similarly, inclusive education practices can be enhanced through the development of the three dimensions of knowing, doing, and believing (Rouse, 2006). If two of these aspects are in place, the third is likely to follow. If teachers gain new knowledge and are supported to put this into practice, then their belief and attitudes about inclusive practices will change over time (Rouse, 2006, 2008). If teachers believe in inclusive education and are given the support to enact new practices, they are likely to develop new knowledge and skills (Rouse, 2008). In the context of L2LPs as a new initiative, effective professional development will develop teachers' knowledge and skills and provide opportunities for "doing" and experiencing successful outcomes to promote positive attitudes and beliefs toward the program. Positive belief will, in turn, promote further knowledge development and inclusive practices in school. An effective professional-development model will support teachers' professional-development needs through continued learning activities rather than brief, one-off events (Opfer & Pedder, 2011a, 2011b), will address school and system needs (The Teaching Council, 2016), and will be teacher led and give ownership to teachers (Guskey, 2002; The Teaching Council, 2016).

### **Transformative Models of Professional Development**

Transformative professional development links theory with practice and reflection, causes change in attitudes and practice, and supports autonomy (Fraser et al., 2007). Collaborative professional inquiry models (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Conway et al., 2009; Fraser et al., 2007) refers to a combination of models, or aspects of models, that together meet a variety of diverse conditions that result in transformative practice (Kennedy, 2014). The principle of professional autonomy and flexibility allows teachers to consider their own and their students' changing needs when considering learning pathways (The Teaching Council, 2016). Professional learning communities (PLCs) (Kennedy, 2014; McElearney et al., 2019) promote critical evaluation of practice by teachers as a group "sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning orientated, growth promoting way" (Bolam et al., 2005, p. 223). Collaborative inquiry models such as PLCs facilitate flexibility in the design of professional-development programs to choose a balanced selection of pedagogies that best meet the purpose of the professional development and the learning needs of the teacher as learner. However, it is important to be aware of issues such as power and tension (Kennedy, 2005, 2014). This is an important consideration in an era of competing demands for teachers as part of Junior Cycle reform. Thus, it was crucial that the professional development for this research aligned L2LPs, inclusive education, teachers' subjects, and their practice.

Collaborative professional development is most effective when the professional development is for teachers from the same school, department, or year group inquiring into practice specific to their context and promoting ownership (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Opfer & Pedder, 2011b). Furthermore, making connections in knowledge and relationships is an important part of teachers' professional-development journey. If teachers' focus is on compartmentalized knowledge of their subject or discipline, they can become disconnected from their broader community and the education system itself. To effectively engage in this knowledge base, teachers will need to work collaboratively with

learners and colleagues within and across their immediate environment as well as beyond (Keay et al., 2019). Additionally, professional development that is job-embedded engages teachers in active learning strategies that are piloted in their own classrooms and offers opportunities for reflective analysis, which are key to building positive beliefs in teachers and capacity to learn (Hunzicker, 2011). Whole-school L2LPs professional development would allow teachers to build a collective knowledge base that informs their understanding of L2LPs within their subject areas and at a whole-school curriculum level (Keay et al., 2019) and make informed collaborative decisions to meet their students' needs in consideration of their school, subject plans, and classrooms.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research question and aims of this study warranted a predominantly qualitative research approach, which is compatible with construct approaches. Interpretive and naturalistic approaches to inquiry allowed for multiple methods of data collection using a case-study research design. This informed decision-making about participants and setting, procedures and instruments, and the research intervention (professional-development design).

### **Participants and Setting**

The intention of this study was to have a small sample size of one research school. Purposive sampling was used to select this site and participants relevant to the research topic regarding their experience, or lack of, with L2LPs. The school was chosen because it had identified a student or students commencing first or second year that met the criteria as set out by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for participation in the L2LPs and had decided to engage with L2LPs or was in the early stages of introducing L2LPs in their school. Sixteen teachers participated in Phase 1. Eleven teachers completed Phase 2. Additionally, four Professional Master in Education (PME) students participated in the study.

