

**Investigating the Role of a Community of Practice in Supporting Primary
School Principals to Enact Inclusive School Leadership**

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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List of Abbreviations

AN	Additional Needs
AP1 and AP2	Assistant Principal Grade 1 and Assistant Principal Grade 2
CoP	Community of Practice
CSL	Centre for School Leadership
DE	Department of Education (formerly Department of Education and Skills)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills (changed to Department of Education in October 2020)
DL	Distributed leadership
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004)
ESCI	Education Support Centres Ireland
ESSA	Every Student Succeeds Act
HSE	Health Service Executive
IDEA	Inclusive Development in Education for All
IEF	Inclusion Education Framework
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IL	Instructional leadership
ISL	Inclusive School Leadership
ISM	In School Management
IPPN	Irish Primary Principals Network
JCT	Junior Cycle for Teachers
LAOS	Looking at Our Schools
LSG	Local Support Group
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NIPT	National Induction Programme for Teachers
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OIDE	Professional Development Service for Teachers and School Leaders
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Professional Learning Community
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goal 4
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SET	Special Education Teacher

SETAM	Special Education Teacher Allocation Model
SISL	Supporting Inclusive School Leadership
SISLCoP	Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TC	Teaching Council
TL	Transformational Leadership
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WSE	Whole School Evaluation

Abstract

Investigating the Role of a Community of Practice in Supporting Primary School Principals to Enact Inclusive School Leadership

Aidan Raftery

Inclusive and special education in Ireland is currently at a critical juncture as it moves towards a more inclusive system. The Irish context is particularly nuanced and complex given the ongoing expansion of special class provision while meeting obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This research sought to gain insight into the current perspectives of school leaders in leading special class provision in the context of inclusion. It also sought to investigate if a community of practice (CoP) can support school leaders in developing inclusive school leadership (ISL) in their schools.

This study brought together a group of primary school principals, who have special classes, to form a CoP to support principals in developing ISL in their schools. ISL is defined in this research as all leadership practices which address inequities to build a school community where all learners are meaningfully included. The CoP formed the bounded case study site of this qualitative research with data gathered from semi-structured interviews, audio transcriptions of the CoP meetings and researcher reflections. The study is underpinned by a conceptual framework that reflects a rights-based view of inclusive education, with a professional learning experience designed to support the enactment of ISL and evaluated using a professional learning planning and evaluation framework.

Findings suggest that principals in this study view the current special class provision as a suitable model to support the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system. That said, there are also many challenges to realise a vision of inclusive education that is compatible with Ireland's obligations under the UNCRPD. The findings also highlight the potential of CoPs to support principals in developing their understanding and enactment of ISL. The most significant output of the study is the resulting framework that can support the plan and design of professional learning for ISL.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study was conducted to investigate the role of a Community of Practice (CoP) in supporting Irish primary school principals to enact inclusive school leadership (ISL) in their mainstream schools with special classes. Inclusive and special education in Ireland has undergone significant changes in recent times (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020) with the ongoing expansion of special-class provision (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Travers, 2023). In light of Ireland's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the compatibility of special class provision with inclusive education is worthy of critique. Furthermore, the global movement towards inclusion is clear with access to quality and more meaningful inclusive education now seen as a fundamental right (Crisol Moya, Molonia and Caurcel Cara, 2020). In particular, the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) (UN, 2015, p.4) seeks to ensure 'inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. A key factor in the development of inclusive education in schools is leadership (NCSE, 2011; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Mac Ruairc, 2013; McLeskey, Billingsley and Waldron, 2016; Carter and Abawi, 2018; Ainscow, 2020; DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson, 2021). This research explores the leadership practices that support the development of inclusion in schools.

This chapter sets out the background and rationale to the study. It begins with a statement on the language used throughout the study. Next, some clarifications around terminology are made and working definitions of key concepts used are explained. Next, the policy context from an Irish perspective is outlined with a preview of some of the complexities that have prevailed in inclusive and special education in Ireland. Following this, the research aims and questions are presented with the researcher's personal and professional rationale. The chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

1.2 Statement on Language

This study acknowledges the changing and evolving nature of language used to describe educational needs and disabilities. Taking on board the recommendations of the National Disability Authority (NDA), this study takes a flexible approach by using terms interchangeably in recognition of the varying preferences (NDA, 2022; NCSE, 2024a). For example, some individuals prefer person-first language (e.g. person with disability) whilst others prefer identity-first language (e.g. autistic learner). Similarly, special educational needs (SEN) and additional needs (AN) are both used. SEN is frequently used in Irish policy and legislation. As it could be viewed as a deficit term, AN is sometimes preferred as it may be viewed as a broader and more inclusive term. However, it is important to note that there is no consensus on terminology in this field (NDA, 2022). When highlighting participant views, their preferred pronouns are used. Finally, the term ‘learner’ and ‘student’ are used to describe all young persons enrolled in primary and post-primary schools.

1.3 Defining Inclusion, Inclusive Education and Inclusive School Leadership

Both inclusion and inclusive education are terms that have been grappled with in the literature, without a consensus on what exactly inclusion in education looks like. Some describe it as a process or a journey (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; Armstrong *et al.*, 2010; Ainscow, 2024), some see it as a grandiose term that is a new buzzword for special education (Slee, 2006), while others see it as a feeling or a sense of belonging (Goodall, 2020) that is difficult to conceptualise and quantify.

Ainscow *et al.*, (2006, p. 25) describe inclusion as a ‘never-ending’ process that requires constant critique and reflection. This section does not set out to find an all-encompassing definition of inclusion or inclusive education but more so to provide the reader with a clear understanding of how this research conceptualises these contested terms. In this study, inclusion is defined as a process of identifying and removing barriers to participation in society and education for all those at risk of marginalisation by focusing on their presence, participation and achievement (Ainscow, 2024). In addition, there is a specific focus on the inclusion of learners at risk of ‘marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement’ (Ainscow, 2024, p.30) such as those enrolled in special classes. Inclusive education in this study refers to an approach to teaching and learning that addresses the needs of all learners

and responds to ‘individual differences between learners but avoids the marginalisation that can occur when some students are treated differently (Florian, 2014, p.289).

In developing inclusive education in Ireland, research acknowledges the growing complexities and responsibilities school leaders face (Murphy, 2019; Kenny *et al.*, 2020; Dennehy, Cahill and Moynihan, 2024). School leadership can have a significant impact on student outcomes, both directly and indirectly (Mac Ruairc, 2013; Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020). Furthermore, the contextual factors wherein each school leader practices, add another layer of complexity (Ainscow *et al.*, 2012; Hallinger, 2018; King *et al.*, 2021). The term inclusive school leadership (ISL) is used in this study to describe the leadership practices which promote inclusion in schools (EASNIE, 2015). The concepts of inclusion, inclusive education and ISL are explored further in the literature review (Chapter 2), with the current policy context discussed next.

1.4 Policy Context

Ireland has experienced many changes in special education policy (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008; Kenny *et al.*, 2020) in response to the international discourse and the move towards more inclusive education systems. SEN provision in Ireland and many of their European counterparts offer a multi-track provision system with mainstream and separate specialist provision available (Rix *et al.*, 2013). In contrast, Italy and Norway, as per policy, advocate a full inclusion model whereby all students attend their local school and there is no education available for students in separate settings (Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo, 2015). These countries also share similar prevalence rates of young people identified as having an additional or special educational need, making up over a quarter of the school-aged population (McCoy, Banks and Shevlin 2016; Cosgrove *et al.*, 2014).

Much of the policy changes in SEN provision internationally share the common goal of developing a more inclusive system. In Ireland, more recent policy changes to the provision of special education teaching resources to support the inclusion of learners with SEN, such as the special education teacher allocation model (SETAM), advocate for a more equitable and rights-based approach (Kenny *et al.*, 2020). In summary, children with SEN are served by a continuum of provision in Ireland which ranges from full-time placement in a

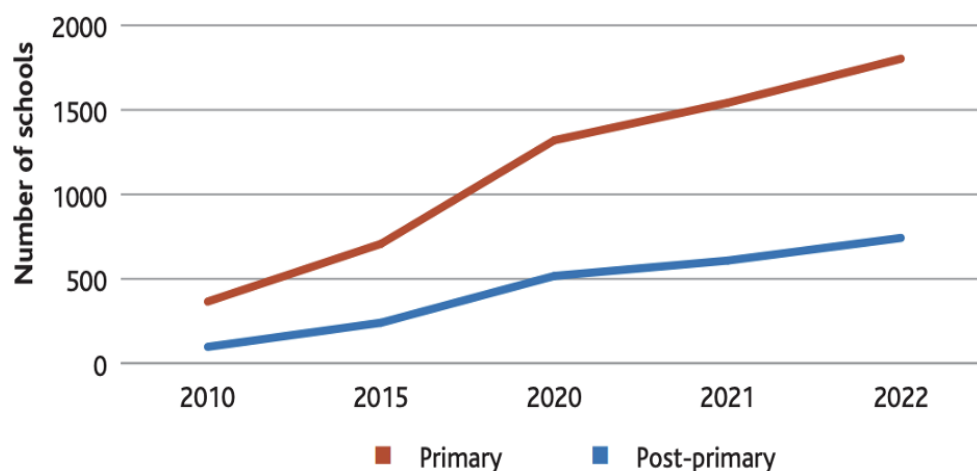
mainstream school to full-time enrolment in a special class or school (Rose and Shevlin, 2020). The concept of a continuum was first introduced in the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) report (Government of Ireland, 1993) and continues to be the language used today to represent Ireland's support provision for learners with SEN.

Despite the policy shifts towards a more inclusive system, the number of special classes in Irish primary schools continues to rise (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Travers, 2023; NCSE, 2024a). This arguably mirrors the traditional policy shifts internationally in SEN where, despite fundamental changes in policy, practices remain consistent and unchanged (Fulcher, 2015). Special class provision is intended to be a feature of a continuum of support to meet the learning needs of children with more complex needs in a mainstream setting. These learners are considered to be those who are 'unable to access the curriculum in a mainstream class, even with support, for most or all of their school day' (NCSE, 2016, p.2). In light of policy moves towards inclusive education there has been a lot of focus on separate special education provision, prompting several reports and evaluations on special class provision (Ware *et al.*, 2009; McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2016; Banks *et al.*, 2016). Of note was a progress report, '*Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes*' which promoted a move towards a full inclusion model, similar to that of New Brunswick in Canada (NCSE, 2019) where all children attend their local school regardless of their level of need (AuCoin *et al.*, 2020). However, through consultation with stakeholders, it was also acknowledged Ireland was not ready for such a significant move which would effectively see the end of special classes and schools. Special schools and classes are now being considered as part of the 'progressive realisation' of inclusive education in Ireland (NCSE, 2024a, p.14). This policy direction comes at a crossroads for inclusive and special education at a time when Ireland's commitment to the UNCRPD is under scrutiny, along with a review of the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (DE, 2021a). The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004, p.7) provided children with SEN the right to an education in an 'inclusive environment' unless doing so would not be in the best interests of the child (as determined by an assessment) or impact 'the effective provision of education for the other children whom the child is to be educated with'.

Although Ireland ratified the UNCRPD in March 2018, which promotes a fully inclusive system, there has still been a steady increase in special classes (Figure 1.1). In 2020 alone, there were 126 new special classes established at primary level (McCoy, 2021) and figure

1.1 highlights the significant growth in special classes in primary schools from 2010 (n = 356) to 2022 (n = 1807).

Figure 1.1 Growth in Special Class Provision (NCSE, 2024a, p.6)



The Education Act (Government of Ireland, 2018) granted the power to the Minister of Education, in consultation with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), to mandate schools to open special classes if they felt there was a need in the locality. This power was further strengthened in 2022 when the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act (Government of Ireland, 2022) was signed into law. This shortened the process known as section 37A which is invoked when the Minister for Education and NCSE can compel a school to open a special class. It would be forgivable for scholars to find this confusing in a climate of inclusive policies. This is what Shevlin and Banks (2021, p.4) refer to as the ‘crux of the inclusion debate’. This is explored further in Chapter 2.

The law was introduced during a time of pressure from advocacy groups on the Minister for Education to increase special class placements. In particular, autism advocacy groups have called for an increase in special class placements (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). This category of special class accounts for approximately 89% of all special classes in primary and post-primary schools in Ireland (Travers, 2023). Some are critical of the expansion of special classes (Banks and McCoy, 2017; DE, 2022b) against a backdrop of a commitment by the Irish Government to the principles of the UNCRPD. Other scholars argue this form of specialist provision is necessary (e.g. Kauffmann and Hornby, 2020) and can co-exist within an inclusive system (e.g. Travers, 2023). This conflict of interest sets a challenge to school leaders with special classes in creating a system of provision that is inclusive. This provided part of the selection criteria for participants of this study as these school leaders

are at the coal face of creating an inclusive school where research suggests segregation still resides in the form of internal segregation (Banks *et al.*, 2016).

The current guidelines available to schools for establishing a special class describe it as ‘part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex special educational needs to be educated, in smaller class groups, within their local mainstream school’ (NCSE, 2016, p.4). The guidelines focus on the practicalities of opening a class, along with answers to questions related to resourcing and eligibility. Whilst the document does promote the inclusion of special class learners amongst their mainstream peers to the greatest extent possible, there is little reference on how to do this other than a signposting to other documents. Studies from an Irish context which examined the experiences of teachers and principals in the education of learners attending special classes for children with autism, found that once classes were established, the guidance and support promised were found lacking (McCormack, 2019; Dennehy, 2023).

A primary focus of this research is to investigate the leadership experiences and practices which promote the inclusion of learners from the special class with the wider mainstream population, therefore special classes will be defined as classes in mainstream schools which cater specifically for a number of students from a specific disability category (Ware *et al.*, 2009). The most common example of a special class is one for autistic learners, which is the most prevalent category amongst participant schools and primary or post-primary schools in Ireland (NCSE, 2022). A psychological report recommending placement in these classes is a requirement for enrolment, which is granted by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) who assesses each application to ensure they meet the Department of Education (DE) criteria (NCSE, 2016). Each class for this category of SEN has a student-teacher ratio of 6:1 accompanied by two special needs assistants (SNAs) to meet the care needs of the student.

Inclusive education and special education provision are at a crucial juncture in Ireland (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). Policymakers are now looking at special classes and schools having a developmental role in the ‘phased development of the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system for Ireland’ (NCSE, 2024a, p.14). It is argued that this developmental role is a possibility but must be carefully planned within a rights-based framework (Travers, 2023). Given the essential role of school leaders in special class provision, the next section looks at how they are supported in this regard.

1.5 Special Class Provision and Professional Learning for School Leaders

The role of leadership in special class policy is acknowledged as a key driver in the inclusive implementation of such provision (Travers, 2023; NCSE, 2024a). However, how school leaders are supported in this regard is unclear. This research is premised on the theory that if teacher professional learning (PL) is crucial for promoting inclusion (Avramidis and Kalyva, 2007; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Messiou and Ainscow, 2015) then PL for school leaders should also be a priority, given the role of leadership in student outcomes (Day *et al.*, 2016; Hallinger and Kovačević, 2019; Leithwood, *et al.*, 2020). The Centre for School Leaders (CSL) was set up in Ireland in September 2015 (now amalgamated with Oide, 2022) with a vision to provide effective PL opportunities to aspiring and current school leaders across primary and post-primary schools (Government of Ireland, 2020). The CSL sought to create ‘a community of school leaders, who feel supported and valued as professionals and who have access to high-quality professional development’ (CSL, 2022, para. 2). However, there is currently no requirement for school leaders in Ireland to have formal qualifications nor are there any requirements to engage in ongoing career development (Murphy, 2020). Therefore, their willingness to engage in PL is largely dependent on their own motivation (van Veelen, Slegers and Endedijk, 2017).

Much of the research on school principals from an Irish context is focused on leadership preparation (Murphy, 2020) and the career pathways of principals (Sugrue, 2014; Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016). There is a paucity of research on their PL needs, particularly for mid-career and more experienced principals, despite research highlighting the need for it (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Fitzpatrick Associates, 2018). PL for school leaders and principals needs to be sustained throughout their career, based on their needs and context (Lambert and Bouchamma, 2021). Furthermore, there is limited research on what PL needs are required for principals to lead inclusive schools (Sider, Maich and Morvan, 2017) and a dearth of research in the Irish context, despite the acknowledgement that it is needed (NCSE, 2024a).

The Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) is a professional body for Irish primary school leaders which is recognised by the DE as an official education partner (IPPN, 2018). Part of its remit is to support school leaders at a local and county level, and present the concerns and issues raised by members at a local level. Local Support groups (LSGs) have

been formed throughout the country with voluntary access to such a group available to every principal and deputy principal in the country (IPPN, 2022). Since COVID, researchers have noted an increasing prevalence of such networks between and across education systems (Harris, Azorín and Jones, 2023). Whilst there is no formal structure to the operation and facilitation of such groups, they do generally consist of discussions on local issues, have a PL element and are a networking opportunity (Kerins, 2022). The researcher is a founding member of one such group that was established for principals of mainstream schools with special classes. Whilst anecdotal evidence existed on the value that members put on this group, questions arose for the researcher around its effectiveness in supporting the inclusion of these learners in the wider school context. This led to the development of this research study on supporting school leaders to develop more inclusive schools.

1.6 Research Aims and Questions

The overall aim of this research was to explore to what extent a CoP could support school leaders to enact ISL and make their schools more inclusive of learners enrolled in special classes. This aim was supported by three main research questions:

- What are school leaders' current experiences of leading mainstream primary schools with special classes in the context of inclusion?
- What leadership practices and activities are principals who lead special classes in primary schools engaging in?
- To what extent is a CoP an effective model of professional learning to support principals in enacting ISL in their primary schools?

1.7 Personal and Professional Rationale

The researcher is a practising principal of a mainstream school with two special classes for autistic learners. The opening of special classes was a significant feature of the researcher's leadership career to date and although they were opened in the spirit of inclusion, many questions arose regarding how inclusive such provision is or could be. This also coincided with a change in the special education teacher (SET) allocation model for children with AN

in mainstream schools (DES, 2017). This prompted a post-graduate research project that examined principal perspectives of leading inclusive and special education under this new model (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Findings of that research revealed a commitment to principles of inclusion amongst principal participants and prompted the researcher to dig deeper and look at the inclusion of learners who were deemed more complex and required the support of a special class setting. Given the discourse on inclusive and special education, the researcher was struck by the conflicting policy message of ratifying the UNCRPD and the ongoing expansion of special class provision. Similarly, the researcher witnessed children thrive in the special class setting but also wondered if this could have happened in the mainstream setting if given the right support. The researcher identified the key role played by principals in sharing a vision for special classes in the context of inclusion and thus set about researching how school leaders could be supported to make their inclusive vision a reality. The researcher's positionality will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

1.8 Thesis Outline

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the current landscape of inclusive education and the predicament of where special class provision sits within this context. It also presented the research questions this study intends to address. Chapter 2 synthesises the pertinent literature relating to the research topic outlined in Chapter 1 and delves further into special class provision in the context of inclusion and inclusive education. It highlights leadership practices associated with developing inclusive schools and the PL needs of school leaders to support this process. In Chapter 3, the conceptual framework borne from the literature review is outlined and the researcher's positionality is discussed along with the methodological approach employed to answer the research questions. Next, Chapter 4 details the findings from the study which are organised into the three main themes of special class provision in the context of inclusion, ISL and the impact of the PL experience. Chapter 5 presents a detailed discussion of the findings in tandem with the literature that clarifies the contribution of this study. It also proposes a PL for ISL planning framework that is derived from the research and can be used by practitioners, academics and PL facilitators. Finally, Chapter 6 brings a conclusion to the thesis by clarifying how the research questions have been answered and making recommendations for practice, policy and further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

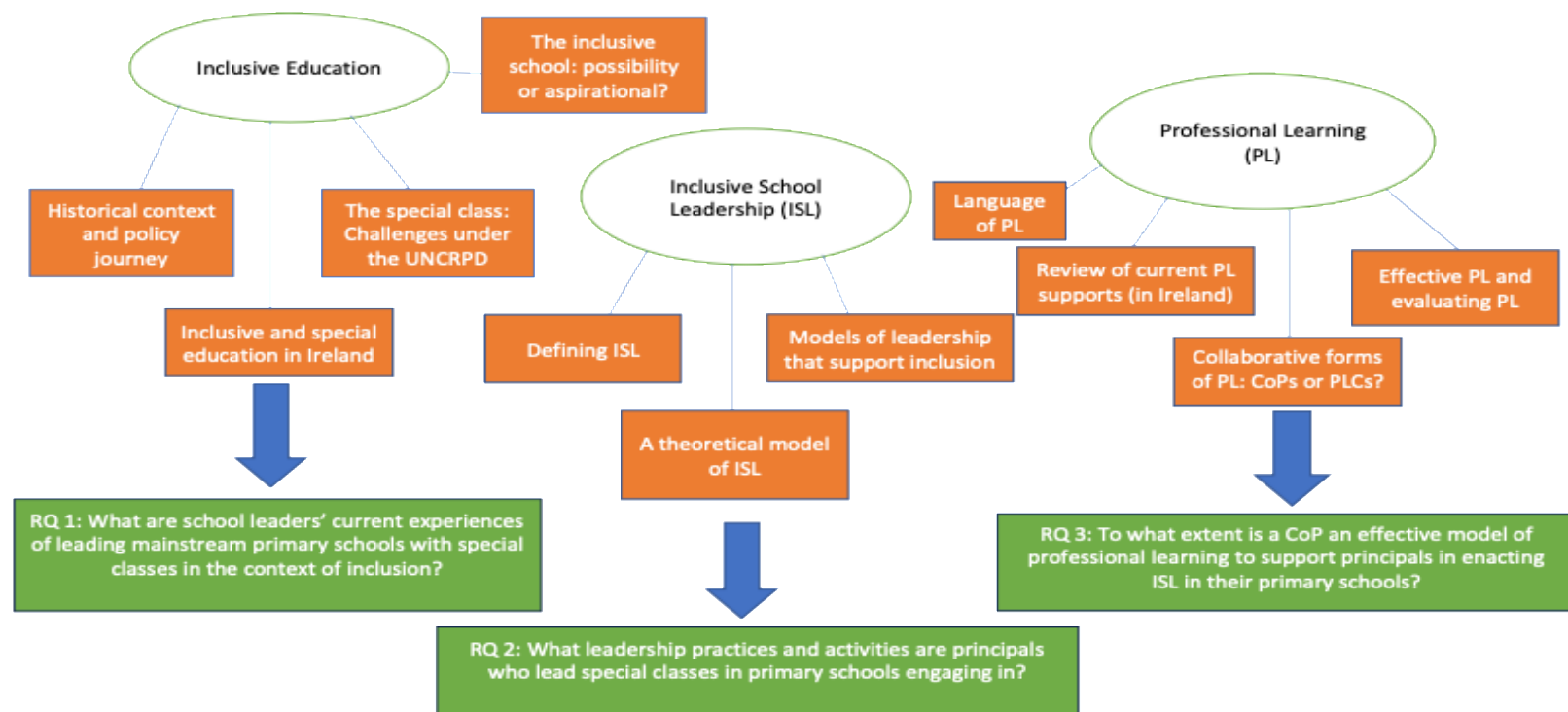
2.1 Introduction

This study sought to develop ISL amongst a group of primary school principals through engagement in a CoP. This chapter reviews the literature and provides a contextual background to the research aims and questions. Firstly, the literature review strategy that guided the process is outlined. Next, section 1 discusses the developments in inclusive education internationally and inclusive education policy in Ireland. Section 2 focuses on leadership practices to support inclusion, followed by a theory of ISL which emerged from the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) project (EASNIE, 2015). Finally, section 3 considers the literature on professional learning (PL) for inclusive education, focusing on PL for school leaders. The chapter concludes with a brief synthesis of the chapter and introduces the conceptual framework of the study which is further explored in Chapter 3.

2.1.1 Literature Review Strategy

In reviewing the literature, the literature review strategy (Figure 2.1) illustrates a coherent structure as to how the literature was explored and how it feeds into the research questions.

Figure 2.1 Literature Review Strategy Map



Journal databases were searched (DCU Library), along with Google Scholar and the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), using the keywords associated with the research topic: Inclusion; inclusive education; leadership for inclusion; inclusive school leadership; professional learning; professional development; communities of practice; professional learning communities; professional learning for school leaders; special classes.

For the most part, the search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published in the last twelve years (2012 – 2024). However, seminal articles and books relating to inclusive education, leadership and professional learning were also included. Similarly, key policy documents from Ireland and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE), of which Ireland is a member, were included in the review as they have a key role in the context of the current and future landscape in which school leaders are currently working in. Further documents were also selected from bibliographical lists found in relevant articles and books. Given the extensive literature available on the topic of inclusion, the search was narrowed to focus on the inclusion of learners with SEN in primary and post-primary schools, as these learners (those who attend special classes) are the focus of the research.

2.2 Section 1: Inclusive Education

This section is subdivided into three parts that explore the historical context, specifics relating to inclusive education in Ireland, special class provision and what an inclusive school might look like.

2.2.1 International and Historical Context: From Integration to Inclusion

The international discourse on inclusion was initially rooted in the civil rights movement in the 1960s where the philosophy of segregated education began to be challenged (Winter and O’Raw, 2010). In the education sector, the concept of inclusion was first introduced as a response to criticisms of integration theory, whereby students were merely placed in a mainstream setting, without due regard to the quality of this placement for the individual (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006). In most countries, inclusion is at the forefront of educational

policy reforms but also remains the most complex construct to implement, given the many interpretations (Ainscow, 2005; Lindsay, 2007; Hardy and Woodcock, 2015). Its prevalence in policy development in education since the enactment of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) has led to exponential growth in academic interest and publications (Hernández-Torrano, Somerton and Helmer, 2022). However, despite the popularity of the concept amongst scholars, Shyman (2015) argues that capturing the concept of inclusion as an educational principle and a practical application is one of the most challenging tasks in the educational research field.

According to Vislie (2003), the linguistic shift to inclusion was cemented following the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The main reason for this was the global orientation of the educational policy agenda, with previous policy in relation to integration focused on western countries only (Vislie, 2003). At the Salamanca Conference, 92 governments and 25 international organisations agreed on the future policy directions needed to promote inclusive education (Ainscow, Slee and Best, 2019). It has been used as a conceptual framework for policymakers in Europe and further afield, guided by the key principle of inclusive education being the most effective form of schooling for the majority of children (Meijer and Watkins, 2019). However, some critics argue that its vague interpretation of inclusion allows for a variety of interpretations (Magnússon, 2019). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) called on governments to adopt the principles of inclusive education, whereby all children are enrolled in regular schools ‘unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise’ (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix). The focus of the Salamanca conference was special needs education, however, what emerged was a broader concept of inclusion (to include all at risk of marginalisation) which emphasised education for all in their local communities (Ainscow, Slee and Best, 2019) with the aim of reforming education systems to enable mainstream schools to cater for all (Ainscow, 2024). However, despite the statement placing obligations on member states to move towards inclusive education, the statement was arguably too vague in terms of what inclusive education is and how to do it (Graham *et al.*, 2023) and this resulted in inconsistent applications in human rights law and enabling countries to interpret as they saw fit (Byrne, 2013).

As countries grapple with implementing inclusive education policies, it is likely that the implementation of these policies will vary depending on how inclusion is conceptualised and practised given the unique history, culture and school structure of each country (Ottesen, 2013). From an Irish perspective, Merrigan and Senior (2021) maintain that the

conceptualisation of inclusion where the focus is on the location of where the child is educated is detrimental to the positive impact special settings can have on the entire education system. That aside, they emphasise the right to an appropriate education that meets the needs of the child as a priority in the inclusion debate. What is less clear, is how an appropriate education can align with the child's right to an inclusive education.

There is an ongoing debate over the terminology around special versus inclusive education, or their necessary co-existence in the inclusion debate (Florian, 2019; Hornby, 2020; Kauffman and Hornby, 2020). Special education is usually associated with a child or young person having a learning difficulty or a disability that requires additional support or something different to what is offered to peers of a similar age (Florian, 2019). Inclusive education on the other hand, as promoted by the Salamanca Statement, is a more universal approach to improving the quality of education for all learners that takes place in the local school (Meijer and Watkins, 2016). Some argue that inclusive education is simply a rebranding of special education (Slee, 2013) evidenced by the change in language within university programmes, whilst others argue the shift in terminology represents the paradigm shift of countries supporting the rights-based approach to including all children in a 'mainstream' setting (Meijer and Watkins, 2016).

A rights-based view of inclusive education is reflected in Article 24 of the UNCPRD. Signatories are obliged to provide access to education for all and provide individual supports as necessary, with the onus on institutions to adapt (Murphy *et al.*, 2023). However, how exactly to do this inclusively is less clear (de Beco, 2022). To provide guidance on this, General Comment No. 4 (UN, 2016) was issued to clarify that modifications and changes to facilitate all learners should be done to ensure all learners can be educated alongside their peers in their locality. The comment is particularly relevant to special classes as they define segregation as where 'the education of students with disabilities is provided in separate environments designed or used to respond to a particular impairment' (UN, 2016, p.2). This is arguably simplistic as education systems grapple with the complex issue of meeting individual needs and the flexibility needed to do so (Travers, 2023).

Florian (2019) points out an important assumption of inclusive education is that mainstream education is an appropriate setting, or as Mac Ruairc (2013, p. 12) describes, inclusion implies a 'bringing in and therefore carries within it a presupposition of a centre/an ideal

centre or a place worthy of being brought into'. The success or failure of inclusive education systems is arguably down to the ability of mainstream schools to educate all children in their local communities (Ainscow, 2020). The main challenges for schools in this regard is to support the presence, participation and achievement of all learners. Presence is concerned with the location of where the learner is educated; participation relates to the quality of their experiences; and achievement is linked to their outcomes (Ainscow, 2024).

In the United States, inclusive education has had a similar journey to its European neighbours, with enabling legislation, most recently of note is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 which aims to provide free and appropriate education to all students, regardless of their ability (Tahir, Doelger and Hynes, 2019). Similarly, Australia's move towards an inclusive system accelerated after the introduction of the Salamanca statement (Forlin, 2006). Whilst international policy directives advocate for more inclusive schooling, the way in which it is defined and conceptualised differs. Tisdall and Riddell (2006) offer the explanation that individual historical customs and practices influence policy implementation around inclusion.

Given the wide-ranging conceptualisations and applications of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2005; Slee, 2011; Shyman, 2015; Azorín and Ainscow, 2020; Goodall, 2020; NCSE, 2024a) it is important to adopt a single definition that fits the context of this research. Although there is an argument that focusing on a particular group of learners is contrary to the principles of inclusion (Messiou, 2017), this research is targeting principals of schools with special classes and as a result, the broader definitions of inclusion are potentially too wide an angle to stay within the scope of the study. Furthermore, acknowledging inclusion as a journey (Ainscow, *et al.*, 2006; Frederickson and Cline, 2015), enables this view of inclusion to align with Ireland's current standpoint at a critical juncture (Tiernan, 2021) of policy and legislative reform toward a more inclusive system. Therefore, inclusion in this research can be seen as involving 4 key features:

- Inclusion as a process/journey
- Identification and removal of barriers
- Presence, participation and achievement
- Particular emphasis on groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation and exclusion (such as those enrolled in special classes)

These key features align with the work of Ainscow *et al.*, (2006) and can be seen as principles that underpin the work of the school as opposed to a set of guidelines or policies. These principles are useful also to support the investigation within this research that looks at the compatibility of the operationalisation of special classes and their alignment with the child's right to inclusive education enshrined in Article 24 of the UNCPRD. Prior to these movements towards principles of inclusion, special education provision in Ireland resided in the peripheries of the general education system (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011) and the policy and legislative background to this is examined next.

2.2.2 Inclusive and Special Education in Ireland

The international discourse of inclusion became more prominent in Ireland in the early 1990s after a number of landmark reports and litigation. Table 2.1 summarises the key reports, legislation and policy that impacted inclusive and special education in Ireland since the SERC report in 1993. This section then explains some of the more pertinent aspects of this summary.

Table 2.1. Key Inclusive and Special Education Reports, Legislation and Policy in Ireland

Year	Name	Impact
1993	Special Education Review Committee (SERC Report)	Very influential on policy and practice: introduced the language of 'continuum' of provision to support SEN All children have the right to an 'appropriate education' First recommendation of students with SEN to be 'integrated' with mainstream peers
1993	O' Donoghue Case	The responsibility of education for all children lay with the Department of Education (and not the Department of Health)
1996	Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities	Rejected medical (deficit) based view of disability and promoted a social model and advocated for an appropriate education for learners with disabilities in the 'least restrictive environment'
1998	Education Act	First legislative step towards inclusive education and parental choice over what school they go to
2000	Education Welfare Act	Ensures every child is receiving a 'minimum' level of educational provision
2000-2004	Equal Status Act	Obliges schools to provide reasonable accommodations to meet the needs of learners with SEN
2004	EPSEN Act	Framework for developing inclusive learning environments; established National Council for special Education (NCSE); Introduction of SENOs
2005	Disability Act	Statutory obligation on public service providers to support access for people with disabilities
2007	Signed up to UNCRPD	Commitment to principles of inclusive education
2018	Ratification of UNCRPD	Firmly put the issue of special class and school provision under scrutiny
2018	Education (Admission to Schools) Act	Granted the power to the Minister of Education, in consultation with the NCSE to mandate schools to open special classes if they felt there was a need in the locality
2022	Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act	Shortened the process for compelling schools to open a special class
2024	EPSEN Act under review	Currently carrying out a consultation with stakeholders to inform review (DE, 2024a)

When Ireland adopted and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1992 (UN, 1989), it provided the impetus to pursue a rights-based vision of inclusive education (Kenny *et al.*, 2020). Subsequently, the SERC report recommended the provision of education for children with SEN as more appropriate in the mainstream, except ‘where individual circumstances make this impracticable’ (Government of Ireland, 1993, p.20). In such circumstances, there are alternative options available in the form of special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools which have been available since the 1970s (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). This report recommended mainstream schooling for children with SEN to be part of Department of Education and Skills (DES) policy, a responsibility which previously rested with the Department of Health. The shift from departmental responsibility arose from a number of landmark court cases in the 1990s. One such case, in particular, had a significant effect on the rights of children with severe/profound general learning disabilities. In the *O’ Donoghue v. Minister for Health (1993)* case, the state argued that the child with severe/profound general learning difficulties was ‘ineducable’ and maintained the responsibility of his education rested with the Department of Health (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). Despite this defence, the judge ruled in favour of O’ Donoghue and ordered the state to make the necessary modifications to teaching and curriculum to enable the child to access an appropriate education (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). These judgements started to challenge the medical-deficit approach and this view of disability was further challenged by the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (National Disability Authority, 1996) which published a report recommending a social model of disability and the creation of more inclusive learning environments (Rose and Shevlin, 2021). In response to the O’Donoghue case, a new definition of SEN appeared in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.8) which described SEN as ‘the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students’. It also strengthened the parent/caregiver voice by giving parents the right to choose where their child is educated. Griffin and Shevlin (2011) argue that the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Government of Ireland, 2005) built upon these earlier initiatives and are arguably the most significant pieces of legislation in the area of inclusive and special education in Ireland in terms of enabling and improving participation in education despite the shortcomings in the full implementation of the EPSEN Act (Kenny *et al.*, 2020).

The EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) was a major milestone in enabling legislation and in establishing the NCSE to support and oversee the education of children with SEN (Rose and Shevlin, 2020). It also specifically referenced inclusive education as the preferred option for students with SEN. However, certain elements of the EPSEN Act, relating to assessment and subsequent individual educational planning (IEP) development, have yet to be implemented to date, arguably due to the financial implications (Shevlin, 2016). This is an added complication in providing clear pathways for access to appropriate educational provisions (Rose *et al.*, 2017) and further raises concerns over the equity of access which contributes to the inconsistencies reported in their implementation in schools (Rose *et al.*, 2015). Acknowledging the shortcomings of certain sections not being implemented, the DE announced a full review of the EPSEN Act to ensure the act is fully operational and reflective of the lived experiences of students and families (DE, 2021a). They are currently in the process of a public consultation to gather information from all stakeholders who are impacted by the legislation (DE, 2024a).

In 2007, Ireland signed up to the UNCRPD but this was not formally ratified until 2018 (Banks, 2021). The purpose of this convention was to call on signatories to ensure that persons with all types of disabilities enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This delay in ratification, coupled with elements of the EPSEN Act yet to be implemented, is arguably indicative of a troubled landscape for policymakers in the area (Kenny *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, in the same year, the Education (Admission to Schools) Act (Government of Ireland, 2018) reinforced the provision of segregated education by outlining the steps the NCSE can take if they feel a special class is warranted in a certain catchment area or school.

An interesting point to note is the fact that the drafting of the UNCRPD spanned over five years. The members of the Ad Hoc Committee could not reach a consensus on inclusive education, which may be a factor in the continued separate provisions such as special schools and classes, despite inclusive settings remaining the key goal (Kanter, 2019). However, coupled with General Comment No. 4 (UN, 2016) governments are now more accountable for policy and practice concerning inclusive education (Graham *et al.*, 2023). From an Irish perspective, feedback from the stakeholder consultations on Ireland's first report to the UNCRPD committee noted some stakeholders viewed the draft report as a reflection of Ireland's aspirations as opposed to the reality on the ground (Centre for

Effective Services, 2021). A closer look at special class provision may provide some insight as to why.

2.2.3 Special Class Provision

Initial research into the role of special schools and classes in Ireland (Ware *et al.*, 2009) recommended the continuation of the provision of special classes and special schools. However, this recommendation was made primarily because of the lack of evidence that mainstream schools could provide a better educational provision to the students who attended these placements. There may have been an assumption amongst stakeholders (e.g. parents) that special classes offered a specialist education that could not be replicated in a mainstream setting. More recently, in a progress report on the same topic, the NCSE (2019, p.5) argued that the more ‘methodologically robust studies’ indicate that students with SEN in mainstream settings have better short and long-term outcomes compared to those in special class placements. Following a further NCSE commissioned review in 2024, notwithstanding the limitations of the literature reviewed, the authors concluded that students with SEN in mainstream placements ‘achieve a greater percentage of school qualifications’ in comparison to those in special classes (NCSE, 2024b). However, in their policy advice paper (NCSE, 2024a) the report recommends the continuation of special classes and schools, ‘pending the full realisation of an inclusive school system’ (NCSE, 2024a, p. 17).

In an argument for the development of special education in tandem with inclusive education systems, Kauffmann and Hornby (2020) propose that these special classes provide unique advantages such as reduced class ratio, specialist interventions, and an emphasis on functional skills. They also concluded that special schools and classes provide a better option for students with more complex needs in terms of social and academic outcomes. Hornby (2020) also argues for a move away from the ‘one or the other’ argument and calls for a synthesis of best practices in both inclusive and special education. Citing the example of Finland, a country hailed for having a model of educational excellence and equity (Sahlberg, 2021), Hornby (2020, p.9) argues for an ‘inclusive special education approach’ where children are mainly catered for in mainstream classrooms, but some learners will still be taught in other classrooms in the same location. In the absence of robust empirical data in the field, coupled with variances in practices amongst these settings, the debate over

what placement is better will likely continue to remain unresolved. This dilemma of placement has been highlighted by Norwich, (2008; 2014) who illustrates the tensions between labelling differences to enable or stigmatise and labelling differences to participate and protect. These dilemmas underscore issues in relation to learners with SEN that focus on identification of need (diagnosis), curriculum design (differentiated approach) and the optimal environment (school placement) to implement this (Norwich, 2014).

A closer look at the evaluation of SEN provision may provide some insights into the complexities of the placement dilemma. The Inspectorate division of the DE is responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education (DE, 2022a). The Chief Inspector's report provided analysis and reflection on the quality of education provision in schools and other educational settings between 2016 and 2020 (DE, 2022b). The report highlighted that special class provision for children and young people with autism is having limited success in the goal of full inclusion for these learners (DE, 2022b). This report drew from another Inspectorate report which evaluated 65 special classes at primary level and 20 at post-primary level (DES, 2020). Issues around enrolment were highlighted, with a suggestion that learners with less complex needs were being prioritised, which is contrary to the vision the DE has for special classes, whereby places are reserved for those with the most complex needs. However, the lack of clarity around the term 'complex needs' is something which needs to be explored for schools to fully understand the profile of learners these classes are intended for (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). The term is also used in other special education support provisions such as the SETAM (DES, 2017). Again, complex needs are not clearly defined in this circular, nor is it defined in the updated version (DE, 2024b), other than comparing it with what was previously known as 'low incidence' disabilities and those learners who are identified by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Questions arise here over the equity of access given the reports on waiting lists for HSE services and access to disability teams (Cosgrove *et al.*, 2014; Rose *et al.*, 2017). In the previous allocation model, low-incidence disabilities were described as disability categories defined as those 'not found in every school' (DES, 2005, p.1) and each category of disability equated to a number of support teaching hours per week (e.g. 5 hours for students with autism). The persistence of terms such as low incidence and complex needs perpetuate the medical view on disability, where disability is viewed as a deficit within the individual (O'Gorman and Drudy, 2010). Such terminology can act as a potential barrier to the inclusive education system envisioned by the DE. This

deficit view is also used for the allocation of other resources such as assistive technology (DES, 2013). The SETAM (DES, 2017) marked a distinct departure from diagnosis-based resource allocation to allocating supports based on need. However, the continued separate allocation models may restrict the autonomy of schools in how they allocate support to those considered. The latest iteration of the SETAM re-emphasised the separate nature of these models (DE, 2024b). This may be a missed opportunity to combine the two models and create a more flexible model for schools (Travers, 2023).

It is important to draw a distinction between special schools and special classes attached to mainstream schools as both models of provision have emerged in response to categories of learners for whom mainstream education is deemed inadequate to meet their needs. Special schools have no official definition in Irish policy or legislation, other than a reference in the SERC report (Government of Ireland, 1993) which described them as primary schools that can cater for children aged 4 – 18. Most special schools in Ireland have been established by religious orders, voluntary bodies or parent groups (Rose and Shevlin, 2021). In terms of the continuum of provision for children with SEN in Ireland, there may be a perception that they are a ‘placement of last resort’ for those students for whom other placements don’t work out (Merrigan and Senior, 2021, p.6). Similarly, the definition of a special class is difficult to define within the Irish education system (Ware *et al.*, 2009). Special classes initially emerged in the 1970s in city schools as a result of voluntary groups not being able to secure sufficient numbers to warrant the sanctioning of a special school (McGee, 2004). The DES released a circular in 1999 to introduce new procedures for establishing special classes which included 13 categories of disability along with the student-teacher ratios assigned to each category (DES, 1999). The ‘Inspector’ of the department had responsibility for sanctioning a special class, a responsibility that was handed over to the NCSE upon its establishment in 2005. The NCSE issued new guidance in 2007 to explain the application process for establishing such a class (Ware *et al.*, 2009).

The motivation for schools to open a special class is unclear in the literature. Some argue it is a more suitable environment due to factors such as smaller class size, facilitation of specialist pedagogy and assessment and more flexible learning spaces (NCSE, 2016, DES, 2020; Croyden *et al.*, 2019; Hebron and Bond, 2017). Others argue that placing a child in a special class is an administrative convenience (Thomas, 2013) and a move away from focusing on building teacher efficacy for inclusive practice (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). In terms of the PL needs of special class teachers, a study on Irish primary special class

teachers revealed feelings of being ill-prepared and unsupported in teaching this setting (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022). In particular, Finlay *et al.* (2022) recommended a compulsory PL programme for teaching in this setting by integrating it into undergraduate programmes or ongoing PL for experienced teachers to prepare them for the particular challenges as well as a support mechanism to alleviate feelings of stress and isolation. In a two-phase study commissioned by the NCSE to examine and evaluate the operation of special classes, an initial lack of awareness around the resourcing and establishment procedures of special classes was evidenced among participant principals (McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2016). This could be considered a reason for the lack of consistency across schools in how special classes are structured within the mainstream environment. Also, there is little guidance for schools on how they can make a special class inclusive and support is needed in this regard (Shevlin, 2023).

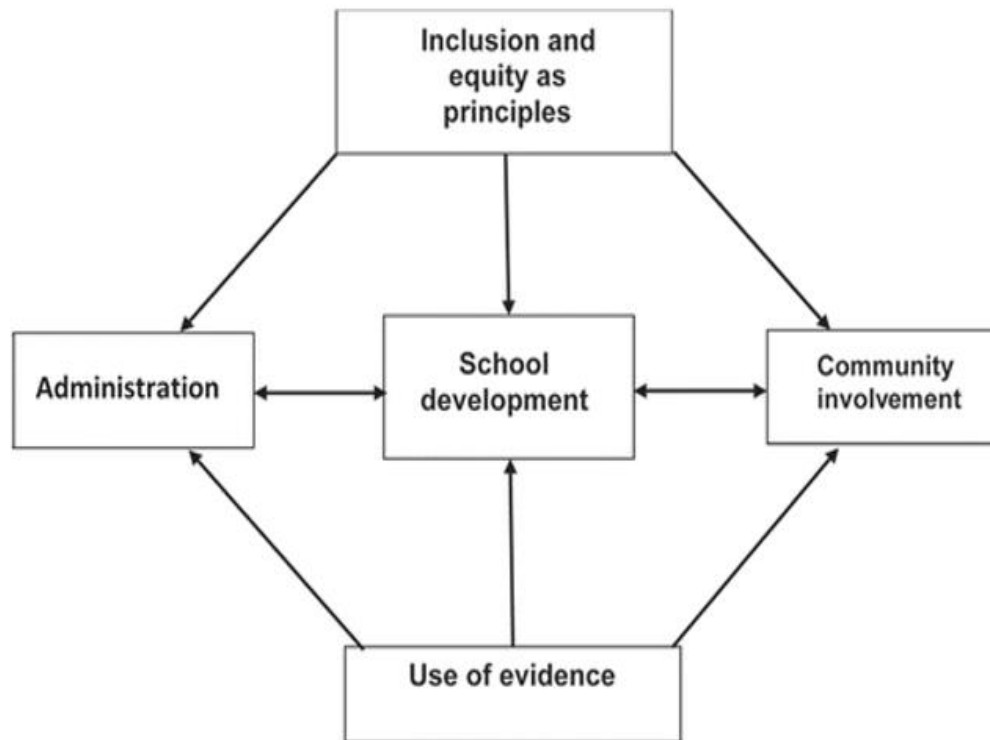
Often an overlooked perspective in the inclusion discourse is the voice of the student (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015; Messiou, 2019). In a small qualitative study on the educational experiences of autistic children, inclusion as a concept emerged as ‘a feeling, not a place’ where the location is irrelevant (mainstream or otherwise), and the emphasis is on a sense of belonging (Goodall, 2020). Using the data from a large study on the role of special classes in Ireland (Ware *et al.*, 2009), an analysis of the interviews and focus groups with students revealed a preference among students for their special class or special school placement (Prunty, Dupont and Mcdaid, 2012), suggesting the support for learning and social issues was more favourable in their special class setting. On the other hand, special classes and schools have been described as a ‘safety valve’ for the mainstream system, effectively letting the mainstream ‘off the hook’ and placing the blame on the learner for not fitting into the mainstream setting (Travers, 2023, p. 2). Given that the right of children to express their views on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the UNCRC (UN, 1989) and re-emphasised in the UNCRPD (UN, 2006), more consideration should be given to the child’s voice in matters relating to inclusive education. Given the level of complexity in meeting the needs of this cohort of learners, it is prudent to look at how this might work in an inclusive school or if it is just an aspirational vision.

2.2.4 The Inclusive School

Stainback and Stainback (1990, p.3) describe an inclusive school as ‘ a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports and is supported by his/her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his/her educational needs met’. Instead of defining an inclusive school, other authors point toward the characteristics that inclusive schools share such as having a number of learners with SEN, positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusion and a welcoming culture (Farrell *et al.*, 2007; McLeskey, Waldron and Redd, 2014). A commitment to inclusion is a prerequisite for an inclusive school, but it requires much more than this, including an emphasis placed on the internal structures and practices which make the inclusive school a reality and not just a theoretical aspiration (Clark *et al.*, 1999). The degree of inclusion can be largely dependent on the system of educational provision from which it operates, with the extent to which schools are resourced considered an essential factor (Drudy and Kinsella 2009). Others would argue that a focus on what schools are doing with those resources in order to build school capacity to meet all learners’ needs is worthy of more attention (Slee, 2008). Inclusive school development can be approached in an organisational manner, and not solely based on individual approaches, thus effectively shifting the paradigm focus from a medical model of disability to embracing the social model (Kinsella, 2020).

Developing a school where all really means all may seem like a challenging or even aspirational task. However, Ainscow (2020) puts forward a framework for the promotion of inclusion and equity in schools (Figure 2.2). At the centre is school development, and to move schools in an inclusive direction, attention must be paid to all contextual factors relating to the wider community (Community involvement), educational departments (Administration), what evidence is gathered (Use of evidence) and all are underscored by principles of inclusion and equity. These are examined further in the next subsections

Figure 2.2. Ainscow's (2020, p.9) Framework for Promoting Inclusion and Equity in Schools



2.2.4.1 Inclusion and Equity as Principles

Defining terms such as inclusion and equity can be challenging as they mean different things to different stakeholders in education (Ainscow, 2020). Earlier sections have highlighted the complexities in defining terms. However, to move forward, it is argued that a shared understanding is needed of the four key processes of: the necessary acknowledgement of inclusion as a journey; the identification and removal of barriers; presence, participation and achievement of all; and a particular emphasis on learners at risk of exclusion (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006). This research is particularly concerned with the latter principles of this view of inclusive education that focus on learners at risk of marginalisation such as those enrolled in special classes. What is unclear from the literature is how these principles can be maintained whilst still operating special classes, a gap which this research addresses.

2.2.4.2 Use of Evidence

Great emphasis is put on data which measures the performances of education systems globally, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). However, one criticism of using such a measure is the pressure it puts on policymakers to focus on narrow measures of success without considering a country's contextual circumstances (Özer, 2020). In terms of inclusive school development, this narrow focus could be deemed detrimental to the broader picture of measuring the achievement of all learners. Therefore, it is argued schools must measure what they *value* as 'what gets measured, gets done' (Ainscow, 2020, p.10). From an Irish perspective, one possible process to support the use of evidence to inform school development is the School Self Evaluation (SSE) process (DE, 2022d). Ireland has a mandated school improvement policy that acts as an internal school evaluation system known as SSE (DE, 2022d). Schools that are under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity (DEIS) scheme adopt a similar process specifically for schools identified as being educationally disadvantaged (DE, 2017). In moving in a more inclusive direction, there are a number of tools available to schools to support inclusive school development, for example, the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Building on this work, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) offer a series of guides to support stakeholders in developing inclusive schools and classrooms (UNESCO, 2021). The European Agency (EASNIE, 2020a) also offer a toolkit to support schools and policymakers to reflect on inclusion. From an Irish context, the NCSE (2011) have an inclusive education framework to support whole school inclusive practices. All share a common purpose of using a series of indicators and prompts to support schools and education systems to reflect on their inclusion progress to date and generate pathways to development and improvement. Table 2.2 highlights some of the key features of each.

Table 2.2 A Comparison of Guides to Support Schools to Develop Inclusion

Name of Guide/Toolkit	Commonalities	Key differences
Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002)	Designed to tackle the challenges of inclusion and delivering equity in schools	Developed initially for English schools
Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011)	Associated with delivering quality education for all	More focus on learners with SEN
Reaching Out to all Learners: A resource pack for supporting inclusion and equity in education (UNESCO, 2021)	Attends to values and commitment to principles of inclusion Acknowledges inclusion is a process with each school/organisation coming from a different starting point Facilitates reflection on inclusive policies, culture and practice	Focus on all education centres, including early years and further education Separated into 3 guides: 1. Support for senior leadership staff 2. Teachers 3. Collaboration with community
Inclusive School leadership: A Self-Reflection on Policy and Practice (EASNIE, 2020a)	Includes Indicators or guiding questions for reflection Supports the development of an inclusive school development plan Promotes a collaborative approach Cyclical process Evidence used to guide process Acknowledges the importance of senior leadership (and management) Includes templates and sample materials (e.g. questionnaires, vignettes)	Specific toolkit for school leaders, policymakers and a joint self-reflection for school leaders <i>and</i> policymakers Focus on leadership practices regarding: • Setting direction • Organisational development • Human development A clear focus on leadership and policymakers actions to create the necessary conditions for inclusive education

However, no one set of indicators can serve as a panacea to progress inclusion, therefore context should inform the appropriate guidelines to be adopted by schools. Whilst leadership is acknowledged in all, the European agency's version was deemed most

appropriate as it is grounded in ISL theory and specifically addressed the role of school leaders (EASNIE, 2020a) which is the focus of this study.

2.2.4.3 School Development

In looking at school development in a more inclusive direction, attention is paid to what supportive features may support this. A welcoming atmosphere, inclusive practices, staff responding positively to diversity and a school leader with a commitment to inclusion have been highlighted as key elements (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; Ainscow, 2020). The SSE process (DE, 2022d) is Ireland's main policy tool to drive school improvement (McNamara *et al.*, 2022) through a framework for school development (Figure 2.3)

Figure 2.3 Framework to Support the SSE Process (DE, 2022d, p. 10)



This cyclical cycle is designed to support a continuous cycle of improvement that is a collaborative endeavour that includes all members of the school community such as staff, students and parents/caregivers (DE, 2022d). Schools have the option of identifying their own discrete focus but have also been mandated to focus on certain aspects such as literacy

and numeracy (DES, 2012) and wellbeing (DE, 2022d). There are issues with this form of process such as the focus on quantitative data that is dominating the evidence gathering phase (O’ Brien *et al.*, 2019) which is possibly a result of guidelines which focus on measuring learner outcomes (DES, 2016a). This is potentially a cause for inclusion being left out of focus, given the perceived challenges of benchmarking levels of inclusion, especially when looking at achievement of special class learners as they do not complete the traditional obligatory standardised tests. Returning to the notion of *measuring what we value*, more flexible methods guide school improvement through the lens of inclusion. One such method could be to move away from deficit informed assessment to seeing individual differences as an opportunity to enrich learning of all (Ainscow, 2020). For example, evidence from support plans or IEPs could inform a more individualised approach to measure achievement.

2.2.4.4 Community Involvement

Another way to support schools in moving in a more inclusive direction, as outlined in the previous section, is the support of the wider school community that includes students, parents, school staff, external professionals and policymakers (Ainscow, 2022). In terms of raising achievement of all learners, schools cannot do so acting alone (Ball, 2010). Ainscow (2020) identifies family involvement as particularly important to develop more inclusive schools. From an Irish perspective, research also highlighted the strong influence of parental or caregiver involvement on the outcomes of learners enrolled in special classes (Banks *et al.*, 2016). Positive teacher-parent relations were cited as having a positive impact on these outcomes. However, one consistent issue reported in the literature is the lack of access to therapeutic support and professional expertise in disciplines such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychology (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2016). It is argued that collaboration between health and education professionals to support the meaningful inclusion of learners with SEN is essential (Lindsay *et al.*, 2002; Patton, Hutton and MacCobb, 2015). Despite the NCSE calling for such collaboration (Cosgrove *et al.*, 2018) and piloting the school inclusion model (SIM) which includes on-site therapeutic supports (Gardiner, 2023), the current organisational structures in schools (schools do not directly employ these professionals) compromise this (Rose and Shevlin, 2021).

2.2.4.5 Administration

Research on policy making acknowledges that policy is made at all levels of the system and not solely done to schools or by schools (Ball, 2010). Moving towards inclusive education systems requires a shared set of values and understanding across all stakeholders, including those at the national policy making level (Ainscow, 2022) such as the DE. As a statutory body that supports the DE to deliver SEN provision, the NCSE (2019) discussed the idea of full inclusion and if Ireland was ready for a system that is universally designed for all students without special classes or schools. In their consultations with various stakeholders (met with over 30 different groups) including school staff, advocacy groups, teaching unions, parents and students, they found consensus that Ireland was not ready for such a radical change. The precursor to such a major system change would arguably need to begin with a change in culture and attitude (Ainscow, 2022). It also sparks an interesting debate over the right to an inclusive education. They reviewed New Brunswick's model of full inclusion as a possible system of provision to aspire to. In the Canadian province of New Brunswick (approximately 777,000 inhabitants), all children attend their local school regardless of their level of need (AuCoin, Porter and Baker-Korotkov, 2020). This was an interesting choice given our closer neighbours, Italy (approximately 59 million inhabitants), are considered to be one of the few countries with a fully inclusive model where inclusion has a legal and policy imperative since the late 1970s (Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo, 2015). One could query why the NCSE did not look to visit models of 'full inclusion' closer to home, such as Italy where 'full inclusion' has a long history that is somewhat fraught with challenges (Lanes, Demo and Dell'Anna, 2020). Italy has no special classes but still has a very small number (.025% of school population) of special schools (Anastasiou *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, given the strength and support that special classes and schools have amongst educational stakeholders in Ireland, it is unlikely a 'full inclusion' model will be seen in Ireland in the near future (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). This leaves the Irish system in a state of limbo given the pressures from the ratification of the UNCRPD. However, there is also an argument that distinctions need to be drawn between what constitutes inclusion and full inclusion. Tiernan (2021) argues for a 'pragmatic' view of full inclusion where the focus of inclusion does not remove the necessary specialised support that may take place outside

of the mainstream setting. Another pragmatic step would be to create more flexible spaces for all, that could facilitate the specialist support required (Travers, 2023). Such changes would require a careful and considered approach from leadership and this is considered next.

2.3 Section 2: Leadership Practices that Support Inclusion: Developing a Theory of ISL

Research from an Irish context has emphasised the pivotal role leadership can play in developing a whole school approach to inclusion (Donnelly, Ó' Murchú and Thies, 2016; Morrissey, 2020) and the operation of special classes (Banks *et al.*, 2016). The challenge that remains for school leaders is implementing inclusive practices with the existence of special classes, without being another form of basic integration, where exclusion arises in a different guise (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Raftery 2022). School leaders play a vital role in leading their schools through changes, such as the opening of a special class. It is argued that leadership can play a key role in promoting the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes (Travers, 2023). School leadership is a broad concept which includes all those who take on leadership roles in schools (Ummannel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016). This includes those in formal leadership roles such as assistant principals, as well as teachers who take on informal leadership roles in areas of the school or join leadership teams. The term school leaders in this research refers to all those who take on leadership roles in schools, both formal and informal. Whilst not dismissing the value of informal leadership practices, in order to narrow the focus of the review, formal leadership roles (those that are remunerated for) were considered. This was a contextual decision as leadership policy in Ireland describes it as a role and it is usually accompanied by the term management (e.g. DE, 2022c) and all participants are principals, the formal most senior role in Irish primary schools. This section first outlines the language associated with ISL, followed by a theoretical model of ISL from the literature (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020) and an examination of the leadership practices that are associated with developing inclusion in schools.

2.3.1 The Language of Inclusive School Leadership

Given the complexities of defining inclusion, the process of defining ISL may seem like an impossible task. The research literature interchangeably uses terms such as social justice leadership, inclusive leadership and leadership for inclusion. Whilst appearing similar, it is arguable that they all have the same end goal of facilitating inclusion, however, the process of how that is achieved may differ (Dennehy *et al.*, 2024). In order to support this research project, a working definition was employed. ISL is defined in this research as all leadership practices which address inequities to build a school community where all learners participate fully (EASNIE, 2020a). This allows for a focus on inclusion as more than access and alignment with the key considerations of presence, participation and achievement. Leadership practices are ‘interactions between leaders and followers, rather than as a function of one or more leaders’ actions’ (Spillane, 2005, p.146). In this case, leadership resides in the relationships between leaders and those whom they lead (EASNIE, 2018). In addition to leadership practice, school leaders share the vision that ‘all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers’ (EASNIE, 2015, p.1). This conceptual definition of ISL is in keeping with the rights-based argument for inclusive education which underpins this study. In exploring the leadership theories that are linked to effective inclusive practice, Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, (2020) identified three main theories, namely transformational leadership, distributed leadership and instructional leadership. These models of leadership are explored in relation to inclusion in the next subsections, followed by a synthesis of how these three models interact together to support ISL.

2.3.2 Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership (TL) can be described as an approach to leadership which aims to develop capacity within a school, with higher levels of commitment to organisational goals (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000; Anderson, 2017). It is traditionally associated with vision setting, with a focus on developing organisational structures and cultures which enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Day *et al.*, 2016). It is also linked to a style of leadership that is centred on leading organisational change to meet the increasing demands of complex organisations such as schools (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006). It is often considered not to be an exclusively principal-only role, with leadership

shared throughout the organisation to stimulate change from a bottom-up participatory model (Hallinger, 2003). This is synonymous with Ainscow's (2020) theory that whole-school community involvement is necessary for school development by embracing a collective responsibility towards inclusive education. Precey (2013) argues that TL is intrinsically linked with leading inclusive schools as it emphasises principles of equity and social justice. Furthermore, he maintains transformational leaders are goal oriented towards transforming individuals and organisations for better outcomes and can live with the tensions that result in pursuing such goals. This practice of disrupting dominant discourses is a key component of leadership for inclusion (Fraser and Shields, 2010). From an Irish perspective, King *et al.*, (2021, p.1996) found school leaders of DEIS schools were regular challengers of assumptions regarding their students, by raising teachers 'critical consciousness about the effects of generational marginalisation on a community'. TL is also cited as the preferred leadership tactic when developing inclusive environments (Rose and Shevlin, 2021; Flanagan, 2022). This can be achieved through engaging with staff to develop quality relationships and the promotion of inclusive values (Rose and Shevlin, 2021). According to Charalampous and Papademetriou (2019) a shortcoming in the transformational theory is the lack of attention paid to specific guidelines in tackling marginalisation and the social justice activism it purports. These authors point towards a distributed or shared model of leadership, an element of leadership that has been described as 'indispensable' to leading inclusive schools (Miškolci, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2016, p.53).

2.3.3 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership (DL) is frequently described in the research as a core leadership practice of inclusive school leaders (McLeskey, Waldron and Redd, 2014; Billingsley *et al.*, 2019; DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2020; DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson, 2021). It is primarily concerned with leadership practices as opposed to specific actions or responsibilities (Harris and Spillane, 2008). Furthermore, it is argued that effective leadership can have a positive impact on student outcomes and can have a greater influence if it is more widely distributed (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; 2020). DL can be described as a dramatic shift from the traditional leadership of authority to one of collaboration through brokering, facilitating and supporting those parts of the organisation

(Harris, 2012). This is an essential skill to gather consensus amongst staff to respect and embrace diversity and increasing access to learning opportunities (Ainscow, 2020).

A model of DL is adopted as a policy imperative nationally in Ireland (Murphy and Brennan, 2022) and is cited as a potential solution to making the role of principal in Ireland more sustainable (Stynes, McNamara and O'Hara, 2018; IPPN 2022). It features as a framework for leadership in the Looking at Our Schools (LAOS) document which acts as a set of guidelines for leadership teams. The document can support schools to self-evaluate and is used by the DE inspectorate as a blueprint to evaluate schools by offering a set of standards of practice from which to benchmark school performance (DES, 2016b; DE, 2022c). This is a potential vehicle for inclusive school development (Ainscow, 2020) that harnesses an administrative structure to use evidence for school improvement.

Despite the dominance of DL in the discourse of educational leadership, its application and usage differ (Diamond and Spillane, 2016; O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc, 2023). This is quite evident in the Irish context where, despite the policy intention of Ireland's leadership framework (DES, 2016b; DE, 2022c), the practice in reality often varies (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021). In addition, it is argued that whole school evaluation (WSE) reports in which LAOS is used as a framework for evaluation, those evaluating are conflating DL with delegated leadership (O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc, 2023). Lárusdóttir and O'Connor (2017) argue that there are significant challenges in enacting DL in the Irish context. In their case study of middle leadership in Irish and Icelandic schools, they found several challenges to enacting DL. One such challenge was the lack of distribution of power through the middle management structures where roles and responsibilities are only delegated to the chosen few, or what King and Stevenson, (2017) refer to as 'licensed leadership'. These structures of middle leadership, where staff members are incentivised (by additional remuneration) to take on leadership roles may in fact, be serving to reinforce models of delegated or transactional leadership and not the intended principles of DL the DE sought to promote (O'Sullivan and Mac Ruairc, 2023). One argument here is that the issue of power could impact how leadership is distributed. The issue of power is problematic given its complex nature within school structures, especially over the issue of 'who' is granted leadership opportunities (Lumby, 2013). This is particularly relevant on the topic of inclusion, as Lumby (2013) suggests there may be an unequal inclusion in leadership, specifically related to gender and race. Given the principles of inclusion, it is crucial that school leaders monitor the DL space to ensure their practices align with these principles. It is also

necessary that those taking on leadership in schools have the required knowledge to engage in instructional leadership and this is discussed next.

2.3.4 Instructional Leadership

Regarded as one of the most researched leadership theories, instructional leadership (IL) emerged as a theory that an effective school leader pays significant attention to all things teaching and learning (Gümüş *et al.*, 2018). The term is often used interchangeably with ‘learning-centred’ leadership (Gümüş *et al.*, 2018) and can be defined as a leadership style which focuses on ‘teaching and learning and the behaviour of teachers in working with students’ (Bush and Glover, 2003, p.10). In other words, school leaders influence student learning via teachers through professional dialogue and reflection with teachers. It is also focused on improving learning outcomes for students (Hallinger, Gümüş and Bellibaş, 2020). With inclusive education in mind, paying attention to the pedagogical skills and support needs of teachers and school leaders is a must (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016). In applying principles of IL to a leadership programme in Ireland, Ó’ Murchú, Russell and Bennett (2017, p. 32) centre this leadership practice at the classroom level ‘where the rubber hits the road’. The main idea here is that the practice of IL is a continuous and collective effort to make learning accessible to all, acknowledging that inclusion is a never-ending process (Ainscow, 2024).

Hallinger (2005) summarises the instructional role of the principal into three main dimensions. These are defining the school's mission, managing the instructional programme and the promotion of a positive learning environment, all of which are linked to the core functions of ISL (EASNIE, 2018). One criticism of IL is the centrality of the principal as the centre of expertise and knowledge (Hallinger, 2003). It is argued that it ignores or reduces the influence of the other potential leaders in the schools, such as deputy principals, middle leaders and teacher leaders (Bush and Glover, 2014). This may offer some explanation for the shift in language from instructional leadership to leadership for learning in order to move away from the principal as the focal point in the original terminology (Hallinger, Leithwood and Heck, 2010). However, by supporting teachers to attend to the three dimensions, the school leader can adapt this IL practice to become a shared endeavour (Urlick, 2016) to support an inclusive approach to school development.