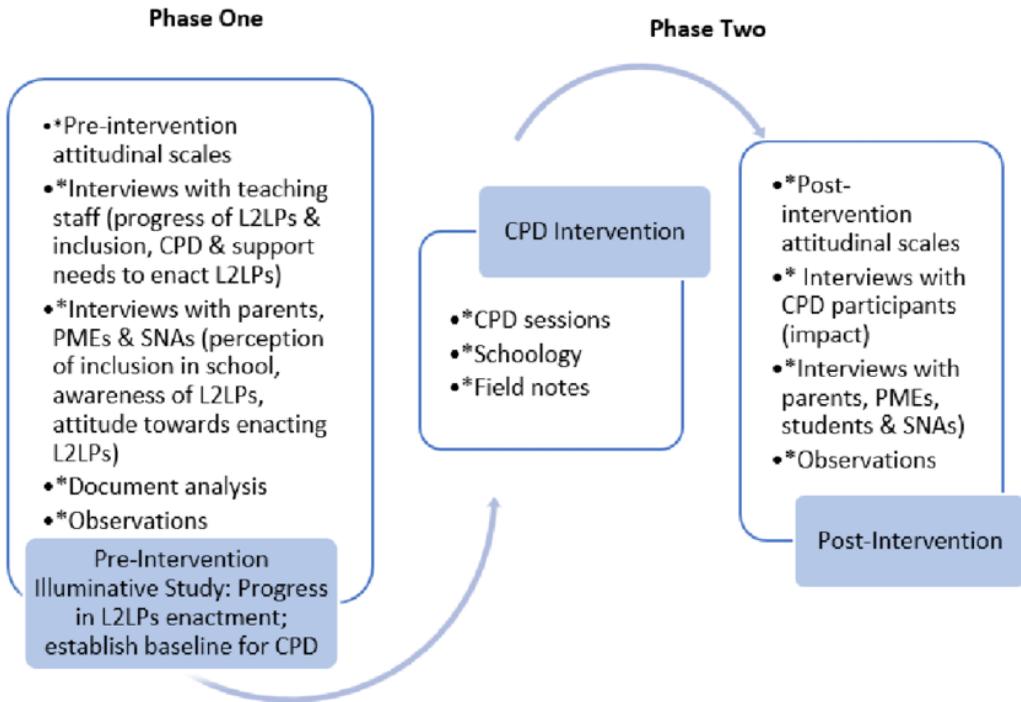
### **Procedure and Instruments**

Individual (principal and SEN coordinator) and focus-group (teachers) interviews, participant observation, and reflexive field notes were the key data-collection methods. Semi-structured interviews using an open-ended schedule of questions were used to encourage reflection and discussion and reduced the potential for missing important data pertinent to the phenomenon. Documents such as school policies and planning and lesson notes were analyzed to illuminate the school's journey. Data were collected sequentially over a school year. An illuminative evaluation approach was taken in Phase 1 of the research to establish a baseline in relation to teachers' existing knowledge and practices for L2LPs and inclusion. These findings evidenced the school's strong commitment to inclusion, with enacting L2LPs forming part of that commitment. However, the data highlighted teachers' misunderstandings about the purpose of L2LPs and student criteria for participation in them. This resulted in gaps in teachers' understanding of planning for learning and teaching and the evidenced lack of teacher confidence and ownership to progress their efforts to enact L2LPs from the school's initial steps (Flood & Logan, 2021). Phase 1 data informed Phase 2, while data collected in both phases were used to examine the impact of Phase 2.

### **Research Intervention: Professional-Development Design and Delivery**

Planning for professional development can improve teacher and student outcomes (King, 2016). Establishing a baseline for professional development indicated where the school was in its journey with L2LPs and identified the goals of the professional development. The professional development needed to be responsive and facilitate collaborative discussions, inquiry, and decision-making based

Figure 1. Phases of research data collection



on acquired knowledge and understanding of students with GLD and L2LPs. Phase 1's illuminative evaluation (Flood & Logan, 2021) informed the nature and design of this professional development.

The first author's understanding of the school's context resulted in modifications to the professional-development design in the initial design stage and in response to arising situations throughout the professional-development intervention, moving the professional development from a general to a contextual model. A more student-focused approach was possible, as all participants were from the same school, as opposed to general professional development, where the number of teachers from different schools would inhibit opportunities to facilitate in-depth discussions around specific students and schools. Additionally, the researcher was able to facilitate discussions around issues that arose in between sessions and adapt the session accordingly. Generic resources and templates were adapted to demonstrate their use within the research school's context, and teachers were encouraged to create resources to meet their requirements.