In exploring each leadership model, this section has highlighted the links between traditional leadership models and inclusion. However, school leaders need to draw from each model at different times in order to navigate the complex environment of leadership

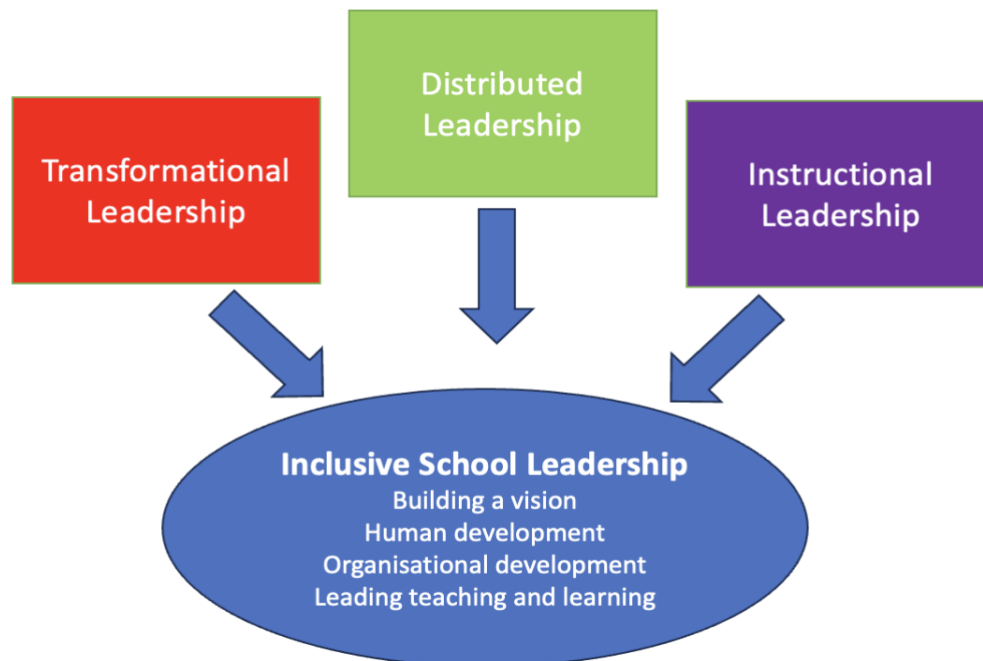
for inclusive and special education. The next section explores leadership practices that illustrate why a model of ISL is a necessary approach to leading inclusive schools.

2.3.5 Inclusive School Leadership in Action: Combining Models to Enact ISL

This section focuses on the leadership practices that influence the core functions of ISL that play a vital role in creating the conditions to develop truly inclusive schools. Similar to the challenges in defining inclusion, Mac Ruairc, Ottesen and Precey (2013, p.2) describe leadership as a ‘slippery’ term given the abundance of perspectives and theoretical models cited in the literature. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) argue that there are more challenges associated with leadership for inclusive and special education, a task which must draw from a toolbox of leadership practices. It could be argued that the leadership practices discussed in this section are applicable to all students, however, it is also argued that special considerations are necessary for improving outcomes for learners with SEN (McLeskey *et al.*, 2016).

In an extensive literature review of leadership practices of effective school leaders, Leithwood *et al.*, (2008) categorised effective leadership practices into 4 main areas: Building vision and setting direction; Understanding and developing people; Redesigning the organisation; Leading teaching and learning. This paper concluded with seven strong claims about effective school leadership and in 2020, the authors revisited these claims and made some revisions (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). One revision, in particular, was revised based on evidence from a study on leadership practices that enhance equitable outcomes for students (Ishimaru and Galloway, 2014). The categories of leadership practices identified by Leithwood *et al.*, (2008; 2020) are used as a leadership framework to inform a typology for inclusive school leadership (Figure 2.3). This framework has been adapted from the work of Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, (2020) and includes changes in terminology to reflect the Irish context. This section delves into leadership practices synonymous with effective and equitable leaders from the literature and these are explored under each core function of ISL practice next.

Figure 2.4: Theory of inclusive school leadership (Adapted from Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020)



2.3.5.1 Building a Vision

Most models of leadership will feature leadership practices which involve elements of direction-setting (Sun and Leithwood, 2015) such as developing a shared vision amongst staff. This practice is also evident when focusing on school leaders who are committed to creating an effective inclusive school, whereby all students' needs are met and are educated as much as possible alongside their typical peers (Waldron, McLeskey and Redd, 2011; McLeskey, *et al.*, 2016; Esposito, Tang and Kulkarni, 2019; DeMatthews *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, such a vision could be strengthened by an understanding of the rights-based view of inclusive education (UN, 2016).

In a study of Estonian teachers' and school leaders' attitudes towards inclusive education (n = 301), a school leaders' vision was found to be a predictor in their attitudes towards implementing inclusive practices in their schools (Pedaste *et al.*, 2021). A positive vision towards inclusive education correlated with positive attitudes towards inclusive practices. In a cross-cultural case study of inclusive leadership practices in Australia, Colombia and Canada, Abawi *et al.*, (2018) described the role of school principals as crucial in setting the cultural tone of inclusion within their schools. Each country had a case study site (school)

identified for having diverse student populations. In progressing on their journey towards more inclusive practices, principals developed capacity within their staff to meet the needs of all students through professional learning. In doing so, examples of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) were evident as staff were seen to actively learn together, accept feedback and be flexible in their approaches to meeting the needs of students despite challenging situations. Such collaboration is a hallmark of inclusive schools (Billingsley *et al.*, 2018; DeMatthews, 2020) and DL (Harris, 2012).

Similarly, in the US, studies have revealed the importance of sustaining a commitment to inclusion or sharing a vision of inclusion amongst staff (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; DeMatthews, 2015). The leadership practices or the 'what' that a school leader does is crucial to creating conditions for sustainable inclusive practices (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Mac Ruairc, Ottesen and Precey, 2013; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn, 2013). The function of articulating an inclusive vision is to motivate staff to appreciate that vision and make it a reality (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013). To motivate staff in such a way, school leaders must understand their staff and develop relationships (Fullan, 2007) which in turn supports their capacity building to meet the needs of diverse student bodies.

2.3.5.2 Human Development

Esposito, Tang and Kulkarni (2019) describe the important practice of recruitment and the school leaders' role in ensuring the recruitment and retention of skilled special education and classroom teachers who understand the importance of diversity and inclusion. DeMatthew (2020) had similar findings but extended the theory to place an emphasis on not just the recruitment of teachers with a positive disposition to inclusion but on the induction of new staff and capacity building amongst current staff. Most school principals in Ireland are generally part of the interview panel and play a key role in the recruitment process (DES, 2019). Therefore, a principal with an inclusive vision for their school is likely to add criteria for employment relating to inclusive and special education experience or values. Similarly, the recruitment of school leaders should prioritise leaders with a commitment to inclusion and ability to lead in a participatory manner (Riehl, 2009; Ainscow, 2020). School leaders need to ensure staff have multiple opportunities to engage in PL activities that explore inclusive pedagogy, collaboration and issues relating to inclusive education (Billingsley *et al.*, 2018; Coviello and DeMatthews, 2021). They must

also afford themselves the time to engage in their own PL to address meeting the needs of all learners in their schools (McLeskey *et al.*, 2016).

A common thread of successful inclusive schools in the literature is the time spent by principals in developing DL capacity (Waldron, McLeskey and Redd, 2011; Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey, Waldron and Redd, 2014; Abawi *et al.*, 2018; Carter and Abawi, 2018). An example of this practice in action is evidenced in Carter and Abawi's (2018) case study of Australian principals where principals developed DL capacity through 'empowering' teachers with decision-making responsibilities. The authors witnessed purposeful meeting structures (e.g. special education committee) led by competent staff members with decisions made by these subgroups and subsequent whole school action, thus demonstrating the potential impact of DL practices in developing leadership capacity.

2.3.5.3 Organisational Development

Leadership practices associated with redesigning the organisation are specifically concerned with establishing conditions which enable teachers to make the most of their teaching pedagogy and motivations (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008). In this case, creating conditions which allow for inclusive practice to thrive is a key ISL practice. Developing a culture of collaboration among teachers, paraprofessionals and external support professionals is identified in the literature as key to successful outcomes for learners with SEN (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Day, Prunty and Dupont, 2012; Carroll and Sixsmith, 2016; Azorín and Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow, 2024). School leaders play a vital role in creating such conditions for collaboration to thrive (King, 2014; McLeskey *et al.*, 2016). An example of this is enabling conditions for teachers to formally plan and collaborate on student support plans (IEPs), a structure that appears to be lacking in the Irish context (Ní Bhroin and King, 2019).

Context matters in leadership (Printy and Liu, 2021). Fullan (2022, p.59) refers to this leadership skill as 'contextual literacy' and argues that when school leaders assume a new leadership role they need to spend time as learners of the context and culture wherein they are working. This is also highlighted in the Irish context as a construct that is essential to understand in order to lead effectively (Ó' Murchú and O'Donoghue, 2024). Therefore, any changes in organisational structures must be preceded by a clear understanding of the context and possible implications for any changes.

2.3.5.4 Leading Teaching and Learning

Effective school leaders must have the prerequisite knowledge in the field of inclusive and special education to lead teaching and learning for this cohort of learners. This has been flagged as lacking for some school leaders with concerns raised at the level of knowledge and understanding of principals in this area (Roberts and Simpson, 2016; Finlay, *et al.*, 2022) which is a concern in terms of their capacity to engage with IL practices. However, a positive disposition towards inclusive and special education may be sufficient if accompanied by a distributed leadership framework where others have the necessary curriculum knowledge to support these learners (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc, 2023). In looking at the attitudes of principals towards inclusive education, an Australian study which explored the views of primary school principals (n=15) found a correlation between school context and a principal's conceptualisation of inclusion (Graham and Spandagou, 2011). Principals of more culturally diverse schools had a broader view of inclusion, incorporating cultural, social, economic and ethnic differences in comparison to less diverse schools where the inclusion discourse dominated around including those with SEN. However, an Estonian study highlighted negative attitudes towards inclusion from school leaders who worked in special schools in comparison to their mainstream colleagues (Pedaste *et al.*, 2021). The study also revealed misinterpretations of inclusive practices which were more linked with integration and the predominantly physical placement of students with more complex SEN.

Key to advancing inclusive school development are inclusive practices with teachers supported by school leaders to collaborate to enhance such practices (Ainscow, 2020). The role of the principal in supporting and developing inclusive pedagogy is crucial (Brennan, King and Travers, 2019; Cullinane *et al.*, 2022). For the purposes of this research, inclusive pedagogy is defined as approaches to teaching and learning that respond to diversity, avoid exclusion and acknowledges the teacher's understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it (Florian, 2014). One common example adopted in the Irish context to avoid marginalisation (if used effectively) is the use of team-teaching, a method of teaching where two or more teachers share the responsibility for meeting the needs of diverse learners within the same classroom (Ó' Murchú and Conway, 2017).

This section has reviewed the literature on leadership models and practices that are associated with leading inclusive schools. The leadership practices linked to each leadership model were also explored to highlight ISL in action. Enacting ISL is a complex task and thus those implementing such practices require support in this regard. The PL needs of principals are explored next with a specific focus on collaborative models of PL that may have potential to support ISL development amongst a group of school principals.

2.4 Section 3: Professional Learning

This section reviews the literature on professional learning (PL) by first outlining the language of PL and looking at PL for school leaders in the Irish context. Next, the focus turns to transformative models of collaborative PL such as communities of practice (CoPs) and professional learning communities (PLCs) that could potentially support the goal of this research in developing ISL in schools. The section concludes with an examination of how such PL experiences can be planned and evaluated.

2.4.1 The Language of Professional Learning

There are many terms in the literature that refer to the array of learning experiences teachers and school leaders experience and engage with. Recently, the terms staff development and in-service training have been replaced by professional learning and professional development (Bleicher, 2014; Ainscow and Messiou, 2021). Common phrases familiar to the Irish context include in-service, continuous professional development (CPD), professional development (PD), professional learning (PL) and professional learning and development (PLD) (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). This research adopts the term professional learning (PL) for several reasons.

Firstly, PL is an outcome derived from engaging with professional development (Liou and Canrinus, 2020). Secondly, this term focuses on the learning of participants which is a result of the social interactions of the participants and not something that is simply ‘done’ to teachers or school leaders (Timperley *et al.*, 2007). Finally, the term PL aligns with a focus on the outcomes arising from engagement with the PD experience under investigation in this research. In addition, from an Irish perspective, PL has emerged as the more common term in recent literature and policy (King, French and Halligan, 2022) and aligns with the continuum of the teacher learning framework promoted by the Irish Teaching Council (Teaching Council, 2016).

2.4.2 Professional Learning for School Leaders in Ireland

Oide is the main support service for teachers and school leaders. Prior to the introduction of Oide in 2022, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) was one of the main support providers to teachers and school leaders in Ireland. The PDST, along with other professional support services in the primary and post-primary education sectors were amalgamated in 2022. This included the Centre for School Leadership (CSL), Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT), and the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT). They offer a suite of supports, including bespoke contextualised offerings which are designed to respond to each school’s unique context (O’Donnell, 2023). Support for inclusive and special education is provided for by the NCSE, primarily for teachers, with leadership PD limited to one-day seminars for leading special class provision. One strand of the Oide support service is specifically dedicated to leadership and supporting school leaders.

Engagement with PL is optional for school leaders and there are no prerequisite qualifications for principals apart from 5 years of teaching experience (Murphy, 2020).

The Teaching Council is the professional standard body for the teaching profession in Ireland, and it also promotes PL through the Cosán (Irish term for ‘pathways’) framework (Teaching Council, 2016). This framework provides a useful structure through which teachers can take ownership of their own PL. It also advocates for inclusive practices with ‘teachers’ learning aimed at improving their capacity to address and respond to diversity of students’ needs’ (p.18). However, a notable absence is any reference to the PL of school leaders. School leaders are called upon to foster ‘ a culture of professional learning and engagement, and actively supporting teachers’ engagement in learning at school level’ (p. 8). Given the complex nature of educational change, it would be expected those tasked with fostering such a culture would need support to do so. It may be considered that school leaders are teachers first and foremost and are included in that sense. However, this research argues for acknowledgement of the unique PL needs of school leaders.

The LAOS framework (DE, 2022c) is also used as a reflective practice tool for schools which can support the design and selection of appropriate PL experiences for teachers and school leaders. The document views schools as learning organisations where PL is ‘central to the teacher’s work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart’ (DE, 2022c, p. 9). The document also sets a standard or benchmark for schools where they identify key leadership practices in relation to PL that aims to enhance teacher practice and student learning. The theme of collaboration and wide-ranging PL experiences in the LAOS document aligns with the definition that is adopted in this research (King, *et al.*, 2022). This is in keeping with Ainscow’s (2020) call for increased collaboration and could also be enhanced through the SSE process (DE, 2022d). This process highlights the key role to be played by principals in influencing inclusive school development (Donnelly *et al.*, 2016).

One area of interest for Oide and the IPPN is in the PL gained from coaching for school principals which could support them in ISL development. According to the CSL, coaching for school principals can increase their ability to prioritise and manage demands of the job, renew enthusiasm, support change management, assist in creating a coaching culture in their schools and provide time and space for school leaders to reflect (CSL, 2015). Coaching can be employed by principals as a strategy to support specific areas for development through an individual’s self-discovery (Whitmore, 2017). Coaching

facilitates a relationship between a coach and the coachee whereby the coach supports the person in drawing out solutions to issues that are challenging them in their context (Anthony, 2017). Research has highlighted the potential of this PL experience for school leaders as something that can support the development of in school management (ISM) teams and in turn support the enactment of DL (Butler, 2024). DL can play a vital role in the development of inclusive pedagogy (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Brennan and King, 2022). Coaching for school principals has been supported by the DE since 2017 (Oide, 2024) and this significant investment is suggestive of a PL experience that is valued by the DE.

The NCSE has acknowledged the need for PL opportunities to support school leaders in developing and embedding a culture of inclusion in their schools (NCSE, 2024a). Given the autonomy that school leaders have in the implementation of SEN policy within mainstream contexts, such as the SETAM (DES, 2017), concerns have been raised about the efficacy to make informed decisions around the allocation of resources to embed inclusive practice (Kenny *et al.*, 2020). Some argue that leading for inclusion requires a school leader with experience in special education provision or at least engage in forms of PL that support an understanding of leadership in this area. Others argue the need for specific PL for principals in relation to the management of provision for learners with diagnosed needs, such as autism (Daly *et al.*, 2016).

Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, (2020) argue that school leaders require knowledge of leadership theories alongside a supportive policy framework to meet the increasing demands and levels of accountability in education systems. The pressure to meet the demands of education stakeholders is becoming increasingly evident in research from an Irish principal's perspective (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016; Murphy, 2020) indicating a need for ongoing PL support. Leadership support networks (LSGs) have emerged as a response to principals seeking support in their roles (IPPN, 2022), but a lack of clarity and variability remains in how these support groups operate. More formal and structured collaborative learning networks that could address this inconsistency are reviewed next.

2.4.3 Collaborative Forms of PL for School Leaders: CoP or PLC?

In reducing the variations of practice in schools, there is an argument for increased collaboration between local school networks with a view to sharing resources and expertise to exercise collective responsibility to meet the needs of all learners (Ainscow, 2016). As Hargreaves (2022) notes, ‘Full inclusion needs collaborative professionalism’. This is a form of collaboration that involves a ‘solid, rigorous approach to school improvement with efforts to cultivate solidarity among members of collaborative teams’ (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018, p.22). The sharing of expertise through an inter-school learning network may have the potential for developing inclusive practices and offer a sustainable system of support for school leaders. Meaningful collaboration to promote inclusion must include critical dialogue and the sharing of practice to challenge hegemonic assumptions about difference (Brennan *et al.*, 2019). CoPs, PLCs and variations of them (e.g. learning networks and virtual Communities of Practice) have been identified as PL models in education to promote professional growth and improve practice (Kennedy, 2014; Holland, 2018; Brennan and King, 2022). This section reviews the literature on the common learning networks that support such collaboration to inform the selection of one that supports the goal of developing ISL.

Similarities can be seen in how each learning network is defined. Stoll (2011, p.112) defines professional learning communities (PLCs) as ‘an inclusive and mutually supportive group of people with a collaborative, reflective and growth-oriented approach towards investigating and learning more about their practice in order to improve student learning’. Whilst many other definitions exist, a PLC generally involves a group of educators who work collaboratively to address problems of practice relating to teaching and learning with the goal of improving learner outcomes (Brennan and Gorman, 2023). A CoP can be defined as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’. They were not originally designed for PL experiences, however, their application in educational fields has led to opportunities for improving teaching and learning (Diaz, Poekert and Bermudez, 2021), the core purpose of a school leaders’ work in Ireland (DE, 2022c; IPPN, 2022). Both definitions share a grounding in a collaborative style of PL.

An important feature of a CoP is its ability to challenge traditional beliefs (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). This facilitates the challenging of the status quo in schools with long-standing practices that can be exclusionary, which Mac Ruairc (2013) argues is a necessary leadership quality needed to promote inclusive practice. PLCs have also been successful in challenging existing practices and assumptions of teachers around difference (Brennan, 2019). In looking at specific professional learning experiences for school leaders, CoPs have been highlighted as being particularly supportive in terms of generating innovative practices to address issues that arise for principals within their schools (Bickmore, Gonzales and Roberts, 2021; Grobman, 2008).

Emerging from a number of case studies on effective inclusive schools is the common theme of a culture of professional learning (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey, Waldron and Redd, 2014; DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson, 2021). In particular, PLCs were evident as a model of PL supported by principals in these studies. PLCs have also been identified as being particularly effective in developing inclusive practices in primary schools (Brennan *et al.*, 2019; Walton *et al.*, 2022) and increasing teachers' willingness to include learners with SEN (Van Mieghem, Verschueren and Struyf, 2023). Much of the research regarding PLCs is focused on teachers' practice and improving outcomes for learners (Stoll *et al.*, 2006; Harris and Jones, 2010; Brennan and King, 2022). They also require external leadership to develop and sustain the group (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). Harris and Jones (2019) suggest school leaders need to ensure that models of collaborative professional learning, such as PLCs, must impact positively on learner outcomes and there should be evidence to support this. Given the crucial role played by school leaders in establishing and sustaining PLCs (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Harris and Jones, 2010; King, 2014; Brennan and King, 2022), developing a platform for their own PL is warranted. However, there lies a paucity of research in relation to school leaders' collaboration with other schools and how they collaborate to develop their own PL. This prompted the literature review to focus on learning networks that focused on principals and school leaders, where CoPs were more evident.

CoPs can often vary in name and organisational style, but can be recognised through certain characteristics (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). Lave and Wenger (1991) originally developed the concept of CoPs where they studied the situated learning of five different apprenticeships. There are three crucial characteristics of a CoP that distinguish it from other forms of learning communities, namely the domain, the community and the

practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The domain represents the passion of its members or the topics and issues the group wish to hone in on (Wenger, *et al.*, 2002). The community represents the group of people who engage with the domain. The sense of community within the group provides a safe place for the participants to engage in learning through interaction and observation of discussions in the group (Li *et al.*, 2009). The practice is the output of the group, or the ‘knowledge repository’ (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) that the group builds up as a result of their ongoing interactions.

The learning theory behind a CoP aligns with the theory of social learning by focusing on participation and the co-construction of knowledge through social engagement and dialogue with the other members of the CoP (Sarid and Levanon, 2022). Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ to acknowledge the newcomers to a CoP whose journey from newcomer to full participant is a social process where learning of knowledgeable skills is central. The notion that a CoP can evolve over time with new members and others leaving (Roberts, 2006) makes them more sustainable and ideal for newcomers (Wenger, 1999). This is particularly important for newly appointed principals, who often find the early years of their career challenging (Spillane and Lee, 2014; Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016; Murphy, 2020) and would benefit from the support that a CoP can offer. Similarly, in a study of organisational factors which support inclusive schools in post-primary schools in Ireland, Kinsella (2020) highlighted the benefits of inter-school collaboration through the sharing of expertise, policies, and administrative systems. Similar experiences in England were experienced, despite the competitive policy context, where school-to-school collaboration can be an effective strategy for improved student outcomes (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018). This aligns with the idea of harnessing the stakeholders in the wider school community to progress inclusive school development (Ainscow, 2020).

Another motivating factor for the selection of CoPs is its emphasis on the importance of the social aspect of learning in the formation of new knowledge (Blankenship and Ruona, 2007). The social element of CoPs lends itself well to a community of school leaders who often find themselves working in isolation within their organisations, in particular, those who are newly appointed or early career school leaders (Sugrue, 2009; McGovern, 2015; Bauer and Silver, 2018). In this context, isolation is the emotional response to the job as opposed to the structural school system they work in (Bauer and Silver, 2018). A reduction

in isolation has been experienced in other studies involving principals participating in a CoP (Bouchamma, April and Basque, 2018; Bickmore *et al.*, 2021).

Improvements in reflective practice have been identified as one of the outcomes of participation in a CoP by school principals (Bengtson, 2012; Bickmore, *et al.*, 2021). In a US-based study, Bickmore *et al.*, (2021) reported that authentic feedback acted as a catalyst for reflective practice. Authentic feedback was developed by each member of the group by identifying a problem of practice and developing an improvement plan to address the problem, which their peers in the group would give feedback on. This could support the critical dialogue needed to challenge assumptions that hinder inclusive school development and could be enhanced by gathering evidence in between CoP meetings to drive inclusive development (Ainscow, 2020). Another key feature of a CoP is its ability to cross organisational boundaries (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) or in this case, work across a cluster of schools. This could potentially address the need for schools to embrace collaboration and view themselves as having a collective responsibility to meet the needs of all learners and not just those who attend their own schools (Ainscow, 2020). The CoP could also be extended across sectors, and include the early childhood and post-primary sectors, however, this is beyond the scope of this study.

It is important to examine the potential pitfalls of any PL experience. For example, Roberts (2006) cautions CoP facilitators against overly dominant voices, mistrust, predispositions and over-populated memberships. In order to mitigate against these risks, the author looks towards protocols and procedures for a CoP such as the ‘cookie framework’ devised by Diaz *et. al* (2021) where they outline a framework for the effective implementation of a CoP which focuses on four key considerations. These are the content, conditions, processes, and structures which played an important role in the planning and design phase of the PL experience for this research, known as the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP).

As ISL and the degree of which it can be exercised hinges on the conditions and contextual factors surrounding each school principal (EASNIE, 2020b), a network of principals in one location should provide a more consistent contextual setting from which to reflect on shared practices. Therefore, the participants share the common context of leading a mainstream school with special classes in the Northeast of Ireland. With these shared features, there will be many contrasts of context within, including DEIS status or non-DEIS status, as well

as different patronage structures. Collaboration between members which encourages support and the sharing of responsibilities are essential for a CoP (Wenger, 1999). As a result of the mutual respect and shared endeavours, the CoP can become a space for problem-solving and a support mechanism where members can seek support from peers they trust and understand their role (Bouchamma, *et al.*, 2018).

There are many studies which have highlighted the potential benefits of CoPs as platforms for PL for school leaders, but a dearth of research lies in the area specific to developing ISL through a CoP model of PL. Therefore, this research intends to address this gap in the literature by examining the role of a CoP as a potentially effective PL experience for developing ISL amongst a group of primary school principals. This section has reviewed the similarities and differences in the literature on CoPs and PLCs. As a result, the CoP was deemed more suitable in the context of this study where participants come together to share practice, explore problems of practice and develop a community that supports one another in their roles. However, what term is used to describe the PL experience is less important when considered alongside the aims of this study. A more pressing matter is to ensure the PL experience is effective in developing ISL and therefore attention now shifts to how the PL experience can be planned, designed and evaluated to ensure it is meeting this objective.

2.4.4 Planning and Evaluating Effective Professional Learning

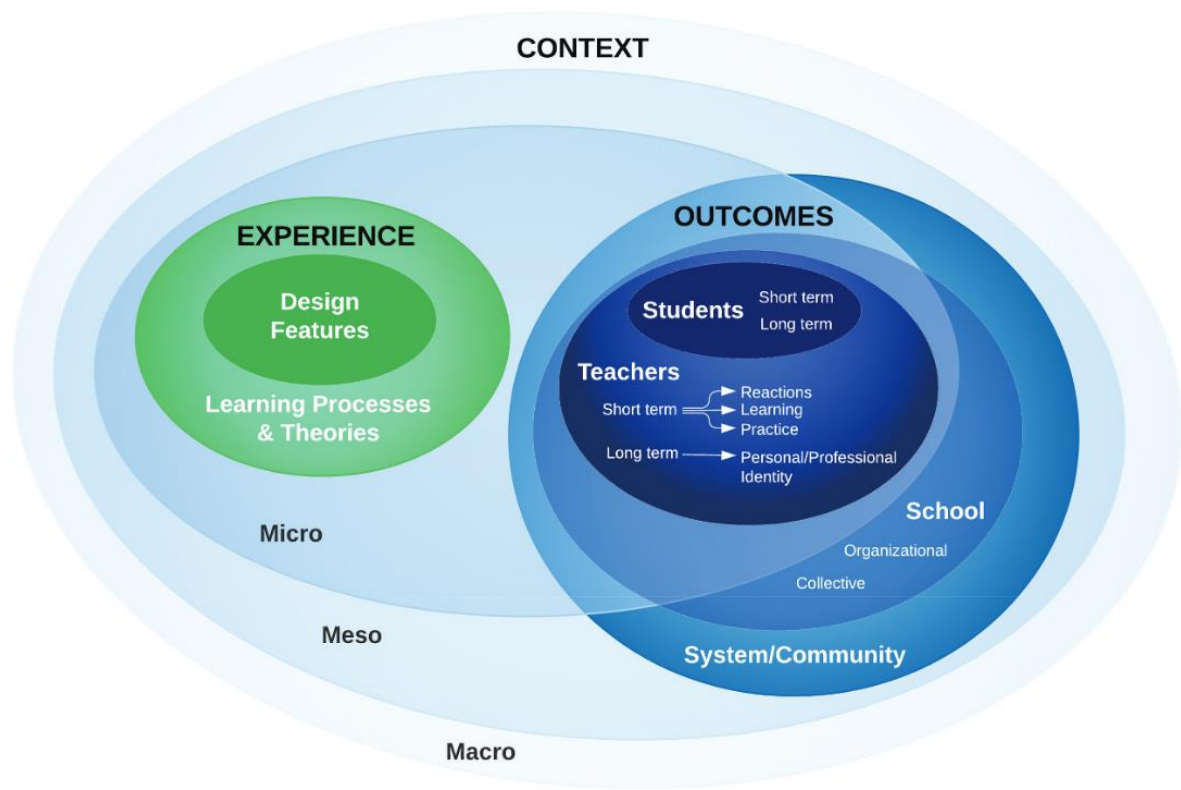
There is a paucity in the literature relating specifically to effective models of PL for school leaders, with most studies highlighting the influential role they play in facilitating the PL of others (King, 2011; Poekert, Alexandrou and Shannon, 2016; King and Stevenson, 2017). Therefore, this review also draws from research relating to effective models of PL for teachers. In exploring effective models of PD for teachers, Desimone (2009) identifies content, active learning, coherence, duration and collective participation as critical features of effective PD. Other researchers pointed towards PD that is sustained, collaborative, subject-specific, draws on external expertise, is practice-based and has teacher buy-in (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Wells, 2014; Dunst, Bruder and Hamby, 2015). In addition to these core features, the role of the facilitator has been identified as a key factor in the success and sustainability of collaborative PL initiatives (Crawford, Roberts

and Hickmann; Diaz *et al.*, 2021; Johnson *et al.*, 2021; Brennan and King, 2022; Brennan and Gorman, 2023).

A central core purpose to PL in education is that they should be designed with the teacher (and by extension, the school leader) in mind which should ultimately result in improved outcomes for the students they teach (Timperley *et al.*, 2007; Tait-McCutcheon and Drake, 2016). Therefore, paying attention to the complex nature of the contextual factors in which the PL is situated is key (Kennedy, 2014; Boylan *et al.*, 2018). There is a current focus in Ireland on a transmissive form of PD which usually targets the latest national priority (King and Nihill, 2019). For example, the rollout of the new primary language curriculum consisted of a number of facilitated in-service workshops delivered by the PDST (now known as Oide). This form of PL that is done to the teacher and focuses on knowledge transmission remains prominent despite research findings that it has little effect on teacher change (Kennedy, 2014; Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2015).

In order to meet the complexities of planning, designing and evaluating the PL experience under research here, a pragmatic tool was required. The conceptual meta-model put forward by King, Poekert and Pierre (2023) satisfied this requirement. This framework (Figure 2.5) was developed specifically for the education sector and draws from relevant literature on PL and builds on previous frameworks for designing and evaluating PL (King, 2014, 2016; Poekert *et al.*, 2020). In this case, the model's flexibility allows it to be adapted to suit planning and evaluating PL at the school leader level.

Figure 2.5 Professional Learning Meta-Model at the School Level (King *et al.*, 2023, p. 969)



The model centres around three major considerations of context, experience and outcomes (CEO). Context is considered at the macro, meso and micro levels (King *et al.*, 2023), reflecting Ainscow's (2020) focus on the role of administrative departments and the wider community. Examples at the macro level include the wider socio-economic, cultural, and political circumstances (Hallinger, 2018) and in this case, the policy of special class provision in the climate of inclusion. The meso level considers the local circumstances of the schools that each principal participant leads, influenced by school, community and institutional levels whilst the micro focuses on the school level context. Experience is concerned with the design features and learning theories underpinning the PL experience and outcomes are considered at the level of students, teachers, school and community (King *et al.*, 2023).

Evaluating PL has been viewed as a weakness in professional learning (Earley and Porritt, 2014) with many models of evaluation centering around post-event questionnaires that some refer to as 'happy sheets' (Spowart *et al.*, 2017). However, measuring impact is a more complex task but knowledge of the core design features and learning theories

previously outlined can support this process (King *et al.*, 2023). Further research is needed that has a longitudinal basis that can illustrate impact and sustainability over time (King *et al.*, 2022). Much of the literature on evaluating effective PL in education is focused on evaluating teacher models of PD (King, 2014; Harris and Jones, 2017). Much of the data gathered to inform evaluations is gathered through questionnaires that are administered immediately after delivery of the PD (Guskey, 2002) and the longer-term impact is relatively unknown. Other authors also mention the challenges in evaluating PD initiatives (Merchie *et al.*, 2018) and the lack of clarity on how exactly it should be done (King, 2014). Some studies highlight how this can be done through follow-up evaluations that look at sustainability and impact (e.g. Brennan and King, 2022). A major difference in PD for school leaders in comparison to teachers, is the crucial element of networking and consultation as the school principal has no other colleagues in the same role in their place of work (Goldring, Preston and Huff, 2012).

What is clear from the research on learning communities is that in the context of globalisation, rapid reform in education and an increasingly complex environment is that learning does not happen in isolation (Stoll *et al.*, 2006). Ainscow and Sandill, (2010) argue for forms of leadership that encourage social learning and foster a commitment to responding to learner diversity through collaboration with other schools (Ainscow, 2020). This may also require a challenging of assumptions which requires a form of transformative learning where staff can critically reflect on their experiences which leads to changes in behaviour and practice (Mezirow, 1991). The sharing of expertise through an inter-school learning network may have the potential to develop inclusive practices and offer a sustainable system of support for school leaders. It is also suggested as a potential support mechanism to achieve excellence and equity in education (Ainscow, 2010). Given the lack of evidence around transformative models of PL that support teachers (Brennan *et al.*, 2019) and school leaders (Billingsley *et al.*, 2018), this research will look at the potential of a CoP to act as a transformative PL experience (King and Holland, 2022) that support sustainable processes to develop and promote leadership for inclusion (Brennan, *et al.*, 2019) within participant schools.

2.5 Towards a Conceptual Framework

The literature review is summarised in table 2.3 and provided a conceptual map that informed the final conceptual framework of this study.

Table 2.3 Conceptual Map that Informed the Conceptual Framework

Inclusion, inclusive education and special class provision	
• Rights based argument for inclusive education UNCRPD (Ratified in Ireland in 2018) • Inclusion as a process/journey; Identification and removal of barriers; Focus on presence, participation and achievement; Particular emphasis on groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation and exclusion (Ainscow <i>et al.</i>, 2006; Ainscow 2020; 2024) • Acknowledging the important role of special classes in educational provision for some learners and also the challenges in avoiding internal segregation (Ware <i>et al.</i>, 2009; Banks and McCoy, 2017; Kauffman and Hornby, 2020; Hornby, 2020; NCSE 2019; 2024a; Raftery, 2022; Travers, 2023)	
Inclusive school leadership	
ISL in action (Óskarsdóttir <i>et al.</i> , 2020) • Building the vision and setting direction • Understanding and developing people • Redesigning the organisation • Leading teaching and learning	<i>Transformational leadership</i> Vision setting (Day, Gu and Sammons, 2026) Leading change (Hallinger, 2003; Leithwood and Jantzi, 2006) Goal-oriented and aligned to inclusive values (Precey, 2013)
	<i>Distributed leadership</i> A policy imperative (DE, 2022) Concerned with the relational practices of leaders (Harris and Spillane, 2008) More effective if widely distributed (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; 2020) Collaborative (Harris, 2012)
	<i>Instructional leadership</i> Focused on teaching and learning (Bush and Glover, 2003; Gümüş <i>et al.</i> , 2018) Improving outcomes for students (Hallinger, Gümüş and Bellibaş, 2020) Pedagogical focus (Donnelly, Ó' Murchú and Thies, 2016; Ó' Murchú, Russell and Bennett, 2017)
Professional learning for school leaders: Considerations for planning, designing and evaluating PL experiences	
• <i>Planning and design:</i> Collaborative (Desimone, 2009); Address problems of practice related to teaching and learning (Brennan and Gorman, 2023); Challenge assumptions (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015; Brennan, 2019); Role of facilitator (Diaz, Poekert and Bermudez, 2021; Brennan and King, 2022; Brennan and Gorman, 2023); Co-construction of knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Sarid and Levanon, 2022); Authentic feedback and critical dialogue (Bickmore <i>et al.</i>, 2021; Brennan and Gorman, 2023); Context bound (Kennedy, 2014; Boylan <i>et al.</i>, 2018) • <i>Evaluation:</i> A challenge in PL literature (Earley and Porritt, 2014; Spowart <i>et al.</i>, 2017); Must consider contextual factors at the macro, meso and micro levels of the system (King <i>et al.</i>, 2023); Focus on student outcomes (King <i>et al.</i>, 2023); Follow up evaluations to test for sustainability (Brennan and King, 2022)	

This table highlights the literature review timeline, beginning with a review of the literature around inclusion, inclusive education and special class provision. Next, leadership practices and theories associated with developing inclusion in schools were reviewed to

underpin the leadership practices that would be explored during the SISLCoP and subsequent interviews with participants. Finally, the professional learning planning and evaluation literature informed the design of the PL experience.

2.6 Conclusion

Following a succinct review of the literature around inclusive education, special class provision, ISL and professional learning, the conceptual framework that underpins this study was generated. Firstly, the framework is underpinned by a rights-based view of inclusive education and Ainscow's (2020) framework for the promotion of inclusion and equity in schools. Next, the theory of ISL and the leadership practices associated with leading inclusive school development take a central role in framing the leadership practices that participants engage with. Finally, designing a PL experience for participants based on the evidence from the literature on effective PL aligns with the central aim of the research in supporting participants with developing the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes with their mainstream peers. The conceptual framework's development and application to the research is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, along with the methodological approach to this case study research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction and Background

Despite Ireland's commitment to inclusive education under the UNCRPD, the expansion of special class provision continues (Banks and McCoy, 2017; Travers, 2023). This raises the question *if* this form of provision can co-exist in an inclusive education system or needs to be adapted. This leads to the following research questions (Table 3.1) which stem from the overall aim of the research to explore the role of a CoP in supporting school leaders to enact ISL in their schools.

Table 3.1 Research Questions

Research question 1	What are school leaders' current experiences of leading mainstream primary schools with special classes in the context of inclusion?
Research question 2	What leadership practices and activities are principals who lead special classes in primary schools engaging in?
Research question 3	To what extent is a CoP an effective model of professional learning to support principals in enacting ISL in their primary schools?

This chapter will firstly discuss the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study and detail the researchers' journey towards a conceptual framework which provided the rationale for the research design. Next, the methodological approach is discussed in detail by outlining the case study approach, with specific reference to the researcher's positionality and role as facilitator of the SISLCoP. This is followed by a discussion of the sampling procedures, participants, data generation methods, data analysis process and ethical considerations.

3.2 Philosophical Underpinnings

A common thread in qualitative research literature is the challenge facing researchers in separating themselves from the research or being actively involved (Creswell, 2013; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). In this study, the researcher is actively involved, both

as a researcher and facilitator of a CoP. This dual role puts an essential onus on the researcher to declare his philosophical worldview and his values or axiological assumptions (Creswell, 2013). In terms of axiology, the researcher refers to the values that underscore the research process and in this case, value is given to the direction of education (Biesta, 2015) or a belief system that involves an education system designed for all. The researcher's ontological and epistemological stances can influence the paradigms that give the research a blueprint or philosophical structure. These philosophical assumptions and beliefs come to the forefront of research, whether the researcher is aware or not (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Therefore, the researcher actively acknowledges this and positions himself in the research. This positionality is explored further in the case study section of this chapter.

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and acknowledging that there are multiple realities in a given situation (Creswell, 2013). In essence, it is the study of 'being' and issues around epistemology and ontology tend to be discussed together (Crotty, 1998). Epistemology relates to how knowledge is acquired, constructed, and shared (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). A core element of the SISLCoP is the interactions between the participants as they worked together to address problems of practice. This interaction resonates with social constructionism, a philosophical view that meaning is constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in the interpretation of the social world around them (Robson, 2011). This underlying assumption aligns with Wenger's theory (explored in Chapter 2) that the learning that takes place within a CoP is generated through social participation (Wenger, 1999). In addition, the CoP aligns with calls for schools to address inclusive education through collective responsibility (Ainscow, 2020) and such an approach is possible through collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018).

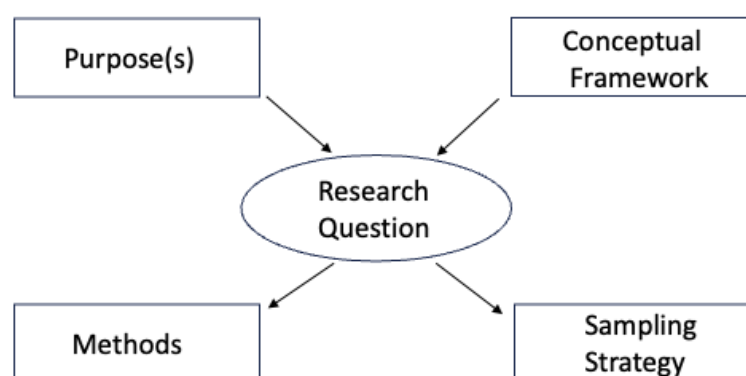
In linking with this ontological standpoint, this research is focused on principals developing ISL through interacting with others in a CoP, therefore it is subjective and personal to the researcher and the participants. This personal reflection on engagement in a professional learning experience aligns the study with an interpretative paradigm where the main objective is to understand the 'subjective world of human experience' (Cohen, *et al.*, 2018, p. 19). The interpretive paradigm is common in qualitative research as the methodologies can be applied in a flexible and context-sensitive manner to address the complex issues under investigation (Carcary, 2009). Interpretivism acknowledges the differences between people and the subject matter in the natural sciences under investigation (Bryman and Teevan, 2005). It purports that meaning is constructed through the interactions and

interpretations of human beings (Robson, 2011). Within these interactions, meaning and knowledge is constructed, thus reflecting the epistemological stance underpinning this research design. This knowledge is subjective and is particularly pertinent within the SISLCoP as the researcher and the research participants cannot be separated from their contexts. The interpretivist viewpoint also acknowledges the difficulties in making research objective and value-free (Carcary, 2009). This is a contrasting view to that of the positivists who view research as an endeavour which is concerned with objectively measuring the social phenomena under investigation (Creswell, 2014).

3.3 Research Design

The qualitative data generation approach in this study is interpreted through a qualitative case study design. The researcher drew from Robson's (2011) framework for research design to conceptualise the study in a simple and coherent manner. This framework places the research question as the focal point, with the conceptual framework and aims of the research influencing the research question, and in turn, the research question determines the sampling and methodological procedures that will address the research question (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.1 Robson's Framework for Research Design (2011, p.71)



The literature review informed the design of the conceptual framework and the application of this framework is discussed next.

3.4 Conceptual Framework Used in the Study

Initially, in formulating the conceptual framework (CF) for this research, the author followed the advice of Schram (2006, p. 62) where he posits ‘Here’s how I am positioning my problem within an established arena of ideas, and here’s why it matters’. However, upon reflection on this advice, the researcher considers this slightly over simplistic, given the time spent on the CF journey and the messy and non-linear nature of qualitative research (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The CF was born out of a passion for inclusive education and curiosity about the possibility of all learners, regardless of need, attending their local schools. Given the researcher’s role as principal, further curiosity developed around the role of the principal in developing an inclusive school, or in other words developing the practice of inclusive school leadership (EASNIE, 2022). Furthermore, the question arises around the ‘how’ we develop such skills in school leaders which gives rise to the professional learning piece of the puzzle. Figure 3.2 shows the final visual diagram of the CF with appendix B illustrating the CF journey from the initial literature review and research map to the visual summary.

Figure 3.2 Conceptual Framework



3.5 Methodological Approach: The Case Study Design

In aligning with the epistemological and ontological stances of this research, the qualitative approach is ideally placed as it views reality as something that is created by individuals through their interactions (Merriam, 1998). This study sought to gain insights into school leader perspectives on special class provision alongside the leadership practices they adopt and where they need support. Therefore, capturing the current experiences of the participants required a combination of qualitative data generation tools to gather data from a case study approach. This offers a rich and detailed exploration of complex issues (such as making schools more inclusive) in real-life contexts. It also offers the flexibility needed to gather information that will answer the research questions (Pearson, Albon and Hubball, 2015).

When considering the research design, the researcher drew from Yin (2018) who advises to look at the research question you are trying to address, with case studies being particularly effective in addressing ‘how’ and ‘why’ exploratory questions. In this case, the researcher is seeking to find out the ‘how’ of supporting school leaders in enacting ISL. Similarly, if the SISLCoP is a supportive mechanism to support ISL, why is this so? The ‘why’ should explore what hinders and supports this model of PL. These questions can be answered by investigating, through empirical inquiry, a current phenomenon where context adds another layer of complexity (Yin, 2009).

It is essential that boundaries are drawn around specific cases to enable the phenomena under investigation to be explored (Denscombe, 2014). The bounded case in this case study is the group of principals who participate in this CoP and share a common interest in inclusive and special education. An interesting feature of this case study is the fact that each participant brings their own contextual experiences to the fore in group discussions. The researcher recognises the added complexity this brings to the case (Mabry, 2008). A case is also a naturally occurring phenomenon that exists before and after the research (Yin, 2009). In this case, the SISLCoP was born out of a principal support network that continued to operate after the research element had concluded. Given the potential for bias in case study research (Cohen *et al.*, 2018), this prompted the researcher to reflect on his positionality in more detail. This exploration of positionality and in particular the role of the ‘insider researcher’ is discussed next.

3.5.1 Positionality: The Insider Researcher

The insider researcher refers to a researcher who is a member of the group being studied (Breen, 2007). In contrast, the outsider researcher can be defined as a researcher who does not share the same characteristics or belong to the group under investigation. However, this is quite a linear viewpoint, which doesn’t acknowledge the potential for a continuum-based interpretation where both ‘insiderness’ and ‘outsiderness’ can be valued by their strengths and weaknesses (Mercer, 2007). In this case, the researcher combines leadership research with the practice of leadership as a principal in a primary school and thus situates himself as ‘pracademic’. In simple terms, a pracademic is one who combines scholarly research with professional practice (Dickfos, 2019).

A key consideration in this project is where the researcher sits on the insider-outsider continuum, in other words, to what extent is the researcher acting as a professional and in

what situations is the researcher just acting as a researcher (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). This role duality was consistently reflected upon throughout the research process. The researcher is the coordinator of the SISLCoP, an active member of the group, as well as a researcher. This triad of roles brings a challenge to the project in both reflexivity and overall coordination of the research project. Furthermore, the researcher recruited the participants from a principal support group of which he was the coordinator, therefore previous relationships with members had been established. This emphasises the need for the researcher to exercise reflexivity with the potential for preconceived ideas of participants and being an ‘intimate insider’ (Taylor, 2011). To address this, the researcher was clear about his role with participants in the first meeting. In addition, during reflections and analysis stages, the researcher consciously acted as a researcher only and this was supported by the peer debriefing process (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007) where supervisors gave feedback to reflections after each SISLCoP meeting.

3.6 Sampling Procedure and Participants

In deciding on a sampling strategy, the researcher considered the personnel from whom the data would be generated from.

3.6.1 Sampling Procedure

Given the unique nature of the CoP that was set up for this project, the sampling procedure can be described as both purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling is described as a sample that satisfies the specific requirements of the project (Robson, 2011). The sampling could be considered purposive as participants were all recruited based on their interest in inclusive education and leading a mainstream school with special classes. Furthermore, as data related to the experiences of participation in the SISLCoP was required, participants had to be part of the group. Similarly, the sampling strategy could also be considered convenience sampling as this relates to choosing the nearest and most convenient respondents (Robson, 2011). This was the case in this research as all participants were located in the same geographical area which made the project logistically viable to enable face-to-face meetings. This sampling procedure was essential for the feasibility of this study given the workload demands for this cohort of participants (IPPN,

2022) and the researcher. As with all social science research, access to the right profile of participants is crucial to the success of the research project (Denscombe, 2014).

3.6.2 Participants

All participants were part of a support group for principals, specifically dedicated to principals of mainstream schools with special classes in the Northeast of Ireland. The researcher is the coordinator of this group of 32 primary school principals. To avoid the possibility of any members of this group feeling under duress, they were reminded of the voluntary nature of the research and that participation in the SISLCoP is not a requirement for being part of the support group. Therefore, it was important to draw a distinction between the support group and the SISLCoP. The range of schools represented a wide range of educational contexts such as rural, urban, Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Band 1 and 2, junior schools and senior schools. This purposive sampling strategy was adopted to achieve greater representation (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) of the Irish context. Once participants were recruited, each volunteer was contacted by the researcher to go through the plain language statement (Appendix C) and address any questions or concerns. Informed consent forms (Appendix D) were obtained, along with consent from the Chairpersons of the boards of management of the schools who elected to host a meeting. Table 3.2 outlines a brief summary of each principal's school context, leadership experience and other demographical characteristics along with their pseudonym.

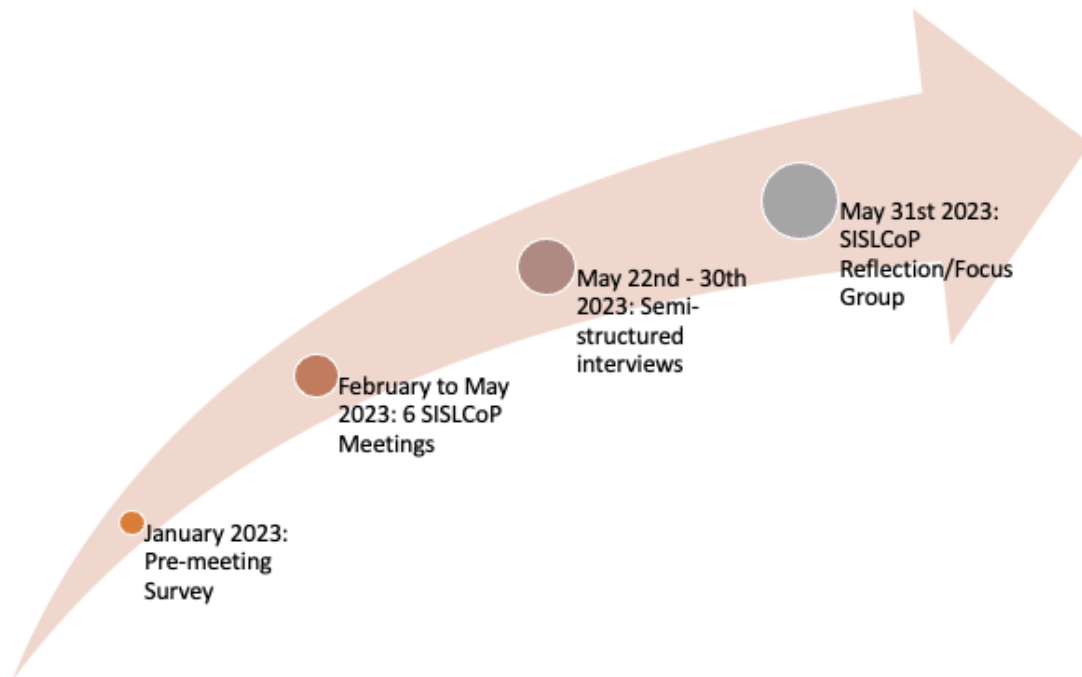
Table 3.2 Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	School Context	Leadership Role	Leadership Experience (years)	Number of Special classes	Special Class Designation
Researcher	Male	DEIS Band 2 all boys	Administrative	6	2	Autism
Beverley	Female	DEIS Band 1 Co-Ed	Administrative	4	1	Autism
Tess	Female	DEIS Band 1 Junior School	Administrative	4	1	Speech and Language Disorder
Avril	Female	Rural	Teaching Principal	6	2	Autism
Maeve	Female	Urban Junior School	Administrative	8	3	Autism
Pete	Male	DEIS Band 2 All girls	Administrative	3	2	Autism
Eva	Female	Rural Vertical	Administrative	12	2	Autism
Sadbh	Female	DEIS Band 2 Urban Co-Ed	Administrative	6	1	Autism
Cáit	Female	Urban All boys vertical	Administrative	1	2	Autism
Freya	Female	Rural	Teaching Principal	6	2	Autism
Paul	Male	Rural	Teaching Principal	24	1	Autism
Bob	Male	Rural	Administrative	25	1	Autism

3.7 Data Generation Methods

The data generation phase of the study was carried out over a five-month period which is outlined in figure 3.3 and preceded by the piloting phase.

Figure 3.3 Data Generation Timeline



Firstly, a participant survey was used as an aid for setting up that initial meeting and getting a sense of participants' understanding of ISL. The semi-structured interviews took place after the 6th SISLCoP meeting and before the final (focus group) meeting. In terms of case study research, interviews are seen as an essential source, given the fact that they can offer explanations and insights into participants' perspectives and reflections on their participation (Yin, 2018). This data was supplemented by the SISLCoP meeting audio recordings and researcher reflections which provided further insights into interview topics and themes. The final SISLCoP meeting was used as a reflection session, which took place after the interviews and therefore was effectively a focus group interview. This was particularly useful in terms of clarifying issues that arose from the interviews and facilitated a group reflection on the SISLCoP journey to date. The session also looked at the sustainability of the group and planning for future meetings. This session was also transcribed for further analysis. The next sub-sections will first describe the piloting measures followed by a description of each data generation tool in more detail.

3.7.1 Piloting Data Generation Tools

As part of the quality assurance procedures, a number of piloting measures were taken. Firstly, the pre-meeting survey was piloted amongst two principals outside of the SISLCoP group. These principals also had experience of carrying out doctoral research and, therefore, were able to offer words of advice from a participant and researcher perspective. The feedback from the pilot participants was very positive with no recommendations for improvement and both found the survey a good reflective exercise as it made them pause to reflect on their own practice. They also timed themselves and indicated an approximate ‘filling-in’ time of twenty minutes.

The semi-structured interview was piloted with a principal who intended to be a participant in the SISLCoP, but later pulled out in advance of the study due to time constraints. This made him an ideal candidate to pilot the interview as he had some familiarity with the research and met the criteria of a primary school principal of a mainstream school with special classes. Firstly, this pilot interview gave the researcher an opportunity to get an idea of the length of time it would take to get through all the prompts. Secondly, and most importantly, the researcher spoke too often in the interview and interjected unnecessarily. This critical reflection reminded the researcher of the potential harm in terms of generating data that just correlates with their own viewpoints. A conscious awareness of this was brought into the subsequent interviews to ensure the researcher’s voice or viewpoint was not influencing the interviewee. Finally, the pilot highlighted a number of questions or prompts that were slightly ambiguous. These questions were edited for clarity. In summary, reflecting on the researcher’s performance at the pilot interview supported the researcher’s skills development as an interviewer (Robson, 2011).

3.7.2 Pre-Meeting Survey

The pre-meeting survey was a reflection instrument designed by the European Agency (EASNIE, 2022) and slightly adapted for the Irish context (Appendix E). Initially, it was thought this instrument would be used as a baseline measure to look at where school leaders place themselves on a continuum of inclusive school leadership. However, uptake was slow on filling it out, and only 6 were returned prior to the first meeting. This was understandable given the level of time and input participants agreed to in taking part in the research. As a result, the decision was made not to ask participants to fill out the survey again post-intervention and just use it to inform the first session. As an alternative to measure post-engagement impact, the final SISLCoP session took the form of a focus group session.

3.7.3 Meeting Recordings and Researcher Reflections

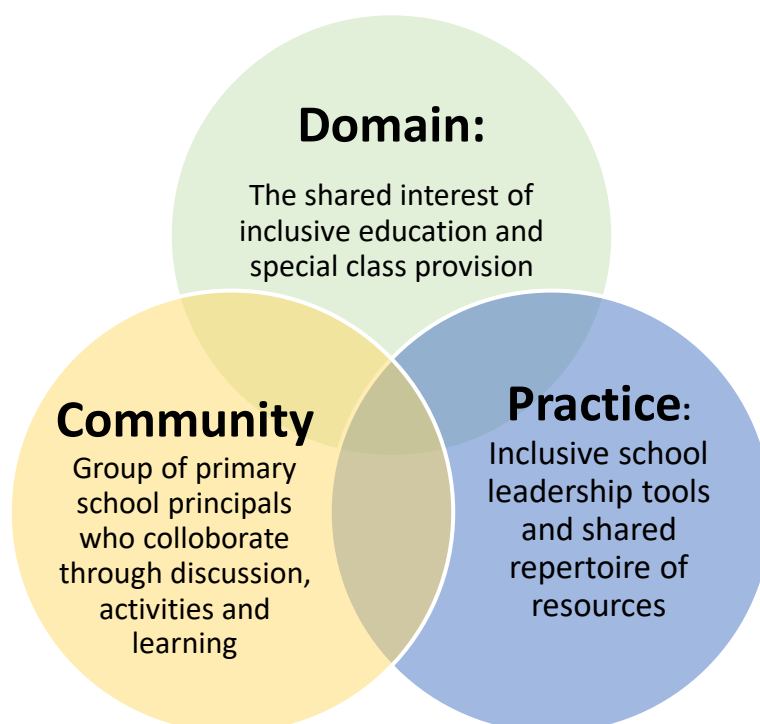
Each SISLCoP meeting was audio recorded and listened back to, which assisted the researcher's reflections and later coded as part of the thematic analysis phase. The recordings proved particularly useful to the researcher as they enabled him to fully engage in the meetings as a participant and aided reflexivity in examining his own beliefs, thoughts and reactions. Each reflection was also forwarded to the research supervisors who provided thought-provoking feedback which supported the structure of the subsequent meetings. Table 3.3 summarises a brief outline of each CoP meeting with further details available in appendix F.

Table 3.3 Outline of SISLCoP Meetings

SISLCoP Meeting	Participants	Content
Meeting 1: 1/2/23 Researcher's school Duration: 2 hours	9	Brief overview of research project; introductions; protocols; goal setting; agree definition of inclusion; ISL and problems of practice; reflection and next steps.
Meeting 2: 22/2/23 Zoom Duration: 2 hours	10	Recap and revisit goals; links to policy; ISL development; problems of practice; reflection and one small step
Meeting 3: 8/3/23 Beverley's school Duration: 2 hours	7	Recap; problems of practice; What went well (WWW); ISL development; reflection and one small step; learning walk
Meeting 4: 29/3/23 Tess' school Duration: 2 hours	11	Recap and digging deeper on issues raised at last session; problems of practice; ISL development; reflection and one small step; learning walk
Meeting 5: 3/5/23 Sadbh's school Duration: 2 hours	7	Recap; problems of practice; ISL development; developing staff capacity; linking ISL to leading inclusive practice; reflection and one small step; learning walk
Meeting 6: 17/5/23 Maeve's school Duration: 2 hours	6	Recap; what's working well (WWW); problems of practice related to developing staff capacity; making the mainstream more inclusive; ISL development and inclusive school development; reflection and one small step; learning walk
Meeting 7: 31/5/23 Zoom Duration: 1 hour	9	Reflection on the journey of the SISLCoP; problems of practice and solutions; Matters arising from interviews; Summarising our understanding of ISL; the future of the SISLCoP

Following the establishment of the SISLCoP in meeting 1, the next phase of development centred on clarifying the community's focus (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Figure 3.4 puts forward a framework for this stage of development, which signals the key issue for each core element of the community of practice.

Figure 3.4 Growing and Sustaining the SISLCoP



Considerations were made by the researcher on how best to host the meetings in order to gain the benefits of a face-to-face format, as well as being conscious of the busy schedules of the principal participants. It was decided to opt for a hybrid format to draw from the advantages of live face-to-face and online (Zoom) meetings. The most obvious advantage of online meetings for participants with busy schedules is the time-saving nature of this format as it cuts out travel. This was highlighted in similar studies, but also led to decreased interactions with peers in comparison to live, in-person sessions (Bouchamma *et al.*, 2018). Participants were also encouraged to log in from home to avoid the interruptions of the school office that can impact focus and engagement in the meeting (Bouchamma, *et al.*, 2018).

Energy and sustained interest are crucial to the effectiveness and survival of a CoP. Wenger *et al.*, (2002, p.51) suggest that a CoP is organic and designing them 'is more a matter of shepherding their evolution than creating them from scratch'. They also build from pre-existing networks (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) and similarly, in this case, the participants have been recruited from an existing network. Therefore, many personal relationships within the SISLCoP have already been formed and adding the research element to this acted as a 'catalyst for community growth and development' (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 64). Thus, careful coordination of the group meetings was necessary to ensure a balance between

focused discussion and energising participation. Towards the end of meetings, participants were invited on learning walks during meetings where they would continue discussions whilst looking around a host's school. Each meeting finished with a personal reflection where each participant considered their key takeaways, what action they might take and how they might develop that action.

3.7.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Ten out of the twelve SISLCoP members elected to take part in semi-structured interviews after the 6th SISLCoP meeting. This style of interviewing was selected as it allowed for flexibility and a relaxed conversational setting to elicit the data. This research is also focused on the perspectives of the participants involved, and semi-structured interviews allow for a conversational atmosphere to collect the data needed, as well as scope for further probing and interviewee elaboration (Denscombe, 2014; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). Interviews are considered an essential source of case study research (Yin, 2009) and support the interpretive paradigm of this research as they seek to investigate each participant's subjective lived experiences (Cohen, *et al.*, 2018).

In designing and conducting the interviews, the researcher drew from the framework of Brown and Danaher (2019) who purport the use of Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy (CHE) principles to assist in ensuring a more dialogical and authentic approach between interviewer and interviewee. Connectivity is associated with rapport-building, something which the literature has highlighted as an important factor in a worthwhile interview (Bryman and Teevan, 2005; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018; Roulston and Choi, 2018). Humanness is positioned on the premise that the interview is a two-way sharing of information and researchers are encouraged to express their humanity (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury, 2013). The third principle of empathy is closely connected with the principle of rapport (Brown and Danaher, 2019) and enables the interviewee to feel supported as the interviewer demonstrates an understanding of their situation.

In order to ensure the data collected at interviews related to the research questions, an interview schedule was developed (Appendix G). There were three distinct sections that needed to be covered to get participant perspectives on special classes and inclusion, inclusive school leadership and to evaluate their PL from engaging with the SISLCoP.

There was flexibility in the order of these questions/prompts to allow the interviewee to develop their ideas and speak more freely (Denscombe, 2014).

3.7.5 Reflection Session/Focus Group

The final SISLCoP meeting took place via Zoom and took the format of a reflection session (Appendix F), which operated like a focus group session where the researcher was able to probe further into topics or issues that arose in the interviews. The objective of a focus group is to generate conversations that gather opinions on certain issues (Cyr, 2016) which supports the interpretive paradigm of this research. In this meeting, there was less facilitation by the researcher with the focus on getting participants to reflect on the PL experience and address common themes that emerged from the participant interviews. The session was recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

3.8 Quality Assurance

Qualitative research is a contested space for assuring reliability and validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), therefore attention shifts to a more practical and flexible approach that is necessary for quality qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Some argue that qualitative research requires a different set of criteria to be used such as trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1994) or credibility and rigour (Tracy, 2010) to name but a few. This section addresses these issues by adhering to the criteria in table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Eight Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research Applied to this Study

Criteria for quality (Tracy, 2010)	Various means, practices and methods through which to achieve	Actions and outcomes from this research
Worthy topic	The topic of the research is • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting	Clear rationale for research topic, outlined in Chapter 1
Rich Rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis processes	Literature informed conceptual framework designed (Chapter 3) Relevant sample, context and time spent in the field (Table 3.2 and Table 3.3) Data generation and analysis (Chapter 3)
Sincerity	The study is characterised by • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases and inclinations or the researcher • Transparency about the methods and challenges	Researcher reflections (Chapter 3 and Appendix H) Positionality and insider researcher (Chapter 3)
Credibility	The research is marked by • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallisation • Multivocality • Member reflections	Rich data triangulated from multiple data sources and participants (Chapter 3)
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through: • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalisations • Transferable findings	Findings presented in a coherent manner with relatable content for readers to support transferability (Chapter 4)
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically	ISLA Framework (Figure 5.1) in Chapter 5
Ethical	The research considers • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics	Ethical procedures in Chapter 3 and approved by ethics committee (Appendix A)
Meaningful coherence	The study • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions, findings and interpretations with each other	Answering the research questions and contribution to knowledge in Chapter 6 Discussion in Chapter 5

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are imperative in all research endeavours but are particularly important when researching in the field of education where more vulnerable learners are being discussed by participants of the SISLCoP. Therefore, the ethical process and procedures for this project were strictly adhered to due to the complex nature of the methodological issues presented with this type of research (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). Ethical approval was sought and granted by Dublin City University (DCU) in January 2023 (Appendix A). Throughout the research process, the ethical guidelines produced by the university were strictly adhered to (DCU, 2021) and the research was deemed to fall under the category of an expedited level of risk.

The voluntary nature of participation was important as it reduced the potential for participants to feel under duress to take part. At no point was pressure placed on principals to participate, as a key element of a CoP is that they are voluntary in nature and participants take part because of their shared passion in the domain element of the CoP (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) and the shared learning and interest in the topic is what gives the group sustainability (Wenger, 1999). The voluntary nature and participant requirements were explained to participants via plain language statements (PLS) as well as a follow-up phone call with each participant individually before the first meeting, to ensure they understood the research and what their participation involved. Access to these participants was gained through a local principal support group in the northeast of Ireland. During an online network meeting, the researcher briefly spoke about the research by highlighting the contents of the PLS (Appendix C), followed by direct contact via email and phone. Informed consent forms (ICF) were sent and filled by each of the principals (Appendix D) and Chairpersons of Boards of Management of the school principals who offered to host a meeting (Appendix I). The right to withdraw at any point of the study was outlined to the participants without any consequences (Cohen *et al.*, 2018) prior to the first meeting and again prior to individual semi-structured interviews. Should they have opted to withdraw, all data pertaining to them would be removed.

It is important to note that participants were informed about the contextual factors that may hinder confidentiality and anonymity. Despite every effort to protect participant identity through the anonymisation of transcripts and the use of pseudonyms, there still remained a risk of participants being identified given the small-scale geography of the project. This was clearly outlined to the participants prior to participation in SISLCoP meetings and

again before the commencement of the semi-structured interviews. Similarly, they were made aware of the legal obligations of the data should anything be disclosed during meetings or interviews, for example, a child protection issue. A confidentiality agreement was also made at meeting 1 (Appendix J) which outlined an agreement between participants that anything discussed outside of the SISLCoP meetings would not be attributed to specific individuals and only discussed in generalities around issues raised.

In terms of data management, careful attention was given to securely managing the data and protecting the anonymity of participants. All signed and handwritten documents such as PLS forms, and ICF forms were scanned and uploaded to the encrypted DCU Google Drive. The hard copies were then shredded. The audio recordings of meetings and interview transcripts were uploaded to Nvivo and are retained for 5 years after the publication of the research. This is in line with the DCU Code of Good Research Practice (DCU, 2021) and is also a necessary timeframe to effectively analyse the data and disseminate the research. The findings and feedback from the research were offered to the participants and are scheduled to feature as an item at a future SISLCoP meeting agenda. The data will also be used to inform future publications and shared during presentations at conferences.