The professional development took a blended approach, building in synchronous and asynchronous elements. Teachers met as a group in school, and FaceTime was used to communicate with the facilitator. This approach was before the Covid epidemic made online learning the norm and addressed some of the challenges identified from the move to online learning and teaching in 2020 (Devitt et al., 2020; Donlon et al., 2022; Hodges et al., 2020). This online element, and the role of the first author as facilitator and data collector, had implications for how the professional-development relationships were nurtured and navigated in this study. The researcher addressed this challenge by focusing on facilitator social presence, endeavoring to build a positive rapport with participants to enable affirmative engagement with the group. Additionally, the first professional-development session was held on site, further allowing the facilitator and participants to become more familiar with each other and build relationships. It also facilitated the researcher to express their personality and style of interacting face-to-face before moving to online communication and sessions.

The researcher encouraged group connectedness through active participation in the sessions and showing respect, trust, and patience to participants. In all sessions the researcher used open, friendly communication, addressed participants by name, used nonjudgmental and affirming language, and invited feedback in the session and through professional reflection logs (PRLs) afterwards. As the group became more comfortable with the professional development, they took ownership of group activities and indicated when they required input from the researcher.

Schoology, the school's online communication system, was used to create a forum for asynchronous activities to follow each session. Resources sourced from educational sites such as Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), the main source of information for teachers of Junior Cycle, and Scoilnet, a website hosted by the Professional Development Support Services for Teachers (PDST), and researcher-developed templates and examples were used. A folder was set up on Schoology for each session for the purpose of sharing these resources. Opportunities for participants to put new knowledge into practice between sessions and reflect on their outcomes were provided throughout the professional development. Finally, flexibility was built in to ensure sessions reflected the teachers' needs at that time. Table 2 briefly outlines the professional-development intervention.

## **Data Analysis**

Data comparison, data reduction and display, and data correlation were used to look for regularities and patterns in the data. A phenomenological mode of inquiry was chosen for this purpose. Data collection and interpretation were sequential, as some information gathered was required to inform the next phase. Data collected from each instrument were interpreted separately and then brought together in common themes. A thematic approach was used.

An iterative approach to interpretation of the data allowed space for unexpected themes to evolve rather than focusing on a set of pre-coded themes and facilitated descriptive detailing of participants' experiences at face value before interpreting emerging themes. Furthermore, this facilitated the exploration of emerging themes to support or refute the hypothesis that this model of professional development could have a positive impact on the L2LPs enactment in this school.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Merriam's (1998) strategies to achieve validity and reliability were considered a useful guide to establishing credibility. The key terms SEN, inclusive education, L2LPs, policy enactment, and professional development were defined and discussed with participants. Evidence-based themes from the Inclusive Education Framework (National Council for Special Education, 2011) were used to guide the development of the observation schedule. Additionally, an evidence-based framework for professional-development evaluation (King, 2014) was used to evaluate the impact of the professional development on L2LPs enactment in the school and factors that supported or hindered teacher learning. Data and methodological triangulation were utilized to reinforce or contradict realities. During data analysis, information that might contradict the themes established in the findings was looked for and rival explanations to interpretations were considered.

## **Limitations**

This was a single-site case study that employed purposive sampling drawn from a small number of teachers, students, parents, special-needs assistants (SNAs), and PMEs. Therefore, it is limited to time and place and cannot be generalized to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the small sample size facilitated detailed exploration; thus, the research findings can offer key recommendations for policy enactment in the school context and the wider policy field. Context was a significant consideration in this study. Thus, the extent to which results may be applicable to other settings is largely dependent on the reader's understanding of similarity and applicability to their own circumstances and how the results might be applied to a different school context. This was addressed by explicitly detailing the characteristics of the school and engagement with L2LPs prior