3.10 Data Analysis

Prior to the analysis of the data, all the meeting audio recordings, interview transcripts and researcher reflections were imported into Nvivo, a qualitative research data management tool. This allowed all data to be collected and managed efficiently in the one location, which also acted as a central location for the research audit trail. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai and imported to Nvivo. Otter.ai is a transcription software that was used to support the transcription process. Despite issues with accuracy, the software did provide a structured layout to the researcher which he found beneficial as it encouraged deep listening to edit the transcripts which led to an intimate engagement with the data (Marshall and Rossman, 2014).

This research also gathered a large volume of data which includes meeting recordings, interview transcripts, a focus group transcript along with the researcher reflections. Considering the wide-ranging options available to the researcher in terms of analytical tools from research literature, it was important to remember no single approach can suit all situations (Denscombe, 2014). Therefore, the search for an appropriate method of data

analysis became a search for the most appropriate method for this project rather than an exact match. The researcher adopted Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021) supported by the same author's guidebook (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis is a process for 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 4).

In order to instil confidence in the findings, careful attention has been given to the data analysis cycles with the rationale for each stage of analysis outlined in this section (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). Each stage of coding and analysis is detailed in Table 3.5 with a sample of work available in the appendices that illustrates each phase.

Table 3.5 Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description of the Process	Appendix Example
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	Appendix K
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.	Appendix L: Open Coding
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Appendix M: Initial themes
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis	Appendix N: Thematic Map
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	Appendix O: Phase 5 codebook
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.	Appendix P: Sample of extracts related to codes and research questions

During the familiarisation phase of data analysis, the researcher became intimately immersed in the data by re-reading the transcripts, taking notes, listening back to the audio recordings of the meetings and reflecting on the researchers' post-meeting reflections. Step two involved generating initial codes which was done by reading, re-reading and listening to the audio recordings and collating the data relevant to each code. This was all done on Nvivo 12. In this project, a code is the term given to a word or short phrase that represents a key attribute or summary of a portion of language or audio-based data (Saldana, 2021). Coding is the process of 'exploring the diversity and patterning of meaning from the dataset, developing codes, and applying code labels to specific segments of each data item' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 53). The code referenced here is the output of the process of coding, which gives the researcher the foundations for developing initial themes. They are 'heuristic devices' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.59) which allow the researcher to engage with the data, understand it and create meaning from it. As an example from this research,

the code ‘defining inclusion’ was given to a segment from an interview with a participant when she discussed what inclusion meant to her in her own context (Appendix Q). This coding phase was done with a clear and open mind (inductive coding), without expectation or assumption of what codes might appear (Saldana, 2021).

Phases three, four and five involved organisation, theme generation, refinement and a consistent over and back between the data and the themes to ensure they are coherent. For example, some themes did not have enough data to support their inclusion as a standalone theme and similarly, some themes were collapsed to form a more general theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As an additional layer of quality assurance in the thematic analysis, the researcher used Braun and Clarke’s (2022, p. 269) 15-point checklist (Table 3.6) for good reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). This checklist is not a ‘do or don’t’ of thematic analysis, but more so an added process of rigour. For example, when check number 9 was completed, the findings relating to stakeholder attitudes were omitted as they did not directly address the research question, despite being very interesting data.

Table 3.6 Braun and Clarke's 15-Point Checklist for Good RTA (2022, p.269)

NO.	Process	Criteria
1	Transcription	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail; all transcripts have been checked against the original recordings for 'accuracy'
2	Coding and theme development	Each data item has been given thorough and repeated attention in the coding process.
3		The coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive; themes have not been developed from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach)
4		All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated
5		Candidate themes have been checked against coded data and back to the original dataset
6		Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive; each of them contains a well-defined central organising concept; any subthemes share the central organising concept of the theme.
7	Analysis and interpretation – in the written report	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just summarised, described or paraphrased.
8		Analysis and data match each other – the extracts evidence the analytic claims.
9		Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic; analysis addresses the research question.
10		An appropriate balance between analytic narrative and data extracts is provided.
11	Overall	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase, or giving it a once-over-lightly (including returning to earlier phases or redoing the analysis if needs be).
12	Written report	The specific approach to thematic analysis, and the particulars of the approach, including theoretical positions and assumptions, are clearly explicated.
13		There is a good fit between what was claimed and what was done – i.e., the described method and reported analysis are consistent.
14		The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions of the analysis.
15		The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the robust methodological approach that was adopted for this study. The philosophical underpinnings of interpretivism were discussed in terms of how the research questions were formalised and guided the qualitative research design. Next, the research audit trail was outlined and discussed in terms of developing the conceptual framework, sampling, data generation and analysis. This is essential to develop trustworthiness in qualitative research (Carcary, 2009). Ethical considerations were discussed and the chapter concluded with an outline of the data analysis. The next chapter will describe the findings of this research study following the application of this methodological approach.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into three sections representing the findings and overarching themes that were generated from the research instruments. These included a pre-meeting participant survey, meeting recordings, researcher reflections, semi-structured interviews and a focus group session. Section one details the findings in relation to inclusion and special class provision. Section two focuses on the practices participants engaged in that align with a theory of ISL (outlined in Chapter 2). Section three presents findings relating to the SISLCoP as a PL experience for school leaders to support them in leading more inclusive schools. Each section begins with a thematic map to assist the reader. The research set out to explore the role of a CoP in supporting principals to enact inclusive school leadership and answer the following research questions:

- What are school leaders' current experiences of leading mainstream primary schools with special classes in the context of inclusion?
- What leadership practices and activities are principals who lead special classes in primary schools engaging in?
- To what extent is a CoP an effective model of professional learning to support principals in enacting ISL in their primary schools?

This chapter is descriptive in style and uses extracts and quotes from the data collected. It is focused on describing and analysing the data only, with the synthesis presented in Chapter 5 where the findings are discussed in relation to the literature while Chapter 6 directly answers the research questions.

In qualitative studies, frequency and prevalence of data are not straightforward (Braun and Clarke, 2022) nor would it be appropriate to use in this study. When reading this chapter, there will be four statements of frequency used (Table 4.1) when reporting data. This is not an attempt to quantify the data but more so a strategy to provide the reader with the strength or consistency of the theme. Please also note that 10 out of 12 participants were interviewed, therefore any findings relating to meeting recordings and researcher observations may include up to 12 participants.

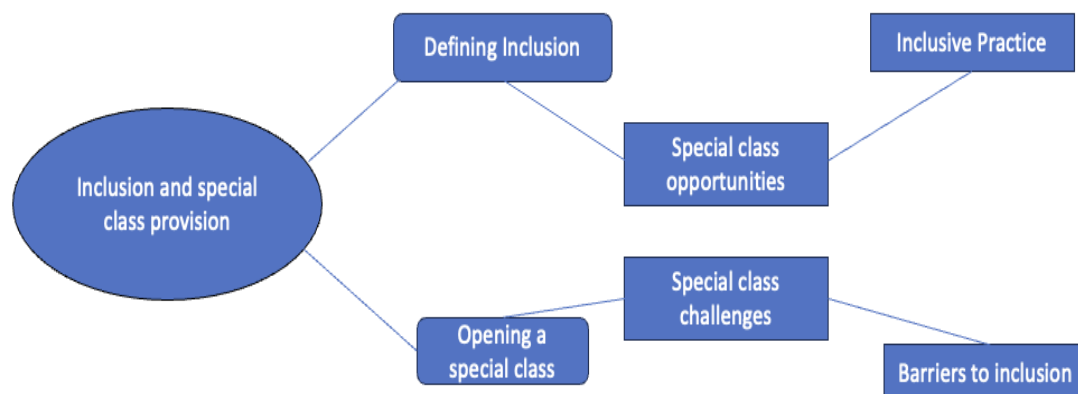
Table 4.1 Quantifying Language Guide

Term	Approximate quantity of participants
Some	2- 4
Many	5 – 7
Most	8-10

4.2 Section 1: Inclusion and Special Class Provision

This section explores participant views on inclusion and findings relating to principal perspectives on including learners enrolled in a special class in their mainstream schools. Every participant in this research was a primary school principal who was leading a mainstream school that provided special class provision at the time of interviews. The findings relating to this theme are illustrated in Figure 4.1 and discussed in the next subsection.

Figure 4.1 Sub-Themes Related to Inclusion and Special Class Provision



4.2.1 Defining Inclusion

Arriving at a shared understanding of inclusion was the first task of the group during SISLCoP meeting 1 and the issue was explored again during the semi-structured interviews. Having a shared vision and common purpose is central to an effective CoP

(Diaz, *et al.*, 2021). All participants shared the view that inclusion is a term that should be looked at in its broadest sense despite the SISLCoP being focused on the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes. This focus was chosen based on the following reasons:

- The rights-based view of inclusion underpinning the conceptual framework of this study
- The query over the possibility of special classes being compatible with the UNCRPD
- Research highlighted that this cohort of learners spent a significant amount of their day in their special class and were less likely to be included with their mainstream peers (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Banks *et al.*, 2016).
- All participants are leading mainstream schools that provide special class provision

Participants were first asked to share what comes to mind when they hear the word inclusion (Fig 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Inclusion Word Cloud from Meeting 1



Next, the facilitator shared four contrasting definitions of inclusion from the literature (Table 4.2) and participants were asked to walk to the definition that they related most with. The participant handbook had a wide range of definitions of inclusion (Appendix R) to illustrate the lack of agreement in the literature. These particular definitions were chosen as they represented a broad range of concepts of inclusion, from disability-focused to a

sense of belonging. The definitions were provided as a stimulus for discussion to support the group in arriving at a shared understanding of inclusion.

Sadbh summarised her thoughts by saying ‘I could live with or die happily by choosing A, C, or D but not B’ (Sadbh, Meeting 1). This is because she found particular difficulty with the notion of following the same curriculum at the same time, which she said is ‘impossible’. Beverley suggested that ‘each build on the other and ultimately it’s a broader version we need to include gender, socio-economic factors and so on’ (Beverley, Meeting 1).

Table 4.2 Definitions of Inclusion from the Literature

A	A set of principles which ensures that the student with a disability is viewed as a valued and needed member of the community in every respect (Uditsky, 2007, p.88)
B	Being in the ordinary school with other students, following the same curriculum at the same time, in the same classrooms, with the full acceptance of all, and in a way which makes the student feel no different from other students (Bailey, 2007, p.173)
C	Addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance in school (Winter and O’Raw, 2010, p.39)
D	Inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise) (Goodall, 2020)

Bob also highlighted this broader definition of inclusion during the focus group meeting and warned of the assumption that it is only for those with SEN:

Inclusivity in the broadest sense of the word...when I mentioned it here, automatically everyone thinks, oh, yeah, the children in the special class are being included as much as possible... It's not just the children in the special class. It's children from different countries, children of different religions...Kids don't have to be in a special class to have problems with being included or not... (Bob, Focus Group).

Beverley extends this broad notion of inclusion when it comes to DEIS schools, describing this particular context as having ‘so many different facets’ and the opening of a special class for her school ‘was not such a big deal’ as they were dealing with ‘an incredible variety of individual needs on any given day’. As a result, she described her staff as being ‘so used to differentiating in multiple ways that SEN is, you know, in the main, it's not such a big deal’ (Beverley, Interview).

Similarly, Sadbh believed her experience of teaching and leadership in a DEIS school had an impact on her views of inclusion as she looks at education through a ‘DEIS lens’:

And so, I think about inclusion...this is probably my own bias coming to it... I kind of think some people are just looking at it through a special educational needs lens... the SEN part of it is...just one part of the puzzle. (Sadbh, Interview)

Another participant warned of the danger of tokenism and inclusion as just a buzzword:

It's a buzzword too and everybody says they're an inclusive school. Yeah...you can get a badge that says it. And that's fine, but when I peel it back, what I think is, if I had a child with any form of needs, I would like to go and feel that I could go into the school and talk to any member of staff and that they shared the same sort of values that I had, and goals that I had for my child. And that's to sort of embrace them for what they are. And to focus upon their strengths and bring them along at their own rate, and to have an understanding and empathy towards that child in a way that's just a little bit different to a mainstream child that doesn't have needs and view them as an opportunity to upskill and to develop a relationship that goes beyond just...academics (Pete, Interview).

The sense of belonging was important to participants, most participants aligned with definition D in Table 4.2, where students in the community regardless of need could attend their local school where they 'feel like they belong' (Maeve, Interview). In summary, participants agreed during the interviews, by sharing examples, that inclusion is a broad concept that can be centred around the meaningful presence, participation and achievement of all learners in their local schools. From these findings, presence and participation are linked with belonging while achievement is looked at broadly, going 'beyond just academics'. Given the broad concepts of inclusion that were discussed at meeting one, opening a special class presents a dilemma for participants in terms of ensuring their vision for inclusive education being compatible with special class provision. There was also evidence from the pre-meeting survey of a lack of clarity around a school's vision of inclusion that is underpinned by children's right to an inclusive education. Here, many respondents considered articulating such a vision as an emerging practice (not yet established). The next section looks at the motivations or reasons behind opening special classes in their mainstream schools.

4.2.2 Opening a Special Class

According to the NCSE (NCSE, 2023), a special class is established based on collaborative engagement between the NCSE, schools, and families of children with SEN as well as boards of management, patrons and DE. The findings from this research would suggest this collaboration was absent with some participant schools taking the lead on opening the class, such as Eva who commented ‘we were one of the strange schools that actually looked for one’. Eva’s school pushed for the opening of a special class as in one particular year they had a spare room, which coincided with junior infant applications from siblings of students enrolled in the school, all of whom had recommendations for a special class placement. Other participants such as Sadbh felt they were put under pressure from the special educational needs organiser (SENO). The SENO is responsible for coordinating supports for special education and special class provision on behalf of the NCSE (NCSE, 2024c).

One school described the opening of a special as something that was ultimately inevitable but came to fruition due to several factors:

From before I became principal, our SENO had been knocking on our door. And we were kind of, I suppose kicking the can down the road. And for a while, I was kind of quite content to kick that can down the road. And then, at the time, I suppose our numbers were not looking great. And I kind of thought, well, this will sure up somebody's job for another year. And I don't want to be forced or shamed in the media, you know, so we had kind of said, at our last Board of Management, we won't do it this year, but we will do it next year (Sadbh, Interview).

This extract illustrates a number of motivating factors that arguably may not be borne from a commitment to inclusion. The first two reasons of job security and avoiding negative media attention could be considered as non-inclusion related factors. The fear of negative media attention stemmed from the situation in Dublin 15 where the Minister for Special Education compelled 25 schools to open special classes (O’Brien, 2020). This participant also believed that there is a perception out there for schools that do not have special classes to ‘avoid it as long as you possibly can’ due to the increase in workload for principals. That said, the same participant also went on to discuss the positive impact the opening of the class had on the school and it is something she looks back upon with great pride. Similarly, Beverley saw the opening of their special class partly down to the fact that they ‘could see it coming down the tracks’ (Beverley, Interview 3). They also cited that they would prefer to open on their own terms as opposed to being told to do it (by the NCSE). These factors are arguably not made based on a school’s inclusive vision or align with participants’ earlier

definitions of inclusion. This highlights the rocky ground special classes are established upon and arguably not linked to the policy imperative of a special class being established as another supportive layer to the continuum of SEN provision available in local schools (NCSE, 2024a).

However, Beverley and some other participants were motivated by meeting the needs of their local community, articulated here by Paul:

We had two siblings, three siblings that had to go to other schools, because we didn't have the facility. So, we felt that we should be able to offer that to siblings of children that are coming to the school, and children of the parish.

Thus, this motivating factor aligns with the belonging (or presence) element of their understanding of inclusion. This quote also describes the dilemmas faced by parents who are recommended places in special classes by psychologists and feel it is the only option for their child. Another participant spoke of similar experiences of this dilemma when opening a third class where she felt it was met with resistance from the NCSE. In this case, the school had 5 junior infants with recommendations for special classes who were enrolled and had started mainstream classes. The principal and NEPS psychologist were adamant mainstream was not the correct placement for these children. Despite the resistance, the NCSE agreed to sanction the third class. The issue over the perceived correct placement for students was further discussed at meetings under the problems of practice section and led to the querying of labelling special classes with a particular SEN which is explored in the special class challenges section.

Eva, who described her school as one of the 'strange schools that actually looked for one' (Interview), explained their motivation to open: 'what really made us push to do it was we had an empty room that particular year, and we had four or five applications for junior infants for the following year'. This is a similar reasoning to previous participants who saw the need in the area. However, this was the single motivating factor for this school in comparison to the other three who also had been approached by the SENO about opening a class.

Some schools opted to open a second class. Three participant schools had done this or were about to open the second class in the next school year. When asked about why they opened a second class, one participant again spoke of the need in the area:

It was largely because of the need in the area. And we were serving literally our own area. And what made us open the second one is we had another three or four applicants who have siblings in the school (Eva, Interview).

Another reason for the opening of the second class was to address the issue of teacher isolation and building a community of teachers with specialist knowledge. This was discussed at meeting 5 where participants were speaking about PL opportunities available to special class teachers and the benefits of having another special class teacher in the school to collaborate and share practice with. Paul shared this idea of building a community of special class teachers during interview:

I find that what our teacher found... when we opened up the first class, she felt very isolated. And she felt like it's a totally different ballgame from mainstream class teaching. So, she had done that for years, and then moved out. And, unfortunately, at the time, we had set up in a temporary modular classroom, which was detached from the school. So, it has taken us like the three, four years to build up the relationships between the children in the autism class and the children in the mainstream, and the teacher, as well. And one of our main reasons when we were asked would we consider opening the second one was, specifically that there would be a community of practice. And that's like, at least we will have two teachers and four SNAs that can share time and talk to each other and share ideas and bounce ideas off each other.

This quote offers an interesting insight into the unintended consequence of what may be described as internal segregation (Banks *et al.*, 2016). Whilst meeting the presence element of inclusion, there remained challenges in including these learners and staff with the wider school community.

Benefits for the students were also identified at meeting 6 where Freya described the benefits for the students:

It's even good in terms of inclusion for the kids in the other special class. They might find peers with similar interests as them because we have noticed friendships have developed between the classes.

When asked about developing friendships at interview, Freya spoke about the positive impact of not having separate play spaces for learners in the special class and increasing meaningful participation with their mainstream peers:

And there's one of the boys, he's sixth class, and like the fifth-class girls actually go and seek him out every day. And they all play together. And he is so happy out there. And they don't do it because anybody asks them to, they actually want to play with him. And like for him, that's massive...it's acceptance.

This example is more aligned to the definition of inclusion agreed at the first meeting where presence and participation are evident alongside the achievement of social acceptance by peers. This may be the policy intentions that are being pursued by policymakers (NCSE, 2024a). Many more opportunities and associated benefits of special class provision were highlighted and these are explored in the next subsections.

4.2.3 Special Class Opportunities: Inclusive Practices for Special Class Learners

All participants discussed examples of inclusive practices that were inclusive of students enrolled in the special class. In this study, inclusive practice is defined as any practice undertaken by school staff that supports enacting the concept of inclusion (Florian, 2009) as defined earlier. The data revealed practices meeting these criteria that ranged from reverse inclusion involving peers attending and engaging with them in their special class to inclusive practices taking place within the mainstream classroom.

Reverse inclusion was a practice discussed during meetings as a problem of practice which participants discussed and offered solutions to develop this practice. Whilst often cited in the policy documents as a practice that should be developed in schools (NCSE, 2016; Cullinane *et al.*, 2022), there is no clear guidance on how to do it. Reverse inclusion could be defined as a process whereby children from the mainstream classes join the special class for lessons or social development experiences. Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework used in Irish schools (NCCA, 2009) was also deemed supportive in this regard as children from the special class could pre-learn topics before they joined their mainstream class and this supported ‘making inclusion more meaningful’ (Maeve, Meeting 6). This is an example of a learner-centred practice that some participants who responded to the pre-meeting survey felt was an established practice in their schools. There were also reciprocal benefits for their mainstream peers in this regard as the researcher reflected on this practice after meeting 3:

The impact of reverse inclusion on the ‘neurotypical’ students was discussed, i.e. those chosen to work with children in the special classes. The benefit of reverse inclusion has an impact on developing student capacity to promote inclusion. Another secondary benefit discussed was the impact of students’ experiences being shared at home with parents. This may be going some way to impact wider societal

attitudes towards the inclusion of persons with additional needs (Researcher Reflection 3).

The role of SNAs also featured during meetings as a facilitator of inclusion and the importance of their voice as ‘a valuable...fountain of knowledge that maybe I wasn't dipping into as much as I should have been (MW, Interview). The role of SNAs goes beyond the scope of their policy remit (DES, 2014) and support the inclusion of learners with SEN in the Irish context according to stakeholders (Logan, 2006).

At a whole school level, inclusive practices were discussed at assembly when all classes gather. One adjustment to the traditional clapping was suggested by Eva:

Some of them (special class learners) come to assembly. But now instead of a loud clap during assembly, there might be a wave instead. We do this, because we know that certain children can't handle the noise. So, I suppose it's adjusting everybody.

This illustrates the small steps that can support learners' participation in the wider school community. Some suggestions were offered on what a more inclusive special class might look like, which might address some of the barriers to access and how the class operates in a more fluid way where access is based on need and not diagnosis:

But my idea of...an inclusive special class would be basically a class where there's, let's say, integration and reverse integration. The children don't view it as something along the side of the school, they just see it as another class within the school. And it's part of our school identity. And in the same way that we go in to do shared reading in second class, we go in to do a little bit of art in rang (Irish word for class) whatever. Do you know what I mean? (Pete, Interview).

This is further discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, with the challenges of special class provision in the context of inclusion discussed next.

4.2.4 Special Class Challenges: Barriers to Inclusion

A number of barriers to inclusion and inclusive practices were discussed during meetings and also during interviews. Barriers that hindered inclusion included the designation of special class by disability, the perceived lack of autonomy for principals, the physical location of the classes in the school, the lack of external support from other agencies, additional workload, resources, time for PL and collaboration and the COVID-19 pandemic.

One participant's school had a different special class designation other than autism. This special class was exclusively for learners with specific speech and language disorder (SSLD). This brought with it a different model of special class with some important differences to take note of. Unlike the autism special class designation, access to the class is timebound, giving a learner who meets the criteria access to one year with the possibility of a second-year extension (DE, 2021b). Secondly, access is also based on a response to intervention model whereby each learner enrolled has already engaged in speech and language interventions at clinics outside of the school context. The third main difference is the personnel resources, where each class is supported by a class teacher, a part-time SNA and a weekly on-site speech and language therapist. Lastly, the student-teacher ratio of 7:1 is higher than that of an autism class, supported by a part-time SNA (0.33 of a full-time SNA position).

The designation of a category of SEN to a special class was raised as problematic. This issue was highlighted by Maeve during meeting 6 when she described the policy of special class designation as contrary to inclusion, when she discussed a learner in her school who left to attend a special class for SSLD:

I have a student coming back to me who had to go...to a speech and language class and that really gets to me as that child is a twin and his twin is here and he's getting up and he's going on a bus for over an hour to get to a speech class and I've tried so many times to have that class here...so that to me is not inclusion when you're only focusing on one type of need.

Furthermore, Pete described the access issue as discriminatory to certain groups of SEN when the group discussed the prevalence of autism-specific special classes during meeting 3:

I also think they are discriminatory by nature of serving only one particular need as there are children in our mainstream with much higher need but because they don't have autism, they don't get as much support...I had a situation with a girl with Down Syndrome whose parents went and got a secondary autism diagnosis so they could get a place in our autism class.

These two examples highlighted by Maeve and Pete were discussed as problems of practice during SISLCoP meetings which were systemic issues and thus out of the control of the group. However, they do highlight some of the issues around special class designation and highlight the contradictory policy messages where an equity argument is made for a move away from diagnosis informed access in some (e.g. SETAM, DES, 2017) whilst the deficit

led diagnosis model remains in others (e.g. special class provision, NCSE, 2016). This topic is explored further in the recommendations for policy in Chapter 6.

Both Pete and Maeve felt the professional judgement of the school should be a factor in deciding who has access to the special classes, and not have such strict criteria:

There are children that we would have within our mainstream cohort that have multiple needs and they are high needs. And in some cases, I feel that the SET model doesn't cater for the extent that we have the profile that we have now...just because they don't...have the line that's needed in a report...they don't get access to the same level of one-to-one help that they need to get (Pete, Interview).

School leader frustrations were also highlighted in terms of their professional opinions not being valued when considering learners' needs:

I think valuing the professional judgement of principals in schools and teachers in the schools is a big thing. Because I think we all very much feel...that it's not taken into consideration. We're almost not believed. So, two people are sent out to look at everybody's timetable and check to the minute where everybody is, and where things can be shaved off. Yeah. You know, it's not a business at the end of the day. It's a caring, you know (Maeve, Interview).

However, not every principal participant was comfortable with such autonomy. For example, Tess, the principal of the school with an SSLD class, felt the input of the SLT was vital in terms of input into the decision, as she describes the staged process for accessing such a special class:

I suppose for us, we're working specifically with a speech and language therapist...the children are referred to speech therapy by a parent or by the school when they're younger...and they have to have attended X amount of blocks (of therapy)...So like I trust that speech therapists are picking the people (for the class) based on... a rating system.

The physical location of the special class was identified as an issue by some participants. In many school buildings, SEN classrooms were built on or contained to a certain side of a building. As Cáit noted, 'it's way off at the end of the building. That's a big thing. It's very segregated and you forget about it'. Similarly, Maeve found this to be a barrier to inclusion as she noted, 'I think physically where the autism classes are located, doesn't lend itself very well to inclusion'. Another participant also alluded to the inadequacies of the physical space of the special class location where she had an old building and described the necessity of being 'creative with your space' (Sadbh, Meeting 6) to facilitate inclusion.

The process of opening the class was deemed a negative experience, with one participant describing it as 'horrible' (Sadbh, Meeting 6) due to the lack of support in terms of timely access to professional development, the administration burden and lack of external support. The issues around external services were summarised succinctly by Paul who articulated the limitations of school staff, despite their goodwill and best efforts: 'We're educators, not physiotherapists or OT's' (Meeting 6). The pre-meeting survey indicated that many respondents felt that influencing national policy (such as special class provision) was not common practice in their schools. However, there was a clear willingness from all participants in working with external disciplines to improve outcomes for learners.

For real inclusion to happen in schools, Bob spoke during the focus group with intent:

The idea of inclusion is all well and good... but if it's not properly supported and resourced, essentially, it's not going to happen properly. You can't have inclusion if you don't have enough support services, if you don't have enough SNAs that's just not... We're just not capable... and schools do their best to make it happen under impossible circumstances. But they need to know...if they want us to pursue that policy they need to...give us the supports and staff the HSE properly.

The researcher noted that the group identified resources as the 'biggest barrier to successful inclusion' (Researcher Reflection 4) with one principal speaking of breakdowns in inclusion (special class learners being included with mainstream peers) due to the lack of SNA support. Timetabling meaningful inclusion with adequate support to make the inclusion meaningful was deemed 'impossible' with current resource levels.

The assumption that a lack of resources acted as a barrier to mainstream inclusion was backed up by Tess who argued that parents were reluctant to 'give-up' their child's place in a special class due to the mainstream not being able to provide the same level of support. When questioned on why she felt resistance from parents when attempting to move a child from a special class to full-time mainstream enrolment, she responded:

I think the resistance just comes from the parents knowing that they're not going to get that level of support, if they opt out and say, right, okay, if things go pear-shaped, they can't go back then. You know, it's like a safety net, nearly, you know?

However, one participant advised that focusing on the shortcomings of the system can be counter-productive:

I'm very clear about my moral compass. I'm very clear about having courage to act on what I'm being paid to do. So, for me...we can get very bogged down with the reality of the situation. And I think you have to look forward...you have to believe

that you have an opportunity as a leader to be part of changing things (Maeve, Interview).

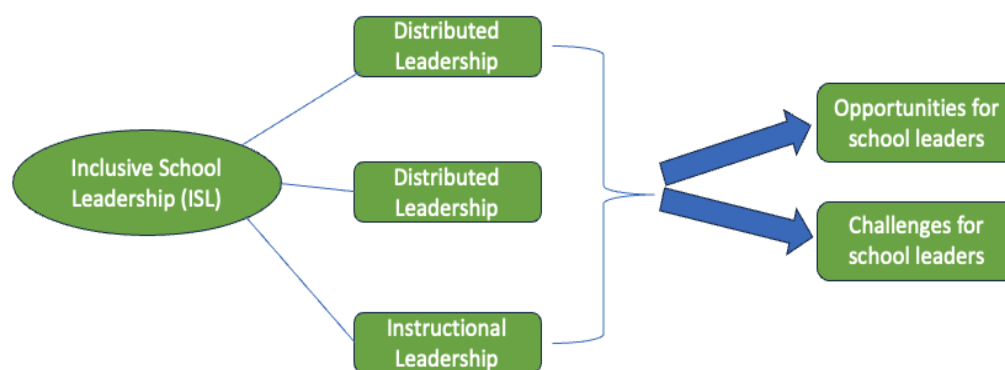
Time was highlighted as a barrier to inclusion, particularly when it came to dealing with additional administrative workloads associated with special class provision. Many principals spoke about their workload as limiting their ability to effectively lead inclusion in their schools. Time was also highlighted as an issue in terms of finding space to facilitate PL for staff and to collaborate with colleagues to develop inclusive practice.

All participants spoke at some point of their interview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their leadership roles, with many also citing COVID as having an impact on inclusive practice. For example, Cáit described their practice of reverse inclusion being scuppered by the impact of COVID and practices having to cease due to health guidelines. Paul had a similar experience of social inclusion being impacted due to the necessity of the class bubble system where students remained with their classes and didn't interact with others as a health and safety measure and he also admitted this practice was slow to return. Collaboration between staff also suffered as teachers 'retreated to their classrooms' due to protection measures (Researcher Reflection 6). This led to feelings of isolation, especially for special-class teachers: 'they did feel isolated from the rest of the school. Definitely during COVID with break times and all that sort of stuff...mainstream was hard but that (special class teaching) was definitely much worse'(Freya, Interview). The feelings of isolation are also documented in the literature on special class teaching (Finlay, *et al.*, 2022). Whilst the barriers to inclusion were spoken about at length during meetings and interviews, the SISLCoP was committed to focusing on leadership practices that were in our control. Findings in relation to leadership practices that supported inclusion are discussed next.

4.3 Section 2: Inclusive School Leadership in Action

During interviews, participants were reminded of the definition of inclusive school leadership (ISL) that describes ISL as leadership practices that address inequity to build a school community where all learners participate fully (EASNIE, 2020b). Next, they were asked to give their understanding of ISL in their own terms. Findings indicated that ISL can be summarised as any action by school leaders which supports inclusion. As an example, Paul noted ‘It’s knowing the children. I try to be at the gates every morning and greet the children as they come in’ (Paul, Interview 5). Meanwhile, Avril stated ‘So it’s [inclusion] now on the agenda... It’s brought up at every staff meeting. And we also bring it up at board meetings as well, what we’re doing and how we’re doing it’ (Avril, Interview 7). Participants exhibited a range of leadership practices when supporting inclusion in their schools as well as acknowledging the challenges. The next subsections are divided into findings related to models of leadership (Figure 4.3) that were evident amongst participants including distributed leadership (DL), instructional leadership (IL) and transformational leadership (TL). The section concludes with ISL challenges and opportunities.

Figure 4.3 Sub-Themes Related to Inclusive School Leadership



4.3.1 Distributed Leadership

All participants described examples of DL practice to support them in developing inclusive practices in their schools. The general consensus was that a whole school effort was needed to achieve a more inclusive school environment. When analysing the findings, leadership practices that align with DL are described as practices which are not specifically related to

assigned responsibilities, but more so the output of the interactions of school leaders and their contexts (Spillane, 2005).

In the focus group meeting, Bob aligned his version of ISL closely with DL and the necessary interactions between all staff:

It's actually a discussion that needs to take place, not just initially, but regularly in an ISM (in school management) meeting, or with a staff so that everybody's on the same wavelength...I suppose it's like anything you need to kind of revisit it fairly often, and remind everybody of what we're doing as a school... It's not just down to the principal. It's more of a kind of distributed leadership model where everybody is saying the same thing.

Freya highlighted the interactions of the principal as a key factor in developing a culture of DL. She describes the interactions with the staff and students as a feature of DL: 'You need them to see you...we're not just this person that sits, you know, inside their desk...being out there in the mornings for them coming into school...and I think staff appreciate that too.'

Beverley believed the role of the middle-leadership was key in developing any practices in the school:

But I think it can only really come out through the postholders. You have to come back to the postholders and kind of say, you know, what can we do about this get the postholders working on it...I think sometimes when it comes from the other staff so it's not always top-down.

Pete agreed with this approach and extended it by describing the appointment procedure to middle-leadership roles (sometimes referred to as post-holders in Ireland) and a clear focus on the importance of leaders' interactions with their followers:

A massive part of it was, how is that person? And how does that person support our children currently with the greatest need? And it's not a case of well, whether we're the teacher in this setting or not. I base it upon how do they talk about children generally, how they interact with them if they bump into them in the staff room or in the hall... It's grand me having an inclusive mindset. But if you have a deputy or other AP ones and twos (post-holders) that don't get it. Well, then it really dilutes what I'm trying to bring to the mix.

Some of the participants had experience as teaching principals, a role with unique challenges in terms of leadership and DL. Paul provided an example of how DL can work in the small school setting, with the deputy principal changing roles to enhance leadership in the area of inclusive and special education:

She's (deputy principal) actually going into SET like. So...one of her roles will be coordinating that whole SET area...And she's asked that she might be freed up some of the afternoon to go into the class that she's had for the past four years. Yeah, you know, she's built up a huge relationship with the boys (in the special class).