Table 2. Outline of professional-development intervention

Session	Logistics	Theme	Key resources	Activities
Session 1	In-school session 90 minutes. Facilitator led	Inclusion GLD	PowerPoint presentation Guidelines for teachers of students with GLD (overview) (NCCA, 2007) UDL Video	Labelling/Inclusion activity -Have an apple Thinking about your student -what students with GLD need to know/ do and how teachers might develop these skills
Session 2	Facetime 60 minutes Facilitator led	Introducing L2LPs Planning for L2LPs Identifying students	L2LPs booklet (JCT)- for all sessions PLU booklet (JCT)-for all sessions Planning templates	Reflect on subject planning checklist and teacher planning-Discussion Creating an individual L2LP-who are our students?
Session 3	Facetime 60 minutes Facilitator led (reducing input)	Creating an individual L2LP continued PLUs, and learning outcomes	PLU booklet (JCT) PLU checklists (JCT) L2LPs planning templates Practical examples/activities	Reflective discussions Identifying PLU learning outcomes for your subject
Session 4	Facetime 60 minutes Teacher led	From planning to practice	Practicalities of L2LPs in action Differentiation (SESS, PDST) UDL (cast.org) Practical examples/activities	Reflective discussions Planning an activity
Session 5	Facetime 60 minutes Facilitator led to introduce topic then teacher led	Gathering evidence	Teacher observation templates Gathering evidence PowerPoint L2LPs assessment (JCT)	Reflective discussions Dotstormig-how can we gather evidence?
Session 6	Facetime 60 minutes Teacher led	Plan gathering of evidence	Gathering evidence (thematic and learning outcome) templates Practical examples/activities	Reflective discussions Plan activity to gather evidence

**Tools used for CPD :** Schoology (school’s online communication and data control system), Facetime, [www.jct.ie](http://www.jct.ie), [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie), [www.scoilnet.com](http://www.scoilnet.com), researcher developed materials.

**Facetime sessions:** Teachers chose to work collaboratively and met in one classroom after school to facetime with researcher. Researcher was on interactive whiteboard and teachers were arranged so that the researcher could see all participants.

**Schoology:** A space was established on Schoology for L2LPs CPD with access granted to the researcher. Each session had a folder with resources added before the session and a section for teachers to add new resources and engage in conversations with researcher/each other in between sessions

to professional development in order to facilitate meaningful comparison by others to comparable situations. Furthermore, the context-specific nature of this study can add value to discussions on

the importance of context in policy enactment (Braun et al, 2011; Maguire et al., 2015) and its influence on professional learning (Boylan et al., 2018; Furner & McCulla, 2018; Opfer & Pedder, 2011b) through its detailed narrative of the school's journey through the professional-development and policy-enactment process.

## FINDINGS

Findings presented here are drawn from data in a wider study that explored the impact of a collaborative whole-school model of professional development on the enactment of L2LPs, which revealed positive and sustained engagement of inclusive practices for the enactment L2LPs and positive student outcomes. The focus of this paper is to consider the data pertaining to the outcomes of this model of professional development on teachers' learning in terms of each of the research questions in turn, namely: (1) What was the degree and quality of teacher change in relation to inclusive practices, in this instance specific to L2LPs? (2) What factors facilitated or hindered teachers' learning for enacting inclusive practices?

### **Degree and Quality of Teacher Change in Relation to Inclusive Practices**

The findings indicate that teachers developed their knowledge and their planning and instructional practices because of the professional development. In interviews, teachers commented on the ongoing nature of the professional development, stating that its regularity supported teachers trying something in class and then checking back in at the next session. This reduced feelings of being overwhelmed, with teachers instead feeling they had a support structure in the facilitator and themselves as the sessions progressed. The changes reported related to the themes of collective decision-making, exploring concepts of inclusive practices, and planning and teaching for L2LPs.

#### *Collective Decision-Making*

Teachers taking ownership of enacting L2LPs at the classroom and whole-school levels was observed throughout the professional development. Teachers became facilitators of their own learning and shared practice in communication and collaboration, profiling students for L2LPs, exploring concepts of inclusive practice, and planning and teaching for L2LPs. In the final three professional-development sessions, teachers were observed making clear collective decisions about students, their learning outcomes, and their assessment of learning. The following session field notes (Table 3) recorded these observations.

Participants agreed on approaches to gathering evidence of activities for Emma (student), and their collective decision that Alex (student) do a Level 3 Junior Cycle was a key moment in teachers' learning and agency for L2LPs. These decisions indicated a greater understanding of how to profile students based on evidence as opposed to perceptions based on a diagnosis. Teacher 2's description of making these decisions represents the experiences shared by teachers:

*From the first session a lot of us were probably a little unsure, as you probably heard from the earlier questions, were unsure of what L2LPs were and what the exact, I guess, criteria nearly would be for students. Once we developed our own understanding of that, then we were in a position where we could make, you know, educated decisions that students were L2s or not, and after a few weeks of being in the study and then you're in your own classroom and you're observing a student, you kind of realize they're not L2 for this, they're Level 3. And we fed this back in one group session, and when one person said it, everyone else was like, yeah, no, I see that too, I see that too, and that's just the way it went on, so yeah. But it was definitely the knowledge that changed that decision or made it easier for us.*