Despite the acknowledgement of the need for a whole school approach towards inclusive education, there were still calls for specific leadership roles for SEN and special classes, with two participants suggesting there needed to be a specific post of responsibility:

I mean there are lots of problems with the UK education system. But if you have this type of a class in your school you have an administrator who just looks after the needs of that class. And that's really what, you know, what we need (Beverley, Interview).

Some principals had inclusion or special education specifically named as a responsibility for members of the middle leadership team. Ireland has a middle leadership system where teaching staff can hold an assistant principal grade one or two position, which is remunerated. For example, in developing a recent assistant principal (AP) 1 post, Cáit explicitly attached inclusion to the role:

At the beginning of last year... we put inclusion onto our AP 1 post. And again, I'm lucky, in that teacher is doing a special education course. So, you know she's very much there and passionate and interested (Focus Group).

Some participants' schools associate the deputy principal with the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) role, similar to Maeve's school where the deputy is the SENCO: 'She's the SEN coordinator. And extremely, you know, what would you say... we're on the same wavelength when it comes to inclusion, you know, and, and the others are too' (Maeve, Interview).

For DL to be effective, one participant described the importance of stepping back and trusting the other leaders on staff: 'that idea of stepping back and letting other people go with the responsibility on something...I'll be there to support you but go ahead and give it a try' (Eva, Interview). This trusting relationship with staff empowers them to take on more leadership roles and represents a shift from the notion of school principals as the sole decision-makers (Harris, 2012).

4.3.2 Instructional Leadership

This leadership style was evident in the data as an area participants felt comfortable with in the mainstream but struggled with when the special class was added to their schools. This leadership style can be summarised as a focus on the teaching, learning and interactions for teachers and learners (Bush and Glover, 2014). Three participants described feelings of inadequacy when they were unable to provide the IL necessary to support special class teachers. Maeve's comments were typical of all three:

Sometimes I find it difficult if a teacher in the autism class comes to me with a scenario that I haven't dealt with, and how do I support them with that scenario? And they, they really are dealing, I think, with the most challenging behaviours in the school...I haven't myself taught in an autism class...so am I best equipped to support these people?

Paul for example was prompted to seek further PL opportunities through autism-specific training providers (Middletown Centre for Autism) as well as post-graduate studies:

I was the first teaching principal, the first principal that did the post-grad in Pat's, special ed...I found that very good. I've made a lot of contacts through that as well...I did as many Middletown courses as I possibly could to sort of upskill myself in the area.

Paul also felt it was important that all staff engaged with PL specific to the needs of the special class, and not limit it to those teaching or working as an SNA in that setting which arguably reflects a belief in a whole school approach and collective responsibility towards inclusive education (Ainscow, 2020).

As an alternative to providing direct IL to staff on issues related to special class provision, some participants drew from their coaching skills to empower staff to find the right solution to pedagogical issues or addressing behaviours of concern. Eva described coaching as a leadership practice where the leader is 'not here to give you answers. I'm here for you to discover the answer yourself' (Eva, Interview 2). Participants also found TL practices as supportive in mitigating against their perceived shortcomings in IL for special class provision and these are outlined next.

4.3.3 Transformational Leadership

Leadership practices that led to improvements in inclusive practice in this study can be linked to TL. This style of leadership practice in education can be defined as a way of working with followers to identify areas for improvement and create a vision to guide that change through collaboration with these committed followers (Anderson, 2017). Utilising leadership practices that align with their values or vision should support them in guiding the vision successfully (Bush and Glover, 2014). Half of the principals in this study were acting as principals at the time of their school's special class opening and many indicated their ability to manage school-level change in the pre-meeting survey. Opening a special class marks a significant change in a school dynamic (McCormack, 2019), therefore leading change was a necessary leadership practice for these principals. When asked about this change, Beverley's response typifies the other responses describing it as a 'slow burner' and you should 'start small' by starting with:

The people who are interested and want to do it. And it's like a drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. And you don't discount the people who don't want to do it. But you can't go bending their arms, you just kind of have to keep chipping away...and you know, there are some people who are wonderful at it.

To support this, other participants spoke of the benefits of communicating progress:

When you show the good stories, and you make a big deal of celebrating the small successes in front of other staff...I think it's important and it sort of lets other people know, well, this is where my priorities lie. And this is where I feel everybody should be putting a lot of work into (Pete, Interview).

The sharing of a vision is a key ISL practice and a foundational practice of TL (Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016). In this case, participants were committed to this ideology but found a lack of clarity on the vision of where the special class fits in this context. When sharing a vision or direction setting, Sadbh summarises participant feelings by arguing that you must first take cognisance of where your staff are at in terms of attitudes and readiness for change:

And then of course, like you always have to remember that you might be in a very different place to where the rest of your staff is...that was a lesson to me...whenever you're doing anything, you have to bring people with you. So sometimes making that assumption that everyone is in the same place as you...you're often losing people somewhere along the way.

When discussing the key factors in what drives inclusion and inclusive practice in schools, Beverly argued for creating a culture of collaboration:

I don't think it can do it unless you got collaboration. One person can't just drag this elephant along all by themselves... You need as many as possible swimming in the one direction (Focus Group).

Adding to this collaborative culture, Sadbh called for patience in developing such a culture and allowing that time:

There are some people who come out of the box ready to do it, like, you know, I'm open to it. And sometimes it just takes a little bit more work with other people. Like, sometimes you kind of have to give that little bit of a nudge... it's like, you know, even things like when we started team teaching first and some people are going thanks but no thanks.

The example here of team teaching was given as something that took time to get buy in. Team teaching is an approach that attracted considerable attention (and arguably confusion) in the Irish context. It involves the presence of two teaching staff sharing the responsibility of teaching with a focus on students in the class with diverse learning needs (Ó Murchú and Conway, 2017). Sadbh's example highlighted an initial resistance from teachers to adopt this more inclusive approach to meeting the needs of learners in an in-class, collaborative setting as opposed to the more prevalent withdrawal model that was initially common practice in schools (Travers *et al.*, 2010). Combining DL, IL and TL to lead inclusively is complex, with the opportunities and challenges discussed next.

4.4 Inclusive School Leadership Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities to exercise ISL were highlighted by participants. The 'one small step' was a feature of the group meetings where participants were asked to reflect on the key learnings from the meeting and take one small action in between meetings. The emphasis was on doing something that was practical and possible in the short term, and they could then reflect on this at the next meeting and get feedback from the group. As an example, Cáit describes her one small step following participation in the SISLCoP:

We kind of drew up some small steps...sharing with all teachers what's happening in the classroom when a child from our autism class goes in (to the mainstream classroom)...explaining the child might be stimming and it's ok for you to go down and sit with the child or do this...just different things like that... It's kind of just enabling other teachers to know what's going on (Focus Group).

This one small step was developed after discussing building staff capacity to support learners with more complex needs, with the first step being to develop understanding on a

whole school level. Another example of a one small step that can be implemented with ease is Maeve's suggestion when speaking about whole school inclusive practices that support the inclusion of learners for whom English is not their first language (EAL):

When you're taking the rolla (Irish word for register) like you can actually, you know, if you allow the children to say 'here' in their own language, you know, and that it's so important for the children to hear their own language being valued in school.

Another opportunity for school leaders emerged through reflecting on where they were at in their schools with regard to inclusion, acknowledging their unique contexts and setting an inclusive vision, as the researcher (acting as facilitator) summarised for the group:

I suppose, respecting the process of inclusion and acknowledging where you're at... And there's no, you know, perfect formula here. We're all at a different point of it. All our school contexts are different...and we're doing our best. That came up a lot (Focus Group).

At meeting three the group reflected on the importance of trialling different practices and having a 'give it a go' culture. They acknowledged the role of the school leader here in supporting school staff to try out new inclusive practices, as Beverley's comments were typical of others:

Being open to new practices and encouraging them... putting in the organisational piece, whether it be covering for the teachers to collaborate or organising a meeting to get it over the line...it's more about flexibility more so than rigid policy structures' (Meeting 3).

Avril extended the notion of culture as emanating from the school's ethos:

We're a Catholic school. And the ethos of all Catholic schools is inclusion. So, I extended that to mean anybody in the local area should be able to come to our school... siblings should be able to come to the school that their siblings come.

The opportunities for growth and learning were summarised by Eva when reflecting on working with children from diverse and neurodivergent backgrounds: 'I think I learned more than they learned from me in many ways' (Eva, Interview 2). This is synonymous with Ainscow's (2020) framework for promoting inclusion and equity by viewing learner diversity as an opportunity for staff growth and development. With this in mind, participants recognised the need to empower and involve staff in developing leadership capacity in the area of inclusive education. For example, Tess (Interview 4) encouraged principals to facilitate PL of staff by organising substitute teachers to cover their classes. Pete provided an in-house version of sharing expertise through their own model of a lesson

study style learning for teachers to ‘shadow’ the special class teacher for a day and ‘remove the fear’ of teaching in such a setting:

So, we had a few days to play around with in terms of sub days, so...we created a little sort of a timetable where everybody got the opportunity... to visit the class (special class) for a day along with the ASD class teacher, and then the ASD class teacher would be able to sort of bring them on and say, this is what we do. The spotlight isn't on you right now, but just to give you a flavour of what it is...it sort of gave teachers a chance to sample it, but not be the person in control that everybody looks to (Focus Group).

Another opportunity to develop staff and leadership capacity arose through discussions in Meeting 5. The researcher reflected on this and noted the positive attitudes of participants towards the opening of a second special class in terms of developing capacity to collaborate with the increase in staff focusing on particular needs, sharing expertise and the removal of the isolation felt by some special class teachers (Finlay *et al.*, 2022):

Just for the teacher to have that extra support from a colleague in the same role...that was a driving force for us to open a second special class...and same for the SNAs as they have a very different role in the special class...(Paul, Meeting 6).

In terms of challenges, participants found the expectations put on them by stakeholders to meet all the needs of learners challenging. This issue was discussed during the focus group meeting and all agreed that too much was being expected of schools in terms of meeting needs that fell outside their qualifications in education, as Bob summarises the feelings of all:

At the same time. I think we all need to remember we didn't do medicine. We didn't do physiotherapy. We didn't do occupation therapy in college. We're educators, schools are places of education. They're not places for minding children. We're not care facilities (Focus Group).

Principals also found it challenging to balance the rights and needs of all learners and staff in their schools when it came to managing behaviours of concern (BoC). BoCs can be described as behaviours which can be considered aggressive, destructive, disruptive or self-injurious (Chan *et al.*, 2023). When discussing this topic, Avril explained:

Like you have to balance everybody's right... like the other children have a right, and the staff have a right... We have to listen to everybody's rights. And then we're in a rock and 3 hard places, you know, because everybody has the right...(Focus Group).

This issue also came up during meeting 4 where the researcher reflected on the problem of practice under discussion at that time:

The challenges of balancing everyone's needs: How can we be equitable in our time distribution? Another principal responded to this by saying the scarcity of resources makes 'teaching time competitive' and this leads to the narrative that those without SEN aren't getting enough time. She went on to mention the difficulties with the exceptional review process (a process for applying for additional SET/SNA support). She spoke about the inevitability of more time being dedicated to those with more complex needs and warned against the narrative of 'these children take up all the teacher's time'. One principal responded then by mentioning health and safety and when you don't have sufficient personnel to manage certain needs, health and safety can be compromised (Researcher Reflection 4).

The exceptional review process spoken of here was discussed again at meeting 6 as a problem of practice when seeking additional support to meet the needs of all learners:

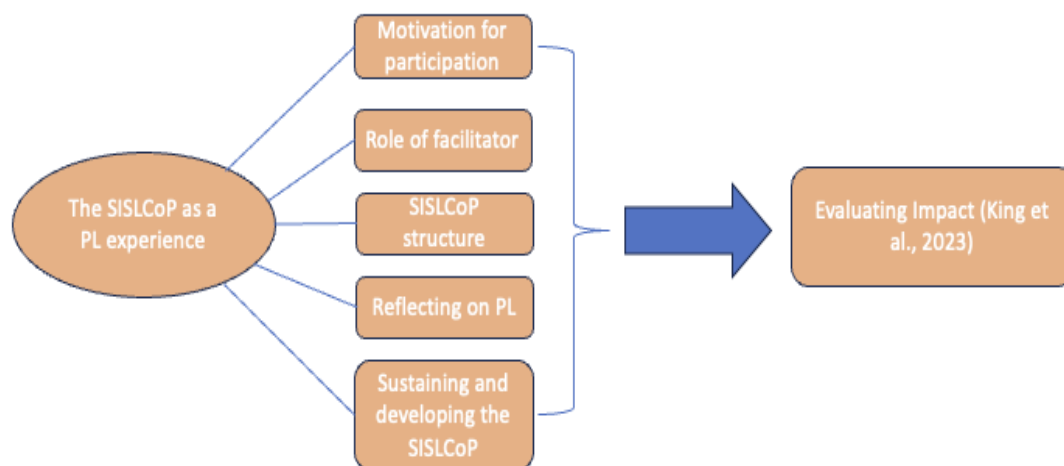
The conversation opened with participants speaking about their exceptional review application. There was a lot of confusion around the process and a fear of failure, with a heavy bureaucratic burden placed on schools. One spoke of a SENO whose 'claim to fame' was her record of upholding exceptional reviews and not granting further support. Another participant spoke of her upset in dealing with a SENO and was reduced to tears. There were very mixed experiences of working with SENOs (Researcher Reflection 6).

A school undertakes this process if they feel that their current SNA allocation does not meet their school's primary care needs (NCSE, 2022). Support from outside agencies was an issue that was raised in many meetings and again during semi-structured interviews with participants. There was frustration as well as an eagerness to explore positive collaboration with external professionals (such as SLTs and OTs) to support learners in their schools. The researcher (when acting as facilitator) acknowledged this was a big issue for school leaders, but also classified it as a problem of practice that was out of our control. Some participants referred to the lack of support as a motivator for engaging with the SISLCoP. The context of challenges and opportunities for school leaders was the starting point of the SISLCoP. The journey of the SISLCoP as a PL experience is explored in the next subsection and the evaluation of its impact is discussed in Chapter 5.

4.4 Section 3: The SISLCoP Professional Learning Experience

This section focuses on the findings in relation to participant experiences of the SISLCoP and the impact of those experiences. A summary of the sub-themes related to this overarching theme are highlighted in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4 Sub Themes Related to the SISLCoP as a PL Experience



Evaluating the impact of PL can be challenging (Earley and Porritt, 2014), often focusing on participant satisfaction as opposed to its impact on practice. To evaluate this impact, a flexible model is needed that can facilitate the context dynamic that is prevalent for the participants in this study. Therefore, a meta-conceptual framework to plan and evaluate the PL experience (King, *et al.*, 2023) is deemed appropriate as it embraces the complexity associated with the different contexts each participant operates in. The evaluation of the PL experience focuses on context, experience and outcomes (CEO) and this is explored in more detail in Chapter 5. This section documents the findings related to participant motivations to join the SISLCoP and participants' experiences of engaging with the PL experience. Participants' reflections on PL are then explored, followed by findings in relation to sustaining this type of PL format over time.

4.4.1 Motivation for Joining the SISLCoP

Whilst there were variations in motivating factors for participants to join the SISLCoP, Freya summarises it by saying ‘everyone was there because they wanted to be there’. Participants had varied experiences of PL to date. There was a clear preference for collaborative models of PL delivery where their own contexts and current issues could be discussed. This is a potential motivator to engage in the SISLCoP, as well as other collaborative forms of PL with professionals in a similar role. As Pete noted:

You're not in a position to sort of, to learn until you're in the job...when you have an opportunity to meet up every two weeks or whenever it may be with people who are in a similar setting, with special classes for this type of discussion, I think it's a far better chance to learn and put into action straight away.

For others, the motivation for joining was primarily based on the fact they sought to know more about special classes as they were a new addition to their schools:

Some kind of groups you get involved with or some can be very valuable, others less so but particularly around the area of the special class...I thought, well, I could benefit from having some connections or like networking or getting some advice or whatever (Sadbh, Interview).

Avril was also new to special classes and saw this as an opportune time to join a group where she could learn from the experience of others: ‘...we opened an SEN class last year. So, it was really, really interesting to hear from the seasoned SEN classes’ (Avril, Interview 7). Avril also referred to the SISLCoP as a PD opportunity for herself and the wider school community:

I know my SEN Teacher, at one stage, she was like, at her wit's end, and I could pick up the phone to about three different principals and say, How can I support her because she is really struggling...So it wasn't even just for me, it was then able to get support for my staff, because I can go to somebody who might know more than me.

Maeve foresaw the wider impact of the SISLCoP as a motivator for joining, referencing the potential to positively impact on her students’ outcomes alongside her personal interest in autism:

I felt that it was a very meaningful kind of group. And I thought that the learning in it for me and for others will be very worthy...I could very much see the link to how it would benefit the children in the schools. The sharing of good practice, you know, can only lead to better outcomes for children. And I thought that I would have something to bring to the table as well, with having three autism classes and having a child with autism.

Of note here is Maeve's personal experience of autism and special class provision. She was an advocate for special class provision as she felt some children 'have a recommendation for a special class for a reason' and she put more emphasis on everybody feeling 'that they belong to your school community' regardless of how much time they spend with their mainstream peers.

Tess also saw the special class as being an area of particular interest to her as she reflected on the context of the special class in her school:

It's (the special class) nearly its own entity in the school, like, a lot of time, you know...so one of the newer teachers will say...what do they actually do up there? You know, so I was kind of thinking that the whole staff is not really aware of what's happening. And it's very much the teacher who's in there at the time, or the SNAs who are working in there, or any staff who've been there previously, who kind of understand what's happening in there.

The idea of networking with other principals also appealed to Eva who described her motivation for joining as an opportunity 'to mix with other principals in a similar scenario, and we could probably help each other' (Eva, Interview). The networking aspect was particularly important to Paul who describes this collaborative forum as 'where we're really learning'. Another participant described the networking as something that combats feelings of isolation associated with the role of principal (Tess, Interview) which is also highlighted in the literature, particularly for early career principals (Sugrue, 2009; McGovern, 2015; Bauer and Silver, 2018).

The lack of support from the DE and NCSE was also identified as a motivator to join to make up for the 'dearth of support for schools with special classes in particular' (Beverley, Interview). Similarly, Freya alluded to the lack of support from external agencies as a motivator to join the SISLCoP:

It was to be part of that community so that we're all in the same situation and how can we help each other. It can be really difficult, because obviously, the supports from outside agencies are not there.

The motivation of the newly appointed principal for joining was another noteworthy case as it differed slightly from the others in the fact that she spent all her life in one school and used the SISLCoP as an opportunity for interschool collaboration: 'I find the community of practice, really, really beneficial to me, because I haven't seen inside in other schools, and how things work' (Cáit, Interview). Furthermore, Cáit was eager to network with local principals and learn from the collective experience:

When this opportunity came up, I just felt talking to local principals, you know, in an informal session...I do love just listening to people and seeing how other people do things, it just kind of fills my cup...and again, as a principal, just to network with other principals, because I wouldn't know, many principals within the area.

Finally, other participant motivators related to the group acting as a sounding board for their ideas:

And the questions that I have had and need answered, and sort of would like somebody's perspective or eyes over. I felt the group was a good chance to run things by them...like a sounding board (Paul, Interview).

Whilst there were slight differences in each participants' motivations for participating, it could be summarised that their motivation was based on an opportunity to engage in a collaborative form of PL that is focused on gaining new insights into special class provision. This formed the agreed domain or special interest of the CoP, which Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) refer to as the 'identity' of the group.

4.4.2 Role of Facilitator

All participants agreed that the role of facilitator was important in a CoP, as without one, 'people can tend to go off on a complete tangent' (Freya, Interview). Similarly, it was noted that focusing on what was under our control enabled the group to align to the domain of the CoP, i.e. focusing on inclusive education and special class provision. At the same time, some participants felt it was necessary to have time to go off-topic and 'rant about the frustration of dealing with, you know, the system' (Tess, interview 4). Maintaining focus amongst a passionate group was described by Sadbh as a group that 'needs a rudder'. This was also picked up on by the researcher through reflection on meeting 5:

As I attempted to steer the conversation back to our core purpose as a group (problem-solving PoPs), the participants noticed I was redirecting the conversation and made a joke about me not allowing 'the moan'! I think this is their acknowledgement of...the key role of facilitator in CoPs (Researcher Reflection 5).

Participants were also questioned on the possibility of university-school partnership to support the CoP which holds some promise in other research on developing inclusive practice (Brennan *et al.*, 2019). There were mixed views on this idea. Some participants

spoke of the need for a balanced facilitator who could draw from research as well as having authenticity in terms of knowing the role of the principal, as Freya described:

You're one of us, we don't look at you as if you're up there, telling us what to do...we all know that you're a principal, okay, in a school with special classes. So, you're exactly the same as all of us.

Pete also acknowledged the need for a balanced facilitator, who described a potential pitfall if the leadership of the CoP was coming from a practice-only perspective:

If it was strictly just a principal, it could end up being the moan and scone only, and without the guidance and direction, that sort of brings it to... not to a head but brings it to a place where it's just more productive.

Cáit saw more value in the role of a partnership with a university as they could support the group through evidence-informed practices, and not just relying on experiences of the participants:

If you were to partner up with a university, you'd have all that evidence-based research. And that's, again, through the postgraduate that I did, I really only started kind of using or looking at things through the lens of evidence-based research.

When asked about the type of facilitator needed for the CoP, Tess suggested:

Maybe just someone who's chairing it, but it doesn't necessarily have to be an external person...if you were doing something like that on a longer basis...you could have a rotating chair or whatever, like, you know, that someone would say, right lads we're getting off target here.

The possibility of a rotating chair recommended by Tess could potentially support the sustainability of the CoP as it would take the focus of responsibility off one person and share the leadership of the group, which would align with the model of CoP purported by Wenger *et al.*, (2002). It would also give the opportunity to the facilitator to spend time being focused on being a participant of the group and engage in deeper listening and reflection. The pressure of the dual role of facilitator and participant was reflected on by the researcher, where it was noted 'I need to talk less and let the participants speak!'. This illustrates an overly participatory role and less facilitation. There is a balance that needs to

be struck between being an active participant and maintaining protocols that keep the group on task and engaged in productive conversations (Diaz *et al.*, 2021).

4.4.3 Reflecting on Professional Learning

All participants spoke about the reflection section of the SISLCoP meeting. Participants were asked to fill a brief reflection document that prompted them to think about what was discussed, what action they would take before the next meeting and how they would develop this action. This was private to them and they took it with them after the meetings. Despite some negative comments during meetings towards the traditional ‘evaluation’ section at the end of other models of PL (Spowart *et al.*, 2017) most participants found this to be an important task. Not all participants found this task straightforward, as Eva describes her experiences:

Sometimes I'm sitting there going what am I saying here? Some of the weeks I could put something down no problem. And other times I have to really think about like some questions...but actually, when you sit down and think about it, you go, oh, yeah, I can answer that. Sometimes I looked at them and was thinking, pretty much I don't know what to say, but then you certainly think or you talk to the person beside you and say Oh yeah, that's what it means. So, I suppose it focuses your mind?

Despite these challenges, Eva saw the value of it, especially when it came to reflecting on her schools’ approach to inclusion as the reflection time ‘made me think more about how we promote inclusion, because listening to other schools and what they're doing, I was kind of, okay, maybe we could try that?’ (Eva, Interview)

Sadbh saw value in both the reflection piece and the ‘rant’: ‘I do think because if you're not leaving reflecting in some way, then you're just going in for a rant, which is also important.’

The discussions during meetings often had examples or experiences of inclusive practice shared, and one participant commented on the benefits of reflecting on what was discussed in order to consider your own context and what you might bring back to your own school:

I actually thought it was really good, because it kind of focuses you on, did I actually do anything since the last time we met?... as opposed to chatting and talking about all the different things, the definitions and all the information... and people are chatting, and everyone's kind of talking about the topic, but we're still talking about a specific problem that we've addressed in our own school (Tess, Interview).

Freya shared the view of Tess here as she also felt the reflection time supported the participant to focus on what was discussed and what can be brought back to the school to be further discussed or introduced.

A slightly different view relating to the reflection piece came from Freya who found solace from hearing about others with the same challenges in their schools:

I suppose the other side of this too, sometimes when you're here, you could feel like, you're the only one in this situation. But actually, when you get out there, we're all in the situation. And for me, bringing that back to my office and, you know, obviously it would be confidential, but you'd be just saying there are, every other school is in the same situation as we are.

This quote becomes more insightful when considered in the broader context of feelings of uncertainty of principals when it came to the IL practices they felt were lacking in their leadership of special classes (explored in previous section). The SISLCoP acted as a support mechanism to alleviate such feelings in a supportive and non-judgemental way.

One participant described his participation in the SISLCoP as an opportune time to 'chew the cud' (Pete, Interview) with like-minded people. This saying is synonymous with talking or thinking reflectively and this summarises the experience of participants succinctly. Furthermore, the group facilitated deeper thinking through some participants comfortable in challenging the status quo:

And so, I would see any group or any kind of, anytime you discuss something with another colleague or peer or leader, you have the opportunity to change their mindset a little bit, which can have a ripple effect (Maeve, Interview).

Maeve described the role of healthy conflict as being an important part of group dynamics, but not always a role that's relished:

I don't always like to be the protagonist. I mean, yes, sometimes I love it. But it's not a role, that it's actually quite a challenging role to kind of have to be always the one who's challenging others because you can be seen to be quite awkward.

Overall, reflecting on PL at the end of SISLCoP meetings was a key component of the experience where participants had the opportunity to reflect on the discussion and then relate their learning to their own context. Sustaining energy and developing a CoP is crucial for its effectiveness (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) and findings relating to the sustainability and development of the SISLCoP are explored next.

4.4.4 Sustaining and Developing the SISLCoP

The data revealed findings in relation to both factors that support the sustainability of the group, as well as factors that hinder the SISLCoP in being sustainable and effective. Sustained learning communities are often a feature of effective PL models (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009; Wells, 2014). Maeve echoed this in her reflection on the SISLCoP, describing it as a ‘non-negotiable’ in terms of attendance and encouraged principals to factor time in their schedule for PL relating to inclusion. The relationships and trust element that was built up within the group was identified as having a positive influence on sustaining the group. The researcher reflected on this after meeting three when the positive rapport was documented which supported an atmosphere of trust and collegiality (Researcher Reflection 3). This view was evident in Eva’s statement during meeting 5 when she stopped during the reflection period to state ‘I’ve just noticed we’ve become a lot more chattier’. This trust was built over time: ‘when people realise that they have something in common with these people...and what they’re experiencing in their situation is not that far removed’ (Beverley, Interview).

The trusting relationships also provided a safe space for principals to speak freely and receive constructive feedback on their practice, as Paul noted:

I think there is a sense of probably respect there, and that, that you can speak confidentially about a matter that, you know, yeah, to like-minded people, because we’re all trying to do our best here and, you know, support each other.

Tess also found the trust element important and enabled participants to speak without fear of their schools or practices being judged:

I think that partly that kind of feeling of support and openness meant that people could just be chatty and be open and sort to say, God, I’m having a real problem without any judgement there. You know, and the fact that we’re all in the same boat, and everyone was just being honest and open.

The community domain of a CoP is an important aspect for consideration when developing a CoP to enable a safe environment for learning to take place (Li *et al.*, 2009). Participants also considered the value in paying attention to the community and how it could enhance their learning and maximise the potential of their participation. For example, Eva compares the community element in the SISLCoP to an online network she is part of:

One of my big things was...the IPPN networking group countrywide... I wasn't always comfortable to ask questions in groups like that, because I didn't know people and I didn't really know what people were thinking. Whereas in our smaller network...you can ask anything and not seem to be silly, or you don't really think someone could go, do you not know that already?!

This quote exemplifies the safe environment Li *et al.*, (2009) refer to that enables participants to learn without judgement. Freya also alluded to this sense of safety by reiterating 'you feel comfortable talking, and you know, no one's judging you'.

A learning walk was incorporated at the end of each meeting based on participant feedback, but it also acted as a community-building mechanism. Participants found this element particularly important in terms of picking up tips for their school building and for building community within the group. The researcher reflected on this after meeting 3:

This section of the meeting has proved popular amongst participants. It allows for more informal chats with trusted colleagues as they walk the corridors. Secondly, the host principal tends to gravitate towards showing the special class layout. This helps the learning walk stay focused and many discussions about inclusive play spaces, regulation and reverse inclusion continued, e.g. 'This area is great for any student in the school to come and relax and take time to regulate, regardless of being in the special class or mainstream' (Researcher Reflection 3).

The sense of community was succinctly summarised by Avril who felt the members shared the same common purpose: 'I think we always find common ground, because at the end of the day, you could see clearly the children came first'.

Findings also revealed factors that hindered participant engagement. There were certain meetings where participants felt their engagement with the group was less in comparison to others. When questioned on this at interviews, participants highlighted the stresses of the job prior to the meetings that could negatively impact their engagement in the meeting discussions. This was particularly evident for one participant:

Sometimes I think, particularly last week, where I was so kind of like out of it because of the day that was in it at school. I kind of looked at the phone and was going I can't write anything on this (Sadbh, Interview).

Another participant also cited the 'busyness' of the role of principal as having an impact on her ability to engage with PL in general:

I just find it very hard to keep the space in my head. That's the big problem. You're right. And that's, that's what we should be doing is taking the time. But...it's just so busy, and there's so much happening, it's really hard to take the time to step back and look at it (Beverley, Interview).

The timing of the meeting was considered by participants as an important structure of the CoP that could support its sustainability, given the challenges with attendance after the school day. Some participants felt that you could sometimes not be ready for professional learning and reflection, or as Beverley described ‘you might be there physically, but the rest of you is actually still somewhere else’.

The location of the meetings was reflected upon at the focus group meeting, where Pete described the importance of being off-site or in another school:

There’s just so many other things going on. I thought it was very useful to actually visit another school. So, you were leaving your own space so that you weren’t as contactable...I know somebody mentioned having the meeting at the end of the day. I felt probably a little bit tired. Maybe an option would be at the start of the day in a neutral location where nobody was getting those sort of disturbances would be ideal.

Of note also was the perspective of the researcher during one of the meetings held on zoom, when he noted ‘I found zoom as a medium for a CoP meeting quite challenging as given the timing of the meeting, many principals were distracted by interruptions and the many items on their desks’ (Researcher Reflection 2). These reports from participants are in keeping with the current landscape of the role of the principal, with advocacy bodies calling for significant changes to enable school leaders to focus on their core purpose of teaching and learning (IPPN, 2022). Having a space to reflect on teaching and learning is a potential support to principals to alleviate stress and feelings of burnout. The next section documents the perceived impact of the SISLCoP on participants.

4.4.5 Perceived Impact of the SISLCoP on Participants

All participants agreed that they enjoyed the experience of being part of this CoP and other principal support groups. They described this enjoyment in terms of wellbeing, with one participant jokingly commenting that participation in the group supported his wellbeing and ‘restored his faith in humanity’ (Pete, Interview). Despite the light-hearted nature in this statement, he reiterated that it was a very positive experience in a more serious tone. The enjoyment factor came from the professional conversations and a safe place to ‘vent’ if needed.

Engagement with the SISLCoP had a more significant impact on the newly appointed principal in the group who commented:

And I just felt it as a newly appointed principal it supported my wellbeing. And I didn't have that network to my disposal (previously). So, if you could just have a cup of coffee with the group, and sit and chat, like I do bounce out of those sessions. I do feel supported. And I do feel I could pick up the phone to you or even anyone now. (Cáit, Interview).

The PL needs of school leaders can change over time with different needs arising at different stages of a school leader's career. School leaders should draw from a range of supports, both formal and informal (Murphy, 2020) and findings here reveal a CoP model of PL can support participant's wellbeing and in turn sustain them in a role that has become increasingly linked with burnout and stress (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Bauer and Silver, 2018; IPPN, 2022).

During interviews and the focus group meeting, participants were asked to reflect on the overall experience of the SISLCoP and how it impacted their practice (or not). Cáit captured the impact of the SISLCoP on her inclusive vision, stating 'I feel like I have...a plan going forward that's more intentional' (Focus Group). Sadbh's thinking on inclusion was challenged following her engagement with the group, with her 'DEIS' lens impacting her thinking and finding that 'the system is weighted so much more towards people who are able to fight for it, and I don't think fighting for it should have to come into the argument'. This illustrates a return in thinking to the rights-based view of inclusion that this research aligns with. Furthermore, Sadbh illustrated deeper levels of critical thinking about inclusion:

I suppose the meaningful involvement as well, that's something that you can be very much tick-boxy about inclusion. And that's something that I've kind of thought about a lot since doing this. Like, is this really inclusion? Or is this just something we're doing to tick a box?

Another participant found the sharing of practice the most impactful. Similarly, she realised the importance of adapting the practice to suit her context: 'it has made me think more about how we promote inclusion...maybe we could try that (what another school did) in some way' (Eva, Interview). This also demonstrates a form of agency (King, 2014) whereby a teacher (or school leader) can adapt the practice to suit their context. Freya also exhibited this agency in her reflection on participation in the SISLCoP and shifts the focus to the learner:

I think that for me to bring that back to the staff as well, to be able to say, you know, what, we kind of need to look at that practice and make sure that it is, yeah, what that child needs and what they're able for.

Arguably, the most significant impact on participation was for the newly appointed principal who reflected on her vision and the impact she could have on inclusion as a principal:

I think... me taking part in the community of practice, it's keeping it (inclusion) on the agenda...I'm definitely more aware of getting a better global image and building my vision as a leader. And even, I've been empowered now, to see actually, I do have an impact, and I can come in and see what's going on in the classrooms and how the inclusion...is working (Cáit, Interview).