Table 3. Observations of teachers' decision-making

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants brought up questions about Alex. Differentiated L3 work wasn't working but choice given for L2LPs is working. However, one teacher brought up a concern that Alex is more capable and should possibly be doing L3 subjects. All teachers joined this conversation with some thoughts (note the conversation showed that some had been discussing this already). Session topic paused for decision making process about Alex (15 minutes). Decision: L2LPs supported Alex, gave Alex confidence to do more, showed teachers the need to challenge him. Alex will do L3 but certain L2 Los will be used to support/scaffold him. Choice of how he presents his work will be important.</li><li>• Focus on Emma. Finding the "thing that interests" Emma (note her interests change) and build a relationship. Decisions made on whole-school Los in Communication and Literacy and Personal Care. Teachers will collaborate outside of session on in-class learning outcome decisions (principal will give time at next staff meeting).</li></ul> <p>Reflection: This is the first session where I have seen teachers take ownership of session and decision-making. Learning from earlier sessions and knowledge of students appear to be connecting. It is evident that learning in sessions being brought back to class otherwise discussion about Alex would not have happened. Participants taking on different L2LPs roles. 1)transactors (accounting, reporting, monitoring) 2) entrepreneurs (advocacy).</p>
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Teachers also reflected on the benefits of their collective agreement that learning outcomes be enacted at the whole-school level. Teacher 3's reflection is representative of her colleagues' feedback on whole-school learning outcomes:

*The fact that—remember we said that we were all going to focus on certain learning outcomes as a school with that student. I really found that helpful because for one of them it was her communication, and I think that's why her CBA [Classroom Based Assessments] was as good, because we all knew the learning outcomes and we all knew her topic and she went out and she practiced with loads of different people and she practiced communicating every day in different situations.*

### **Exploring Concepts of Inclusive Practices**

Another change in practice followed teachers' exploration of inclusive practices. Teachers began using different language when discussing including students. Before the professional development, staff spoke about differentiation for students, for example, adapting worksheets and reducing written work. However, as the professional development progressed, participants, particularly the coordinator and Teachers 3, 4, and 5, began talking about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in sessions, PRLs, and personal communications. In the field notes, there are references to teachers talking about the importance of choice in how Alex could engage with and present his work, teachers' observations that incorporating choice into learning and teaching was helping Alex, and their collective discussion of using UDL instead of differentiation in their assessment planning. In post-professional development interviews, participants spoke about UDL. For example, Teacher 3 reflected:

*Using UDL and building in choice from the beginning made my life easier. I mean, it took time initially but, in the end, it was quicker than making my plan and then looking at my class and thinking “Oh, it won’t work for him and her” and having to, as you [the researcher] said, retrofit my plans. It worked beautifully with my CBA. All students got to choose how they engaged with preparing for and demonstrating their knowledge, and no one stood out for doing something different regardless of if they had a SEN, were doing L2LPs, or were the high achievers in my class.*

### **Planning and Teaching for L2LPs**

There was evidence of teachers engaging with planning and teaching of L2LPs at a deeper level and taking responsibility for learning outcomes in their subjects. For example, Teachers 3 and 4 used a professional-development resource to set targets for students in their English class, while there was evidence of Teacher 4’s growing confidence in enacting L2LPs into her artistic-performance class. Discussions in sessions supported teachers’ comments that they were engaging with planning templates, except for the students’ Learner Profile. However, completed plans were not submitted. The coordinator and principal were conscious that a lot of planning was “still in our heads” and this would be a focus for the year ahead.

Each professional-development session incorporated time for participants to reflect on the previous month. This became, in part, a check-in space for teachers. Learning and teaching of learning outcomes was also evident in post-professional development lessons observed. The five teachers observed demonstrated use of UDL, positive behavior strategies, and collaboration to include students participating in L2LPs in their classes, but also other students who needed additional support. An example of this was Teacher 3’s and Teacher 4’s English class, where their growing ownership of their learning and changing roles was evident. The lesson was co-planned and team-taught with consideration of L2LPs and English learning outcomes throughout. Students worked on individual and group tasks, choice and flexibility was built into the lesson, teachers’ roles interchanged, and students were given opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

### **Factors Facilitating or Hindering Teachers’ Learning for Inclusive Practices**

**Facilitating Factors.** Two main supports for teachers were evidenced in this study: leadership and professional-development design and delivery.