The perceived impact of the SISLCoP on participants can be summarised in terms of providing a safe space for reflection on teaching and learning, with a focus on inclusive education. Through reflection, participants' thinking was challenged and as a result they made changes in their practice to focus their attention on inclusion in their schools. They were also able to gather examples of ISL practices that supported them in enacting inclusive practice in their schools. Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, the SISLCoP supported their wellbeing and in turn sustained them in their role of principal. The next section brings a conclusion to the findings chapter.

4.5 Conclusion

The research findings presented in this chapter tell the story of the SISLCoP journey from conception to impact. Firstly, the participants' perceptions and experiences of leading special classes in the context of inclusion were discussed. Next, the leadership practices relating to ISL were analysed under the traditional leadership models of distributed leadership, instructional leadership and transformational leadership. The challenges and opportunities for school leaders were also explored. Finally, the findings in relation to sustaining and developing this form of PL and the impact of participation in the SISLCoP were presented. The next chapter will discuss these findings in tandem with the literature to address the research questions and synthesise the implications of the research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

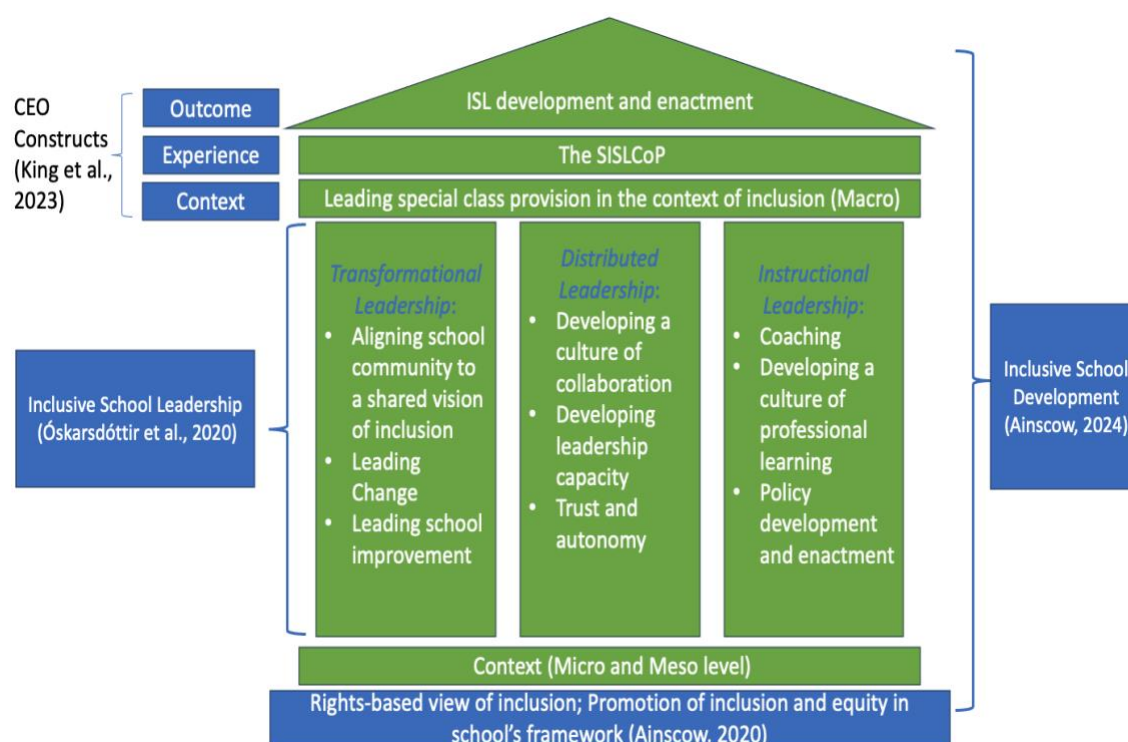
This research sought to explore the current perspectives of primary school principals in leading special class provision in the context of inclusion. The main aim of the research was to explore to what extent a CoP could support school leaders to enact Inclusive School Leadership (ISL) in their schools. Findings demonstrate that the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP) was an effective method of supporting school leaders to enact ISL. The discussion of these findings results in a framework (Figure 5.1) to support professional learning (PL) for ISL. More specifically, this research offers an Inclusive School Leadership in Action (ISLA) framework that can be used to support the design and implementation phases of CoPs to promote inclusion in schools. It will be particularly useful for school leaders, system leaders and all who are looking to develop leadership capacity to progress inclusion in education systems. The framework was informed by the conceptual framework of this study which was discussed in Chapter 3 and the subsequent findings from this study. This chapter will:

- present the ISLA framework to promote the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes
- discuss how ISL was enacted by participants and supported by the SISLCoP
- discuss the suitability of the ISLA framework as a planning tool to design PL for ISL.

5.2 Section 1: The Inclusive School Leadership in Action (ISLA) Framework

The ISLA framework draws on the conceptual framework used in this study to inform data collection and subsequently enhanced following the data analysis of the findings (Figure 5.1). This section will now explore how the baseline (Ainscow, 2020) of the framework can be used to plan and enact ISL in mainstream schools to develop inclusion in their schools with a specific focus on learners enrolled in special classes.

Figure 5.1 The Inclusive School Leadership in Action (ISLA) Framework



Firstly, any PL designed to promote ISL must start with an alignment with principles of inclusion and equity (Ainscow, 2020). In this study, these principles acted as a centre point when discussing problems of practice, for example, when including learners from the special class with their mainstream peers. Findings demonstrated participants’ perspectives on meaningful inclusion were challenged through anchoring the PL experience in the principles of inclusion and equity. Considering Ireland’s commitment to the UNCRPD and the role of special schools and classes within that context (NCSE, 2024a), inclusive education is at a critical juncture (Travers, 2023). As this research is grounded in a rights-based view of inclusive education (Figure 5.1), Ainscow’s (2020) framework was ideally placed to interrogate the findings relating to special class provision in the context of inclusion and address the question of whether or not special class provision can be a facilitator of inclusion.

The findings will show how the cyclical process of the SSE (DE, 2022d) can exemplify how special class provision can act as a facilitator of inclusion by mapping Ainscow’s (2020) framework onto it. First, the underlying principles of inclusion and equity are argued for as a right and a necessary baseline for a school to operate special class provision inclusively. Next, the use of evidence is then discussed as a tool to support that move,

followed by school development towards a more inclusive system. In supporting that move, the final two subsections discuss findings in relation to the involvement of the wider community and the role of administration departments.

5.2.1 Inclusion and Equity as Principles

All participants agreed with the principles of inclusion and equity enshrined in the UNCRPD and shared a commitment to inclusive education. A clear commitment to inclusion is deemed an essential component of developing inclusive schools (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013) and Irish principals have not been found wanting in this regard (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020). At the centre of the proposed adapted SSE (DE, 2022d) process are the principles of inclusion and equity that signify its necessary consideration at all phases of the process. This research advocates for principles of inclusion and equity to inform special class provision and maintain all learners' right to an appropriate education where barriers are persistently sought out and addressed. Whilst references were made to how this could be done, there were also challenges presented by participants that acted as barriers to enacting inclusion for all. There was widespread agreement that inclusion was not a process that could be solely a written policy at local level or otherwise. Some also argued that the designation of special classes in relation to a diagnosed need (such as autism) was also a problematic policy development due to concerns over equitable access, despite the intentions of the policy to facilitate inclusion (Raftery, 2022; Travers, 2023). Recent international policy documents call for inclusion and equity to underscore all aspects of educational policy development (UNESCO, 2017; EASNIE, 2021). This is indicative of the need for inclusion and equity to be seen as principles and not just an approach to serving children with disabilities (Ainscow, 2020). Delivering special class provision through principles of inclusion and equity and a move away from deficit-informed thinking as a means of access could support the mind-shift needed to develop more inclusive schools. This has already been done in Ireland to address the issue of equity in mainstream support allocation models, where support is given based on identified needs and not a diagnosis of a particular SEN (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Whilst this is a positive development, there remain ongoing issues to be resolved.

This study highlighted that there remains confusion over the vision and purpose of the special class, further exacerbated by recommendations from psychologists where parents

may have misunderstood that a special class was their only option. This is in keeping with research in the Irish context (McCoy *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2016; DES, 2020). This can be asserted because some participants viewed the class as the ideal support for those learners who need access to something more specialised throughout the day while still being supported to access the mainstream curriculum. In terms of equity, as some participants argued, learners were getting access to what they needed in the special class. This is something that could not be offered in a mainstream setting. For example, time to regulate, where learners could return to their special classes to receive sensory input to combat feelings of being overwhelmed in the mainstream. Such practices are compatible with a ‘pragmatic full inclusion’ approach (Tiernan, 2021) where specialist provision can co-exist with access to the mainstream setting. Alternatively, adopting a mainstream first perspective where the learner is first and foremost a member of the mainstream class and the special class becomes a flexible support structure (Travers, 2023) to be used when the barriers to curriculum access (e.g. over-stimulation) become overwhelming and detrimental to the learner. A more flexible approach to the special class could be used to effectively maintain presence and participation for these learners and align with a learner’s right to an inclusive education. Thus, this illustrates that an appropriate education, where all children are getting what they need, when they need it, is an equitable stance that promotes inclusion (Ainscow, 2020). What remains less clear, is how achievement can be measured as ‘what gets measured, gets done’ (Ainscow, 2020, p.10). This reiterates the importance of examining the evidence we are collecting when making decisions for an inclusive education system and ensuring we measure what we value. This evidence, and what is done with the evidence, is discussed next.

5.2.2 Use of Evidence

Findings suggest that the use of data to measure the level of inclusion of learners from the special class was challenging for participants, with participants citing the impact of COVID-19 as something which has derailed progress in this area (e.g. recommendations for students to remain in one class group only). Similarly, there was evidence of special classes being left out of the data generation phase in some participant schools during SSE cycles. This was possibly due to the fact that learners from special classes can be exempt from standardised testing, data which participants sometimes used as evidence in SSE evidence gathering phases. Support plans were mentioned as important documents to monitor individual learners' progress, however, this was not linked to evidence to inform the levels of inclusion. As the EPSEN Act is currently under review (DE, 2021a), it highlights an impetus to put a focus on inclusive education in policy in Ireland. Therefore, it warrants the same impetus given to other SSE cycles, such as wellbeing (DE, 2022d). Participants were familiar with the SSE process and research suggests this would extend to the wider school population (McNamara *et al.*, 2022) and is ideally placed as a mechanism to develop inclusion in schools using an evidence informed approach. To avoid inclusion becoming a once off initiative, this study argues for it to be implemented as a core principle in the SSE process (see Figure 5.2) and also argues for the inclusion of learners enrolled in the special class to be a discrete focus cycle.

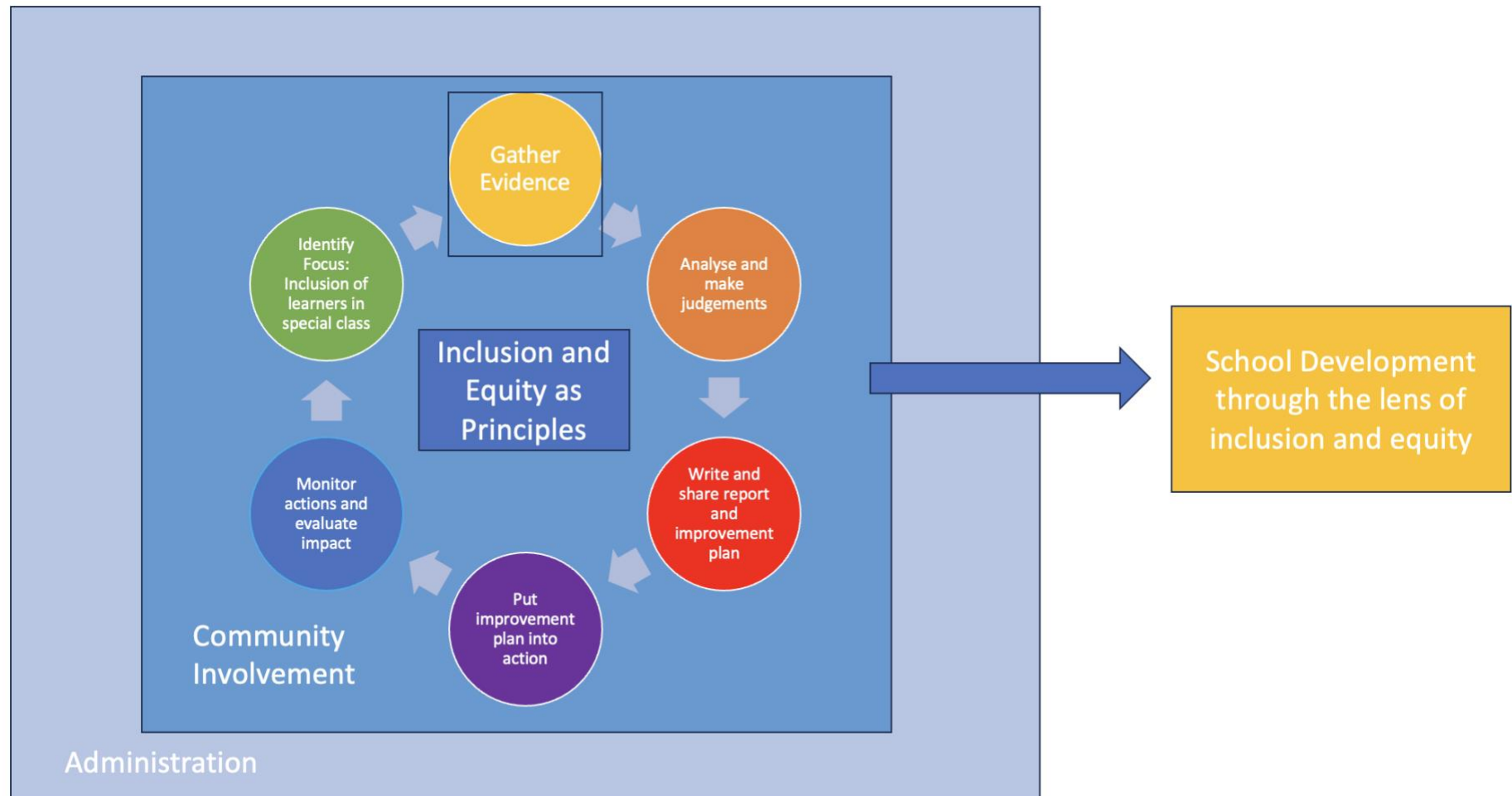
Participants highlighted evidence of the presence of learners enrolled in the special class as a step in the right direction to a more inclusive school as these learners were enrolled in the school, just like their mainstream peers. These were learners they believed would traditionally have enrolled in special schools. However, measuring their levels of participation and achievement is more complex and requires a closer look at developing criteria to measure what exactly participation and achievement look like for these learners. For example, many participants cited the example of special class learners being part of whole school assemblies. The question arises if this constitutes 'meaningful participation' or if these students are just 'present' at these school events. It could also be said that having presence and participation are steps towards the pragmatic inclusion of special class learners (Tiernan, 2021) but possibly not enough to bridge the gap from presence to meaningful participation. Some participants spoke of these learners being present but not participating, while others shared examples of these learners presenting their learning to the whole school. There could also be a role here for support plans (or IEPs) to be used as

evidence to inform levels of inclusion, linking the learners' goals to examples such as the latter. This would also go some way in addressing issues with IEPs in Ireland where research has signalled that in several countries where IEPs were legalised, they are largely bureaucratic and less used as a pedagogical tool (Ní Bhroin and King, 2019).

Despite the challenges in measuring the level of inclusion, participants were much clearer on evidence relating to those who were not being included successfully. This is usually related to a certain profile of learners, namely those who were non-verbal with co-occurring needs (Finlay *et al.*, 2022). This is in keeping with other research which shows that very few students make the transition from special class to full enrolment in the mainstream and spend a large portion of their day in the special class (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Banks *et al.*, 2016; DES, 2020; NCSE, 2024a). In contrast, findings in this study indicated learners who did spend more time with their mainstream peers are those who had good communication skills. This use of evidence was explored in the SISLCoP when developing reverse inclusion, a practice to facilitate the inclusion of learners who spent the least amount of time with their mainstream peers. This involved children from the mainstream classes joining the special class for lessons or social development experiences. The findings highlighted the benefits of sharing practice, critiquing it, piloting it and discussing it again. This is an example of using evidence to stimulate PL (Ainscow, 2020) and developing inclusive practice through collaboration that leads to experimentation of these practices (Ainscow, 2016) when participants return to their schools.

This study argues that the shortcomings in the use of evidence to support inclusive practice could be addressed through the SSE process, underpinned by Ainscow's (2020) framework for promoting inclusion and equity (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Mapping Ainscow's (2020) Framework to the SSE (DE, 2022d) Process



Participants were very familiar with the SSE process, with most focusing on wellbeing at the time of engagement with the SISLCoP as this was required of schools to be a focus of an SSE cycle by 2025 (DE, 2022d). Through the identification of including learners from the special class as an area of focus, schools could then gather evidence on the level of inclusion using data related to presence, participation and achievement. Next, schools could set targets and put a plan for improvement in place. Despite the findings here highlighting challenges in this regard, this study shows how support from a CoP model of PL facilitated by a facilitator with experience of practice and research could help address such challenges. Arguably, this requires a shift in mindset to move away from solely relying on individual approaches and responses to meeting learners' needs (Kinsella, 2020) as inclusion is based on social learning processes (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). This is explored through Ainscow's (2020) view of how we might think about inclusive school development, which is discussed next.

5.2.3 School Development

Developing an inclusive school can be characterised by a school community with a shared consensus around inclusive values that respond positively to diverse learning needs (Ainscow, 2020). Participants in this study emphasised the need for a welcoming and supportive atmosphere combined with a culture of collaboration to build an inclusive school culture, with some participants linking this to their school ethos. Findings also suggest the positive disposition held by DEIS school principals towards diversity, acknowledging their experience of DEIS as a supporting factor of their commitment to inclusive education, where *all* learners really mean all. This could also indicate an awareness of learners' right to an inclusive education. However, barriers to inclusive school development were discussed by participants such as the location of the special class, external supports and insufficient staffing of support teachers and SNAs. Despite these barriers, participants did offer examples of positive steps that could be taken to progress inclusion and school development.

Inclusive practices were evident throughout discussions at meetings and interviews, with participants settling on the conceptualisation of inclusion that aligns with their right to go to their local school and feel like they belong. This sense of belonging translated to their presence and participation, regardless of what classroom they were assigned to. This

definition of inclusion is similar to Goodall's (2020) research describing inclusion as 'a feeling, not a place' and links to Ainscow's (2020) view that school development should include participatory processes (in class support for learners) as part of an inclusive culture. As part of the SSE process, evidence could be gathered from learners, parents, and staff (including SNAs) around the impact of these inclusive practices and review practices as necessary. The NCSE (2024a) call for an external system of monitoring the inclusion of special class learners. However, this internal monitoring and evaluation may offer a more palatable system for those involved, reducing the anxieties related to external inspection (McNamara *et al.*, 2022). This can mitigate against the danger that special classes may provide an illusion of inclusion (McLeskey *et al.*, 2004; Banks and McCoy, 2017).

Findings also indicated some principals viewed meeting the needs of diverse learners as an opportunity to learn and develop practice. This disposition, coupled with a collaborative culture can have a powerful impact on developing inclusive practice in schools (Ainscow, 2020). The SISLCoP provided participants with a template for a solution-focused approach to meeting diverse needs, with evidence of participants taking this approach back to their schools. In addition, SISLCoP meetings were held on-site in participant schools where they exhibited the creative use of spaces to create flexible and inclusive learning environments that all learners could access. There was also evidence of schools critiquing traditional organisational structures, such as assembly and lining up procedures, and making adjustments to support learners who found such situations overwhelming. These examples exemplify the small actions schools can take to support school development in an inclusive direction. Such actions can be monitored and reviewed via the SSE process to ensure they are aligned with the overall goal of increasing the inclusion of learners from the special class with their mainstream peers and realising their right to an inclusive education.

Data from this study suggest that a culture of collaboration exists in most participant schools and the participants recognise its value in supporting and developing inclusive practices. A culture of collaboration in schools has also been cited as a characteristic of inclusive schools, where staff respond to diversity positively and take a solution-focused approach to difficulties experienced by students, rather than focusing on the learner's deficits (Kinsella, 2020). A focus on developing school capacity in meeting diverse needs, rather than looking at alternatives that perpetuate separate provisions, may be the inclusive turn (Ainscow, 2007) in the mindset that Irish policymakers need in developing inclusive schools. The SSE process emphasises its collaborative nature, identifying itself as a

‘collaborative, internal school reflection, review and planning for improvement’ (DE, 2022d, p. 9) and therefore, aligns with Ainscow’s (2020) framework for school development through an inclusive lens. Amalgamating the frameworks (Figure 5.2) could support schools in identifying barriers and adopting a collaborative solution-focused approach to addressing those barriers. The support of all stakeholders, including those external to the school grounds, need to be involved in this collaborative process, and this is discussed next.

5.2.4 Community Involvement

The key stakeholders identified in this research include the school staff (principals, teachers and SNAs), students, parents, policymakers and external professionals (such as health professionals). Involving the wider school community through effective partnerships is key to supporting the work of the school in developing more inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020). Participants concurred with this view, but findings reveal a perception amongst principals that there is insufficient support from therapeutic health providers. This is supported by Irish research that emphasises the challenges associated with access to assessments and subsequent delivery of support services (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2016). Collaboration between schools and health professionals is viewed as a key indicator of outcomes for students with SEN (Day, Prunty and Dupont, 2012; Carroll and Sixsmith, 2016). In addition, General Comment No. 4 (UN, 2016) articulates the necessity of specialist therapies, stating that they should be available within the education setting and have a multi-disciplinary approach. Whilst pilot initiatives have been set up to try and address this issue (NCSE, 2019; 2020) and have shown potential (Gardiner, 2023), they have yet to be expanded. This research calls for a framework of inter-agency collaboration to be established to support the needs of the most vulnerable learners in schools.

The findings also referenced the involvement of parents and students and the need for their voices to be heard in the development of inclusive education. Participants believe there is an appetite for special classes amongst parents and students. There is a role for schools in convincing parents that the same level of support, or the support they need, will be there for the child in the mainstream (Travers, 2023). Of note also from the findings is the participant view that parents of mainstream learners were indifferent to special class

provision and inclusion, with their children having a better awareness of diverse learning needs. This illustrates an area that could be targeted to develop a sense of collective responsibility in the school community. The DE (2022d) have acknowledged schools have work to do in terms of including parents in the SSE process. However, further iterations of the process could borrow the approach of the DEIS action planning process (DE, 2022e) using the theme of partnerships with parents. DEIS schools are obliged to complete school improvement plans, instead of SSE cycles, although in effect they are a similar process with the goal of school improvement (Barry *et al.*, 2022). Five of the twelve members of the SISLCoP were principals of DEIS schools and they all alluded to the importance of involving parents to improve outcomes for learners. A shared understanding of the SSE process for inclusive school development across all stakeholders needs to be addressed to get the community involvement needed to support inclusive change (Ainscow, 2020). This can be supported by policy development from all levels of the system, which are discussed next.

5.2.5 Administration

Participants found administrative supports to be inadequate for leading special class provision inclusively. Ainscow (2020) argues that an inclusive culture in a school must be supported by an education system with the same values, assumptions and beliefs across each of the macro, meso and micro levels. Findings indicated that the principal participants valued the support of the SISLCoP in making links between policy and practice. In particular, the SSE process was highlighted as a policy mechanism that could be used by schools to bring about school improvement through inclusion whilst also satisfying their accountability obligations. The SISLCoP also provided a space for school leaders to reflect on what is necessary to develop an inclusive culture. This is what Ainscow and Sandill (2010) describe as a culture where school staff reflect on inclusion, review and refine their practices and make purposeful decisions to develop a more inclusive culture in their schools. This reflects the steps of the SSE process but also requires coordination at a local level to provide a means of collaboration to develop inclusive cultures and a shared responsibility to improve outcomes for all learners (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018). The SISLCoP is an example of a support mechanism to gather evidence across a group of

schools and collaborate effectively to develop inclusive practice through the sharing of expertise, resources and ideas (Ainscow, 2016).

Participants concurred that the implementation of any policy in education takes on a complex journey and can be a ‘messy process’ (Bell and Stevenson, 2015). Inclusion is not a concept that can be addressed by a top-down policy or organisational changes (Ainscow, *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this research advocates for the use of a framework, such as the model presented in Figure 5.2, to support schools in progressing inclusive education. Other support materials such as the Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011) or the toolkit (EASNIE, 2020a) could also be used to assist data gathering, analysing and making judgements.

The current special class policy implies establishing classes is based on a collaborative engagement between stakeholders (NCSE, 2023). However, participants in this study indicated a lack of collaboration with some seeking to open special classes, and others feeling pressure to do so. Participants also spoke of their disappointment in administrative and PL support from the DE and NCSE once schools opened their special classes. Furthermore, this collaborative engagement from all stakeholders is questionable given the recent legislative move giving autonomy to the Minister for Education and NCSE to compel a school to open a special class if they believe it is required (Government of Ireland, 2022). Findings also suggested a lack of participation of principals in policymaking, particularly at consultation level with policymakers. This indicates the need for a more supportive policy system, with more engagement between policymakers and those at the coal face, something which has been highlighted by the European Agency (EASNIE, 2020b). This could take the form of support at various levels of the system, ranging from supportive policy measures at the macro level, to more specialist support at the meso level and localised supports similar to that of the SISLCoP at the micro level.

5.2.6 Summary

Leading special class provision in the context of inclusion is a dilemma that the researcher has grappled with since the opening of the special classes in his school. Travers (2023) argues that the special class can play a role in furthering inclusive education but needs to be grounded in a rights-based planning framework. As demonstrated here, mapping

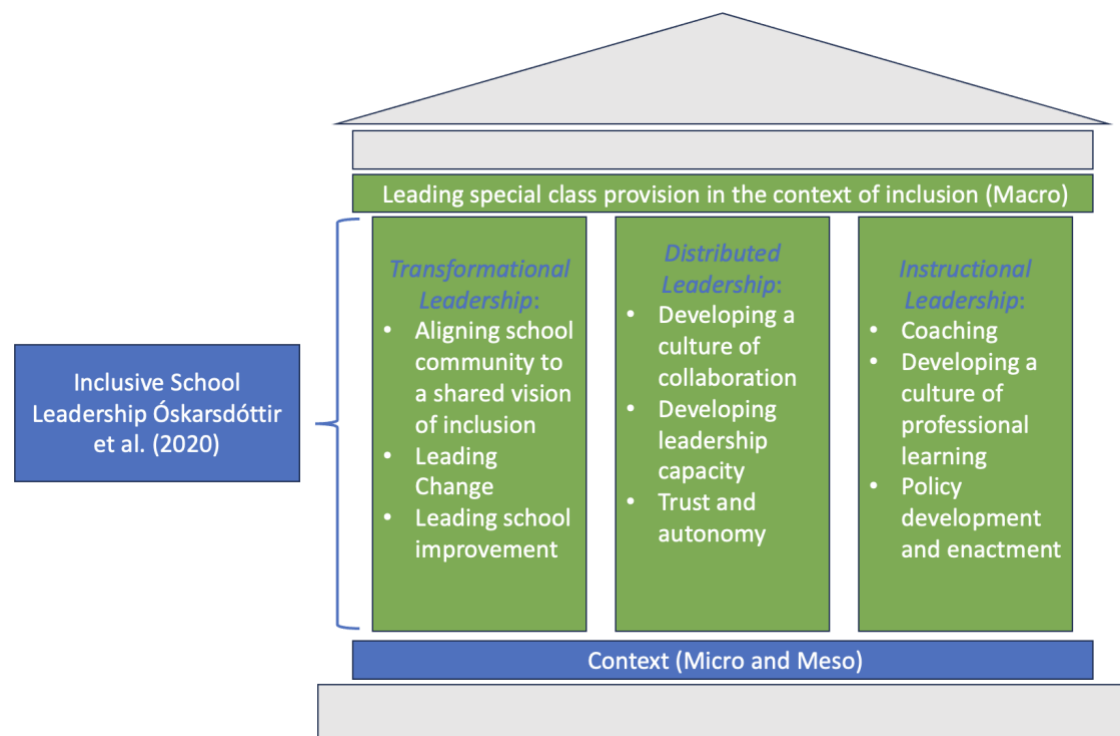
Ainscow's (2020) framework onto the SSE process has the potential to support schools in this regard, ensuring an intentional approach to the inclusion of learners in the special class. This research supports the argument that special schools and classes can play a vital role in furthering the 'progressive realisation of an inclusive education system' (NCSE, 2024a, p.14) by viewing inclusion through a rights-based lens and the triage of presence, participation and achievement. This research calls for a careful, considered approach within a rights-based framework (such as Figure 5.2) to adopt the special class as a facilitator of inclusion rather than a standalone class that reinforces the notion of an inclusion illusion (Banks and McCoy, 2017). Leading special classes in the context of inclusion is complex, requiring school leaders to draw from a repertoire of leadership practices and these are discussed next.

5.3 Section 2: Enacting Inclusive School Leadership and the SISLCoP

This section discusses the data relating to Inclusive School Leadership (ISL) practice and how the SISLCoP could support principal's enactment of ISL which adds to the knowledge base on the design of PL experiences to develop inclusion in schools (e.g. Brennan and King, 2022). Findings suggest a combination of transformational, distributed and instructional leadership supported the development of ISL. This corroborates with the model of ISL theorised by Óskarsdóttir *et al.* (2020) which purports that school leaders draw from each leadership model to enact ISL. This is also in tandem with research from an Irish context (Morrissey, 2020; Dennehy, *et al.*, 2024) where leadership practices that support inclusive education can be traced back to the more established models of leadership that have dominated the educational research field. Findings from this research extends on existing research by emphasising the crucial elements of their interactional nature and being context-bound. Figure 5.3 illustrates the findings from this research (green pillars) highlighting ISL cannot be truly enacted without drawing from each. Therefore, enacting ISL is not a linear or straightforward process. This is further complicated by the challenges of leading special class provision inclusively (green roof). The pillars are indicative of the connected support structure of each leadership model that in turn influence leadership practices that create the environment for inclusion to flourish in schools. The findings also suggest that school leaders will draw from each model at different times, all depending on their school context. Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, (2020) acknowledge the influence of the policy

contexts in which ISL operates at a macro, exo, meso and micro level. However, context does not feature in their visual representation of ISL (Figure 2.4, Chapter 2) and findings from this study indicate its indispensability at all levels of ISL development. Therefore, it features as the foundational base of ISL as an understanding of context is essential in order to lead effectively (Hallinger, 2005; Ó' Murchú and O'Donoghue, 2024). The next subsections draw on the findings and literature to detail how each leadership model is necessary for ISL development. This can be used to support school leaders working in policy contexts such as Ireland, where separate (special class) provisions still exist. Whilst the order does not indicate a linear structure or hierarchy within ISL, they are purposefully ordered to mark the leadership journey of leading special class provision inclusively, beginning with setting the vision for special class provision (transformational leadership), developing school capacity to meet the needs of all (distributed leadership) and finally developing organisational and curricular goals (instructional leadership).

Figure 5.3 Context and the Pillars of ISL



5.3.1 Transformational Leadership

This study highlighted the use of transformational leadership practices when opening or setting a vision for the special class. Participants recommended a cautious or slow introduction of changes, harnessing the enthusiasm of the committed members of staff who help create and share the vision and rationale for any change in practice. This section discusses the leadership practices that emanated from this study deemed to align with transformational leadership. These include aligning the school community to a shared vision of inclusion with a rights-based lens, leading change and leading school improvement.

5.3.1.1 Aligning the School Community to a Shared Vision of Inclusion

The findings in this research suggest that the alignment of stakeholder attitudes is necessary to achieve organisational goals, such as increasing the levels of presence, participation, and achievement of learners. This answers the call for collective responsibility in meeting the needs of all (Ainscow, 2007; 2016; 2020). The participants in this study recognised this ‘meeting of minds’ as an essential part of their leadership practice in improving practice

through shared understanding. Principals described how they worked with stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and students to understand the rationale behind inclusive practices that were developed to support all learners. This was not always a straightforward task due to differing perspectives on inclusion. However, the leadership practice of clear communication was cited as an essential tool in navigating through differences of opinion and remaining clear on the school's vision and intentions. This is in keeping with Day *et al.*'s (2016) assertion that transformational leadership is focused on vision setting and developing organisational cultures which enhance teaching and learning for all, including children with AN.

For many participants, special classes were opened as part of an inclusive vision for the school, in response to meeting the needs of learners whose needs were not being met in the mainstream classroom. Linking this to presence, participation and achievement, it could be argued that the special class was meeting the 'presence' criteria as the learners were still attending their school. The school principal has a key role here in creating a vision where the presence, participation and achievements of special class learners are clearly articulated, thus reflecting the need for transformational leadership practices. This vision is something that could be developed and supported within a SISLCoP and could be a tangible output from such a PL experience. Participants could use the group as a sounding board for feedback, a common feature of the meetings. Following their participation in the SISLCoP, some participants noted their intention to carry out an 'inclusion audit' using prompt material from the Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011) or the self-reflection toolkit (EASNIE, 2020a). This could be used as evidence to support schools in meeting their SSE obligations (DE, 2022d) and develop an evidence-based improvement plan to support them in implementing inclusive practices (Brennan, 2019). This exemplifies a transformational leadership strategy to bring their shared vision to fruition harnessing the potential of evidence as a 'lever for change' (Ainscow, 2024, p.31).