The principal made a significant contribution to the enactment and sustainability of inclusive practices and L2LPs in the school, having brought the professional-development initiative to the staff, as it aligned with their desire to create a community where each person is valued and respected. Once teachers opted into the professional development, the principal allocated discretionary planning time to the professional development and attended professional-development sessions when possible. Policies and structures for collaborative planning and teaching were further developed and, based on teachers’ feedback, specific time was allocated at staff meetings for discussing L2LPs and inclusion in the school. These structures supported the development of a PLC for inclusion within the school, as teachers valued opportunities to work and learn collaboratively in their own context.

The professional-development design and its delivery were another significant contributory factor to the successful enactment and sustainability of L2LPs and inclusive practices in this school. The professional-development participants reported positively on the value of learning over a sustained period that included regular check-ins compared to one-off professional development. Teacher 2 remarked on the benefits of regular professional development: “You do get feedback when you come back in a month and you’re still tackling things, so more sessions is better.” For Teacher 1, the key to engagement was “that we would be drip-fed little bits of information on a regular basis and we

weren't, like, feeling overwhelmed, and sometimes after a professional development day you do feel very overwhelmed."

Another important feature of the professional development was its context-specific and teacher-led design. After each session, teachers were invited to identify what they would like to see in future professional-development sessions, and these responses informed future sessions. All teachers made positive references to this design approach. For example, the coordinator felt:

*This was specific and tailored to our needs as a school, which gave the sessions focus. Often professional development can be general, and you are trying to figure out how it will fit for your students or into your school. This worked because we were focused on our specific students.*

Session pace and facilitator input were guided by the teachers who were present. All participants commented in interviews that this approach motivated them to continue attending sessions. Teacher 7 commented that "this whole team was facilitated and not dictated. Pretty much every other professional development that I have done is [dictated]." Participants liked that there was a structure but that it was flexible and responsive. They identified being asked what everyone wanted to talk about and collective decision-making as factors that made the professional development collaborative.

*And you never told us we were making a haem of this. It's true, like, you were, well, that's really good and you can try this and there was always a solution, always. Questions weren't left unanswered, but you didn't give us the answer, you worked out the solution with us. That doesn't happen at normal professional development. (Teacher 6)*

*There was a structure, but at the same time it was so flexible. I remember especially we were struggling with students, and you asked did we want to park whatever the topic was and spend time on this. But you didn't just move to the next topic after, you went back to the one we'd stopped at and followed it into the next session. (Teacher 2)*

The approach motivated others ( $n = 4$ ) to follow-up with colleagues if they missed a session or had to leave early, "so, when we came in [after missing some of a session] we went straight away, well, I'd go to [colleague's name] and I'd be, what did you discuss, or I'd go online and check it" (Teacher 8).

Another contributing factor to teachers' engagement was the design of the online element of the professional development. Internet and technical difficulties created challenges in initial sessions. However, opportunities for flexibility of time and location in addition to the ability to collaborate with colleagues and communicate with the facilitator were identified. Teacher 9 reported:

*It was a very innovative way of doing it, to be honest, rather than have to be here by yourself, and by the end of it I think it was working very well where we'd talk to you [the researcher] and we'd take the feedback and questions. Sure, I was very impressed with that, to be honest with you.*

**Hindering Factors.** Most teachers interviewed felt previous professional-development experiences did not adequately prepare them for inclusive practices. For example, L2LPs newly qualified teachers ( $n = 2$ ) and PMEs ( $n = 2$ ) spoke about the lack of inclusive education instruction in initial teacher education, with longer serving teachers ( $n = 7$ ) citing dictated and overly structured professional development as reasons teachers may not engage fully. Two years previously, fifteen teachers and one SNA had engaged in the initial two-hour whole-school introduction to L2LPs. However, it appears momentum was lost. Seven teachers, the coordinator, and the principal considered this professional development insufficient, asserted that follow-up support was needed, and favored professional development that is realistic, meaningful, and relevant. All participants wanted to

know how the L2LPs would impact their time in relation to planning and subjects. Teacher 7 noted the need for teachers to understand the rationale for L2LPs and that “professional development needs to include some reasoning for subject teachers why we should do it.”

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper explores the impact of a collaborative whole-school model of professional development on teachers’ learning for inclusive practices. Contrary to the teachers’ previous experiences of transmissive models of education, this professional-development model offered opportunities for teachers to engage at the subject, classroom, and whole-school levels with L2LPs using collaborative enquiry and evidence-based, context-specific, solution-focused approaches.

Findings evidenced teachers’ misconceptions about the nature of L2LPs and student eligibility for L2LPs, resulting in a fundamental lack of understanding of planning for teaching. However, the findings indicated that participants made connections between professional development, gaining knowledge, and putting that knowledge into practice. Their understanding of this relationship is important, as teachers’ knowledge and understanding of inclusive approaches will impact both their and their schools’ capacity to create an inclusive learning environment (Shevlin et al., 2013) and enact L2LPs. As teachers engaged in job-embedded activities and tasks in professional-development sessions, their confidence to identify and plan for students and practices to include L2LPs in their classrooms increased, a consequence of teachers’ experiencing successful student outcomes as a result of introducing new practices (Guskey, 2002).

As teachers engaged in observing their students and trialling activities from the professional-development sessions, their perceptions of students’ needs and abilities changed. There was development in teachers’ practice toward profiling students’ current level of performance based on observation and evidence as opposed to perceptions based on diagnosis. This developing practice and the collective decision-making processes mirror the good practice recommended in the SET allocation model guidelines for teachers (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). The guidelines outline the continuum of support for students and the process for teachers, in collaboration with parents, students, and other relevant stakeholders, to identify the student’s needs, set targets, and monitor and review the student’s outcomes. This is the same process required for L2LPs; thus, a focus on L2LPs and developing practice in planning for L2LPs will support practice for planning for other students with SEN.

Teachers’ desire for collaborative professional development was an important finding and supports the research (Kennedy, 2014; McElearney et al., 2019) backing the role of collaborative professional development in affecting teacher change. Teacher collaboration supports whole-school engagement with policy and initiatives (The Teaching Council, 2016), as the collaborative process serves to form a collective vision, create a common frame of reference, and lead to change in practices (Knoster, 1993). The collaborative nature of this professional development appeared to be a significant contributory factor to teachers’ engagement. This aligns with the principle of ownership by the whole school of the process and shared understanding of inclusion (National Council for Special Education, 2011), as teachers learned through collegial conversations (Brennan et al., 2019; Furner & McCulla, 2018). This has implications for practice at the school and national levels. In schools, the key finding was that time for sustained collaborative planning, collective evaluation of practices, and decision-making regarding L2LPs and in general should be formalized and written into relevant school policies. This could align with schools’ self-evaluation models. At the national level, teacher-support services need to restructure professional-development delivery to focus on the quality of the program delivered rather than the quantity of schools and teachers. Contextual dimensions relevant to policy enactment and effective professional learning should be considered as part of the professional-development design. Furthermore, professional development that moves from the particular school context to

subject-department professional learning communities within the school, progressing to professional learning communities outside the school, may be worth investigating.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to design and critically evaluate a collaborative whole-school model of professional development to enact inclusive practices for L2LPs in a mainstream post-primary school. The findings reported here further demonstrate the capacity for a collaborative whole-school model of professional development to impact teacher change for more inclusive practice. In particular, the findings shed light on the enactment of L2LPs as a model of a more flexible and learner-centered approach to inclusion and on the processes and outcomes associated with teacher professional learning for inclusive practice. As such, this small-scale local initiative presents an example of how, by working collaboratively, a school community might take initial steps to work toward the achievement of Sustainable Goal 4 to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2009). In particular, the study highlighted the potential of facilitated professional development to empower teachers to develop greater levels of knowledge, skills, and experience of inclusive practice to enable collective decision-making and enhanced planning and teaching for all learners.

A subsequent large-scale study encompassing different school contexts to evaluate the impact of this model of professional development on L2LPs enactment would be informative and shed light on the transferability of this study. Furthermore, a large-scale study might give insights into the impact of this model of professional development on teachers’ attitudes to and perceptions of inclusion that the small-scale nature of this study did not capture. Research using this model of professional development for other areas of teachers’ professional learning would also add to these findings. Longitudinal research to assess the sustainability of inclusive practice based on this professional-development model could inform future professional-development design for inclusive practice.

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