5.3.1.2 Leading Change

The findings also reveal that this type of leadership can be negatively impacted if the autonomy of the principal is not respected. Leading change requires the necessary autonomy to adapt curriculum and assessment to meet all learners' needs (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). For example, one participant felt the introduction of the class was quite pressured by external sources and may have impeded the principal's ability to set the class up in an inclusive way. Given the increased autonomy and accountability in the Irish context (Skerritt, 2019; Salokangas, Wermke and Harvey, 2020), PL needs to support school leaders with this increased autonomy and findings from this research suggest a CoP is one such PL experience that could support this. In addition, the shared interest (domain) is a motivator for engagement with this form of PL and supports a move away from the traditional, transmissive form of PL that exists in the Irish context (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). In this study, opening a special class marked a significant change in participants' schools that required them to draw from transformational and distributed leadership practices. Evidence here suggests that leading change requires whole staff buy-in, thus requiring the support of a distributed model where multiple leaders, both formal and informal, support the change process (Morrissey, 2020).

5.3.1.3 Leading School Improvement

Developing more inclusive practices in schools are seen as a vehicle for inclusive school development and improvement (Ainscow, 2020). The participants regarded their move towards more inclusive practices as a process, with an emphasis on acknowledging where staff members are at in that process and supporting them along the way. This is what Day, *et al.*, (2016) refer to as 'layering' whereby school leaders draw from combinations of instructional and transformational leadership strategies during their inclusion journeys. In other words, these are leadership practices that support school improvement with an 'inclusive turn' (Ainscow, 2007). Promoting school improvement can be supported by the SISLCoP through its commitment to improve outcomes for all children and this aligns with Ainscow's theory that collective responsibility and school-to-school collaboration can go some way in achieving excellence and equity in education (Ainscow, 2010; 2024).

Participants in this study aligned with this rights-based view of inclusive education in principle, but found the reality challenging, especially when focusing on learners in the special class. Inclusive school leaders share the vision that all learners are provided with meaningful education alongside their friends and peers (EASNIE, 2015). However, without a clear vision of what this looks like at school level, there is a danger that policies and practices may fall short of the inclusive mark necessary to enact meaningful inclusion. Findings suggest that an articulated vision will set the direction, but consistent communication of that vision is what will assist in making the vision a reality. The communication and ‘practising what you preach’ (Pete, Interview 8) elements of the vision are key. Developing inclusion in schools is a complex process that requires whole staff buy-in, and the case for distributed leadership as a necessity in this process is discussed next.

5.3.2 Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership (DL) was a concept that was familiar to participants from their experiences of PL for school leaders and the leadership policy documents (e.g. LAOS, DE, 2022c). All participants discussed the role of the principal as one that was multi-faceted, challenging and one which can sometimes make them feel overburdened. They also commented on the increase in their workload without sufficient support from external bodies when leading special class provision. Therefore, DL was deemed essential, and particularly necessary when it came to the workload associated with special class provision and the development of inclusive practice in their schools. This section discusses the findings relating to leadership practices that exemplify the need for DL to be at the centre of ISL development. These DL practices are discussed next and include developing a culture of collaboration, developing leadership capacity and trust and autonomy. Possible misconceptions are also highlighted to support further iterations of PL for ISL.

5.3.2.1 Developing a Culture of Collaboration

Principals in this study indicated that collaboration amongst staff and the sharing of expertise through networks such as the SISLCoP supported schools in developing inclusive practices. Collaboration is synonymous with DL (Harris, 2012) and by extension is essential in developing ISL in schools. Developing a culture of collaboration is also intrinsically linked to developing inclusive schools (Billingsley *et al.*, 2018; DeMatthews, 2020; Kinsella, 2020) and meeting the needs of learners with complex needs (Ainscow, 2016; Ní Bhroin and King, 2019; DeMatthews, 2020) such as those enrolled in special classes. The impact of a culture of collaboration is significant as it gives a space for all voices to be heard, address concerns and have a shared understanding to build on inclusive practice. Mirroring the structure of the SISLCoP in their schools could potentially act as a vehicle to develop a collaborative culture and inclusive practice simultaneously. At the heart of such a structure is the agreed vision of inclusion as an underlying principle for schools (Ainscow, 2020) and not something that can be assigned to a person or group of people. This points towards the necessary conditions of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) and DL in schools.

5.3.2.2 Developing Leadership Capacity

Participants noted the need to develop leadership capacity to support them in developing an inclusive school culture. This is also recognised in the literature (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; DE, 2022c; NCSE, 2011). There was particular emphasis on those staff members who were appointed to middle leadership roles. All participants agreed that a whole school effort was needed when striving to be an inclusive school and this requires leadership at all levels, including those in teacher, middle and senior leadership roles. Many participants emphasised the need for specialist expertise in inclusive and special education on their leadership teams. They recognised these staff members as essential in making up for the gaps in their own pedagogical knowledge and developing the instructional leadership element of ISL. Observations from the SISLCoP sessions identified practices shared by participants, such as developing a CoP amongst the special classes within their schools, that supported this development of leadership capacity for inclusive practice. Evidence from the SISLCoP also highlighted how these practices were enhanced through the sharing of expertise, with one participant highlighting how he developed structures that shared the

pedagogical knowledge of the special class teachers with the mainstream teachers. The findings demonstrate the importance of leadership teams to have members with specialist knowledge of inclusive and special education pedagogy. This echoes the calls for roles to be recognised in schools (such as SENCOs) with specific expertise of inclusive and special education pedagogy (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Hornby, 2020) that is conceptualised within a distributed model of leadership (Colum and Mac Ruairc, 2023) such as the ISL model proffered in this research. Notwithstanding the principal's overall responsibility for inclusion and the need for specialist knowledge, it is imperative to acknowledge the collective responsibility required for inclusion to develop in schools (Ainscow, 2024).

5.3.2.3 Trust and Autonomy

In enacting DL, some participants advised to take a step back and allow teachers to lead. This is more akin to authentic DL (Harris, 2012; Lumby, 2013), which some others found difficult to achieve in reality as they felt a sense of responsibility for all school business. In developing DL, principals need to place a high degree of trust in colleagues, relinquish power, and reject the 'great man' theory (Harris, 2012). The sense of 'ultimate responsibility' is something common with early career principals (Spillane and Lee, 2014; Ummanel, McNamara and Stynes, 2016) and was evidenced in this research also. The changes associated with leading special class provision led to challenges for even the more experienced principals in this study, despite drawing from the PL experiences available to them (e.g. NCSE workshops), indicating a need for more bespoke support mechanisms, such as the SISLCoP, for school principals. Whilst acknowledging their need for support, participants also spoke of the need for school expertise to be acknowledged in decision making (e.g. around learner placement) and giving the school more autonomy in this regard to support the enactment of ISL.

Some of the participants in this research are teaching principals (3 of 12), or had experience being a teaching principal, meaning they have full-time teaching roles alongside their leadership responsibilities (54% of primary school principals in Ireland are teaching principals, IPPN, 2022). This unique leadership context has an impact on the school leaders' ability to enact DL, given the reduction in interaction time with staff during the school day. Despite these challenges, one participant provided an example of how DL can work for ISL in this context by supporting the DP (who had expertise in the area of inclusive and special

education) to take on the role of SENCO. This school also used discretionary time to enable the DP to carry out leadership-specific tasks. Context plays a key role in the enactment of DL (Spillane and Anderson, 2019; Printy and Liu, 2021) and this example demonstrates context as a source of constraints, resources and opportunities that a principal must understand and navigate to lead effectively (Hallinger, 2005). Therefore, context must be considered when implementing PL for ISL and when supporting school leaders in the school improvement processes (such as SSE).

5.3.2.4 Misconceptions of DL

While DL was very evident in the findings, the data revealed two different constructions of DL in schools. Firstly, there was evidence of practices and actions that influence or promote the leadership practices of others (Spillane, 2005). The findings point towards the interactions of the principal with the school community as a key enabler of DL in the ISLA framework. For example, Freya described the interactions as something visible in a school, actively promoting inclusion through daily interactions with staff, parents and learners. Secondly, evidence revealed participants confusing DL with delegated or licenced leadership (King and Stevenson, 2017) where responsibilities are exclusive to the chosen few. In this case, the chosen few relate to middle management or assistant principal roles, a system in Ireland where formal leadership roles are assigned and remunerated. In some participant schools, the role of SENCO was highlighted as a key position. Often, this role was given to or inherited by the Deputy Principal without collaboration, while others had it as part of an AP1 or AP2 role. This is arguably another form of delegated leadership, where the responsibilities for coordinating SEN provision are handed to these staff members in middle or senior leadership roles. With calls to make the SENCO role a formalised leadership position (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Holland and Fitzgerald, 2023), evidence here suggests any formalisation of this leadership role will require careful conceptualisation that aligns with the authentic enactment of DL (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc, 2023), and the collective responsibility of inclusive education remains intact and not assigned to a ‘specialist’. Similarly, a rebranding to the term Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) may be more suitable as it is suggestive of the goal of inclusion and not limited to SEN. Notwithstanding the potential a leader with such expertise can give to a school, the core elements of inclusive school development where there is a common sense of purpose (Ainscow, 2020; 2024), must permeate the whole school

approach. Furthermore, the SISLCoP can support the sharing of such expertise and be an enabler of the collective responsibility that is required within schools, between schools and beyond schools (Ainscow *et al.*, 2012).

DL is sometimes portrayed as a potential saviour of the role of a principal in Ireland by making it more sustainable (Stynes, McNamara and O'Hara, 2018; Murphy and Brennan, 2022). The roles and responsibilities associated with special education provision in schools are considered a heavy workload (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc, 2023). This indicates an appetite for DL to be the main player in meeting the diverse learning needs of learners in special classes and schools. The findings suggest that this model of leadership, if enacted authentically, can support schools in moving towards a more inclusive direction. Similarly, the SISLCoP supported principals in enacting such leadership practices through discussion, reflection and action. However, principals did allude to vulnerabilities when it came to supporting staff through instructional leadership, which is discussed next.

5.3.3 Instructional Leadership

The findings from this research reveal that instructional leadership (IL) was deemed the most challenging to implement for participants when it came to developing inclusion for learners enrolled in the special class. These are IL practices associated with a focus on curriculum, teaching and learning, with the goal of improving student outcomes (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger, *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, given the scale of the endeavour that is inclusion, evidence highlighted this model of leadership must be supplemented by the DL practices outlined in the previous section. Therefore, the use of IL strategies was focused on identifying gaps in pedagogical knowledge associated with special class provision and inclusive practice. This section details how IL practices were elicited to support ISL through coaching, developing a culture of PL and policy development.

5.3.3.1 Coaching

There was evidence in this study that principals draw from their repertoire of leadership skills, such as coaching, to support staff. Many participants in this research were aware of

the coaching strategy through their own experience of receiving coaching, with some having specific qualifications in the area. These findings are similar to that of Dennehy (2023) who also found the approach evident among participants in supporting the staff working in the special class. Participants spoke of how they provided space and empowered other members of staff to find the right intervention or practice for students who were struggling. This is an example of one of the aims of coaching where the coach draws out solutions from the person they are coaching, that are best suited to the context they are in (Anthony, 2017). The facilitator also adopted this style during meetings and was central to the ‘problems of practice’ element of SISLCoP meetings, where principals would bring issues related to inclusive practice in their own context to the group. The facilitator engaged in deeper listening, used questioning to clarify and motivated participants to act. This approach has the potential to generate a culture of developing leadership capacity (Butler, 2024) and support schools in meeting the needs of all learners.

5.3.3.2 Developing a Culture of Professional Learning

Data revealed that participants in this study made up for any shortcomings in specific pedagogical knowledge or interventions by developing a culture of professional learning. One of the weaknesses associated with IL is the centrality of the principal in being the ‘expert’ in all areas (Hallinger, 2003) and potentially ignoring the leadership potential of other staff members (Bush and Glover, 2014). This research revealed the vulnerabilities felt by school leaders when it came to special class provision and inclusive practice. This pushed them to draw from a more distributed leadership model. For example, one principal worked closely with a teacher who had postgraduate qualifications in the area of inclusive and special education to further her inclusive vision for the school. Another example highlighted the staff in the special classes and SET settings as leaders in promoting inclusive practices in their schools. This supports the argument of the need for principals to develop both IL and DL models in their schools simultaneously.

Participant principals found it challenging to support their staff when it came to curriculum design and behaviours of concern in the special class which aligns with research from an Irish context (e.g. Finlay, *et al.*, 2022). Other scholars also point towards the need for school leaders to be knowledgeable and aware of what teachers require to tackle the challenges associated with meeting the needs of all (Billingsley *et al.*, 2018; Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020).

Participants expressed feelings of guilt in not being able to support their staff sufficiently, as well as feelings of uncertainty in making decisions about how to proceed in such areas. McCormack (2019) and Dennehy (2023) also had similar findings and called for further support in this area for school leaders. This lack of confidence in supporting school staff via IL is an area in need of prioritisation for school leaders. This is acknowledged in the research (Rose and Shevlin 2020; Kinsella, 2020) as well as policy advice for special class provision (NCSE, 2024a). Participation in the SISLCoP, in particular when sharing practice, supported school leaders in their knowledge of interventions and pedagogy. This led to increased confidence when returning to their schools, as highlighted by some participants in terms of pedagogical support. This reiterates the findings of other research on learning communities that have successfully addressed the lack of confidence of teachers and school leaders in developing inclusive practice in schools (Brennan and King, 2022; Walton *et al.*, 2022). In addition, a willingness to learn more about special class provision and inclusive practice was also evident, suggesting principals saw themselves more as learners in the process and thus reducing the traditional power hierarchy in schools, where the principal is the expert on all (Dennehy, *et al.*, 2024). Shifting the focus to seeing diverse learning needs as opportunities for schools to learn is the cultural shift needed to move schools towards inclusive school development (Ainscow, 2020; 2024) and can be achieved through the SSE process (DE, 2022d) by making it an explicit action. Taking the SISLCoP approach of collaborative inquiry to solving problems of practice could also support this action.

There was also an indication from the findings that there needed to be ongoing development of staff and the role of the principal is essential in supporting and sustaining PL in schools (King, 2016; King and Stevenson, 2017; King and Holland, 2022). This also applies to supporting and developing inclusive practice (Brennan *et al.*, 2019). Participants expressed the importance of PL for both principals and staff through a whole-school approach. Identifying areas of need as opportunities to learn supports Ainscow's (2024) call for a collaborative inquiry approach to develop more inclusive schools and can be supported by a culture of collaboration. There is an element of whole-school PL available to schools with special classes, but there is a focus on understanding diagnoses, individual planning and assessment, teaching methodologies and managing regulation (Flanagan, 2022). A CoP model of PL can extend this learning by creating conditions for innovation through developing collaborative cultures and collaborative inquiry approaches. Developing

inclusion and inclusive practice in schools needs to be part and parcel of PL experiences for schools if we are to realise the inclusive vision and learners' rights to an inclusive education.

5.3.3.3 Policy Development and Enactment

This research suggests school leaders found affirmation through engagement with the SISLCoP to support them in meeting mandated requirements. In addition, the SISLCoP space afforded them the opportunity to understand and mediate policy through reflection and receiving feedback from peers. In short, the instructional element of leadership that supports ISL is one of leaders identifying gaps in knowledge (relating to inclusive practice) and bridging those gaps through the development of others. When it comes to mandated policies, research suggests that when they are aligned with their values and preferences, school leaders shape these to their own contexts and adopt an IL style to support implementation (Seashore and Robinson, 2012). However, Ireland is in a policy context of self-evaluation, where like most OECD countries, there is a dual system of internal and external quality assurance (McNamara *et al.*, 2022). Most participants in this study were focusing on wellbeing as part of their school improvement plan through the SSE process, which was a mandated area of focus to be initiated by 2025, following the perceived impact of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (DE, 2022d). SISLCoP meeting 3 provided an example of linking national policy documents and shaping them to align with the goals of the group in terms of promoting inclusive practice. Principals are more positive about the SSE process since it was initially introduced (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021) and are therefore central to its enactment in their schools through IL. However, multiple iterations of the SSE process (DES, 2016a; 2017; DE, 2022d) have failed to explicitly incorporate inclusion and equity as a core principle. The DEIS plan (DE, 2022e), which is the SSE process for DEIS schools added leadership, PL and wellbeing as core themes for development. These are missed opportunities to embed principles of inclusion or identify the inclusion of learners in special classes (or inclusive practice) as a focus for school improvement. The blueprint for this (Figure 5.2) should be introduced and enhanced by goal-oriented leadership practices that can set a clear direction for schools (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger, *et al.*, 2020). One way of setting goals or direction is through school-level policy development or enacting policies mandated by the DE and the SISLCoP proved supportive

to participants in this regard. This research supports the call on national education departments to provide leadership in the promotion of inclusion and equity as principles to guide the work of all school staff (Ainscow, 2020).

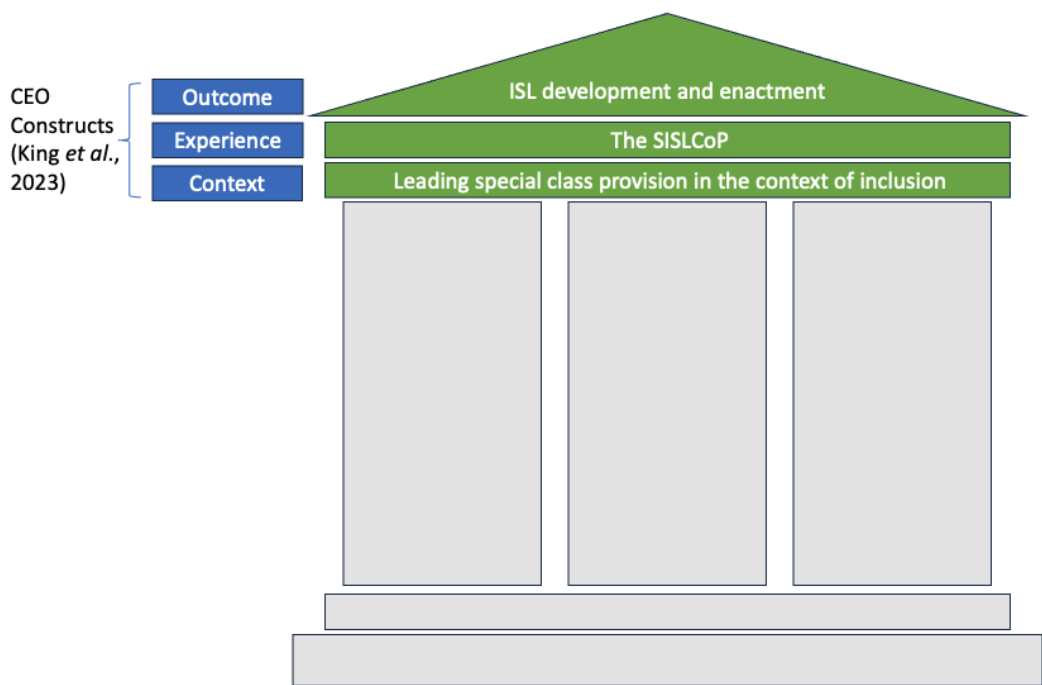
5.3.4 Summary

This model of ISL supports school leaders to meet the rights of learners to an inclusive education in their local schools. The role of leadership is crucial in the current policy climate whereby special classes can play a developmental role (Travers, 2023) in the progressive realisation of inclusive education in Ireland (NCSE, 2024a). This section argues that ISL is a complex leadership practice that draws from a repertoire of leadership practices which emanate from transformational, distributed and instructional models of leadership. Furthermore, it has been argued that you can't have one without the other, and each leadership construct is required at different stages in a non-linear or hierarchical manner. All is context-bound, requiring the school principal to understand the local circumstances in order to lead effectively (Ó Murchú and O'Donoghue, 2024). This section can support school leaders in their understanding of ISL and act as content to inform ISL development in PL for ISL. In designing and evaluating PL for ISL, a careful and considered support mechanism is needed and the next section discusses the ISLA framework in this regard.

5.4 Section 3: The ISLA Framework as a Planning Tool to Design PL for ISL

The findings suggest that the SISLCoP was an effective PL experience for school leaders in this study who wished to develop ISL and inclusive practice in their schools. More specifically, it had a positive impact on the meaningful inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes amongst their mainstream class peers. This section discusses the suitability of the ISLA framework as a planning tool to inform the design of PL for ISL and promote inclusion and equity in schools.

Figure 5.4 ISLA Framework: Focus on CEO (King *et al.*, 2023)



In assessing the suitability of the ISLA framework as a PL planning tool, attention is paid to the King *et al.*, (2023) PL planning and evaluation framework (Figure 5.4). This conceptual meta-model centres around the three main constructs of context, experience and outcomes (CEO) and how these inform each stage of the design and evaluation of the PL experience. As critics note, there are no evaluation frameworks that can be universally applied to those who design or evaluate PL experiences (Boylan *et al.*, 2018), therefore this model is flexible and responsive enough to deal with the complex contextual settings that this PL experience is grounded in. Reflecting on each construct (CEO), table 5.1 illustrates

how the findings from this study are applied to demonstrate the impact of the SISLCoP and act as a framework for the planning and design of future PL for ISL.

Table 5.1 ISLA Planning Framework

Construct	Key Considerations	Prompts	Impact of SISLCoP
Context	<i>Macro:</i> Socio economic factors Cultural factors Political circumstances	Is the focus aligned with national/international policies?	SISLCoP supported principals in linking national/international policy to practice Highlighted awareness right to inclusive education and improved understanding of macro context
	<i>Meso:</i> School Community Institutional	Where are we now in terms of our inclusion journey?	SISLCoP filled the support gap from DE to school level Provided community-based platform with shared contextual understanding Recognised the need for support from institutional structures (e.g. NCSE)
	<i>Micro:</i> Individual staff members Middle leadership Principal	Does the PL align with participants' interests and expectations?	Increased collaboration with staff and other schools DL adopted as a practice to support middle leadership structures Increased knowledge and enactment of inclusive practice
Experience	<i>Design features:</i> Situated, collaborative and social (Boylan <i>et al.</i> , 2018) Meeting structure: Focus on content, conditions, processes and structures (Diaz, <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	What design features support the intended goal of the PL experience?	Voluntary engagement and rooted in context Agreed commitment to and shared understanding of the rights-based approach to inclusion Kept group focused on the domain (inclusive education) Sustained (fortnightly meetings)
	<i>Learning Processes and theories:</i> Situated Learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) Collaborative and inquiry based	What learning theories and processes support goal attainment?	Critical dialogue: Discuss and critique problems of practice, sharing of practice and action Reflection and call to action (accountability) Key role of facilitator: support, leadership and community development
Outcomes	<i>Learners</i>	What are the short and long-term impacts on the learners?	Principals reported reciprocal benefits of inclusive practice for learners in mainstream and special class: e.g., increase in empathy of mainstream learners and increase in social interactions for learners in special classes
	<i>Teachers/School leaders</i>	Were the goals and expectations of participants met?	Personal goals: Time to reflect; Wellbeing Professional goals: increased awareness of ISL; Increased confidence in leading inclusive practice and special class provision
	<i>School</i>	What practices were enacted in schools following engagement with SISLCoP?	Policy and practice development; Inclusion 'back on the agenda'; Reverse Inclusion; CoPs/PLCs within schools
	<i>System/Community</i>	Did the SISLCoP lead to collaboration with other stakeholders?	A reflective, collaborative and context-sensitive PL experience Increased school-to-school collaboration Development of additional CoPs (e.g. special class teacher CoP)

The impact of the SISLCoP is discussed next under each construct heading of context, experience and outcomes.

5.4.1 Context

This study highlights the omnipresent nature of context in PL, evidenced by the permeating discussions by participants on policy context, local context and stakeholder attitudes. These contexts in which the principals are operating take cognisance of the contributing factors at the macro, meso and micro levels (King *et al.*, 2023), reflecting Ainscow's (2020) emphasis on involving the wider community and the role of administrative departments. Findings in this study highlighted how principals felt supported in the SISLCoP in dealing with contextual factors which emphasise the need for context to be considered at all levels when designing or planning PL for ISL (Figure 5.1). Examples at the macro level include the wider socio-economic, cultural, and political circumstances (Hallinger, 2018) and in this case, the policy of special class provision in the climate of inclusion. An example of the meso level is the local circumstances of the schools that each principal participant leads, influenced by school, community and institutional levels. The micro level represents the individual principal leadership and teaching practices. The next paragraphs look at each level in more detail.

5.4.1.1 Macro

At the macro level, the SISLCoP aligned with the promotion of inclusive education policies and the dilemma of special class provision fitting within that rights-based framework. Findings suggest that participants were disenfranchised by the lack of consultation around policy from above and felt they were merely working with restrictive policies handed down to them, thus impacting their autonomy. In terms of restrictive policies, participants referred to the resources allocated to support them in enacting inclusive policy. In particular, they found the development of inclusive practice between learners enrolled in the special class and those in mainstream was hindered by a lack of personnel. However, the SISLCoP undertook a solution-focused approach to these dilemmas and resulted in actions that participants could use in their schools. For example, one participant shared his approach to developing capacity within the staff to support reverse inclusion. The

alignment of the SISLCoP with policy requirements resulted in principals' feeling supported in an area they considered was under-supported by policy guidelines. This was particularly evident when discussing special class guidelines (NCSE, 2016) and practices that supported the inclusion of special class learners.

5.4.1.2 Meso

Participants in this study discussed a range of PL experiences, with most focusing on knowledge receiving through workshops, as opposed to the situated learning offerings of a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 1991) where knowledge is co-constructed. Whilst some participants were motivated to join purely from a knowledge-gaining perspective to support their schools, most engaged for the collaborative and contextual nature of a CoP which focused on the 'here and now' of what school leaders were experiencing. This is an example of the PL context at the meso level. Outside of the postgraduate university offerings on educational leadership and management (Murphy, 2020), PL for school leaders is provided by state agencies (such as Oide and the NCSE). At this institutional level, participants did not feel sufficiently supported by the DE and NCSE in terms of leadership preparation for special classes and inclusive practices. There was also an absence of community-based PL offerings, with most focused on more general issues for principals. These were motivating factors for some participants to join the SISLCoP. Given these findings and similar findings from the Irish context (McCormack, 2019; Dennehy 2023) there is an evidence-based need for a formalised approach to leadership and special class provision, with a focus on ISL and developing inclusive practices. There is an opportunity here for a coordinated approach from the NCSE and Oide to create bespoke PL opportunities for school leaders that could also fit within the SSE framework or DEIS action planning. A more ambitious step forward would be to answer the call of the SISL project (EASNIE, 2019) and support school leaders in creating environments to meet diverse learner needs through collaborative professional programmes, including secondments or sabbaticals that afford deeper learning opportunities.

5.4.1.3 Micro

In considering other reasons for engagement with this PL experience, participant motivations can be viewed from the micro level of the context construct. Findings suggest that motivating factors for engagement were related to inter-school collaboration and a space for reflection. Also at the micro level, participants reflected on their own schools and contexts and applied their learnings from the SISLCoP through the ‘one small step’ action plan. This initiative encouraged them to return to school with an action, discussion or practice to support them in developing inclusive practice. Generally, these practices were focused on the inclusion of special class learners (e.g. reverse inclusion) but also included actions such as whole staff discussions on inclusion in general at their schools. Therefore, the SISLCoP led to school leader growth and PL for participants, something that is the intention of any professional development experience (Boylan *et al.*, 2018; King, *et al.*, 2022). Findings also highlighted the influence the SISLCoP had on developing DL amongst the middle leaders as a starting point to develop DL throughout the school (beyond formal leadership positions).

The findings here illustrate context requires consideration at each level in the planning and evaluation of the PL experience. The macro level evidences the need for national and international policies to be aligned with the content goals or domain of the SISLCoP (i.e. inclusive education). The meso level considers the contextual factors of the learning where the SISLCoP addressed the gaps in PL opportunities offered by the state providers. The micro level highlights the individual factors that influenced engagement. The design of the SISLCoP aligned with the context construct and thus supported the impact of the PL experience. Thus, it can be tentatively concluded that this construct is a key design component of similar PL experiences. The design principles and learning theories that underpinned the PL experience are discussed next.

5.4.2 Experience

This section discusses the impact of the PL experience by examining the core design features and the learning theories underpinning its design (King *et al.*, 2023). Interviews with participants and the literature examined in Chapter 2 inform the key design principles and are summarised in table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Key Design Principles for CoPs for ISL

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Voluntary engagement● Agreed commitment to and shared understanding of inclusion● Critical dialogue● Reflection, feedback and call to action● Facilitator: Support, leadership and community development |
|--|

Whilst these principles share commonalities with other examples of effective collaborative PL experiences (e.g. Brennan and O’ Gorman, 2023), they are slightly more nuanced to reflect the contextual complexities for school principals leading special class provision and inclusion (Figure 5.3). Each is now discussed further as sub-sections of the experience construct.

5.4.2.1 *Voluntary Engagement*

As one participant noted, ‘everyone was there because they wanted to be there’(FD, Interview 6). Having agency over the type of PL an educator engages in is a key facilitator of effective PL (Stoll *et al.*, 2006; Kennedy, 2014). The motivations behind joining the SISLCoP were included in the context construct and are recognised here as supporting contextual factors that prompted participants to volunteer to be part of the research. It could also be argued that the content aligned with their values and principles around a rights-based framework for inclusive education. Cosán (Teaching Council, 2016, p.4) calls for

teachers to take ownership of their own PL and commit to ‘lifelong learning and career development’ but without the mandatory accountability that is associated with PL in other countries (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). This research provides a deeper insight into the motivating factors behind the PL needs of school principals and signals that an appetite for school leader PL for ISL exists and needs to be more widely available. Whilst Cosán acknowledges the vital role of leadership in fostering a culture of PL in schools, it fails to explicitly mention the PL needs of those charged with fostering such a culture. King, Brennan and Gorman (2023) also call on Cosán to build on its progress to date by emphasising the need for a focus on understanding PL, context and leadership for PL. In particular, this research supports the assertions that more attention needs to be paid to school leaders’ contexts, as demonstrated by the ISLA Framework (Figure 5.1). Similarly, the key role of the PL leader needs to be considered, and this could be achieved through the pillar of DL within the ISLA framework with the establishment of leadership teams to focus on developing a culture of PL (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023).

5.4.2.2 Agreed Commitment to and Shared Understanding of Inclusion

From the outset of the SISLCoP, participants were aligned towards an agreed ‘working’ concept of inclusion and shared in the principle of a child’s right to an inclusive education. Reflecting on the ISLA framework and its grounding in principles of inclusion and equity (Ainscow, 2020), findings here reinforce the necessary anchorage that these principles give to support inclusive school development (Ainscow, 2024). Participants commented on how the PL experience challenged their thinking on inclusion through collaborative reflection on long-standing practices (such as lining up) that were subsequently changed to support the inclusion of learners with sensory needs. This means the facilitator was able to return participants to the agreed principles when discussing problems of practice, ensuring the solutions involved more inclusive practices, which are discussed next.

5.4.2.3 Critical Dialogue

Noted by participants were the common core meeting sections of each SISLCoP meeting, namely the discussion of problems of practice, the reflection and the call to action (one small step). From the outset, the goals of the SISLCoP were negotiated as a group, drawing from the need for a CoP to have a shared domain (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Findings suggested that participants valued the fact that the SISLCoP was grounded in the current reality of school leadership, a feature they felt was unique to this style of PL, thus reflecting PL as situated, collaborative and social in nature (Boylan *et al.*, 2018). Their realities, coupled with a shared commitment outlined in the previous section enabled engagement with critical dialogue that challenged traditional education practices (Brennan and King, 2022).

The CoP also borrowed design features from successful CoP facilitators (Diaz *et al.*, 2021) which provided a framework for the meeting design based on content, conditions, processes and structures. Participants found this structure to be an effective framework for keeping the focus on the domain (inclusive education) and avoiding pitfalls such as discussing systemic generated problems that were outside of the control of the group. This solution-focused approach to the problems of practice provided participants with tangible responses or critical feedback to the issues they faced. The fortnightly format of meetings supported further critical dialogue or feedback to participants after carrying out some actions (e.g. how did your ‘one small step go’?). It also gave them respite from the negative perceptions of the role of principal that participants discussed as a symptom of other principal network groups that were informal and lacked the formal structures of a facilitator-led CoP. These PL structures can support the sustainability of a role that has been associated with burnout and stress (Darmody and Smyth, 2016; Bauer and Silver, 2018).

5.4.2.4 Reflection, Feedback and Call to Action

Despite not being ‘excited’ about filling a reflection sheet at the end of the SISLCoP meetings, findings here suggest that critical reflection supported participants' deeper learning and likelihood to implement inclusive practices or engage in leadership practices that promote an ‘inclusive turn’ (Ainscow 2007). There was evidence of reflection beyond the reflection sheet and continuing throughout the week after meetings. The design of the

PL experience was grounded in situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) which supported effective collaboration and inquiry. The design was also participant-led, where they were provided with opportunities to share their ‘problem of practice’ and use the collective experience of the participants to allow for feedback and critical reflection. The triage of collaborative reflection, feedback and action acted as a support mechanism to support principals to deal with the increased autonomy of leading inclusive schools and meet the increasing levels of accountability (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). It also offered a space for school leaders to support each other in mediating policy requirements, which requires social action to make it relevant to their contexts (Ball, 2006).

Findings from this study reveal the value that participants place on PL for school leaders that gives them time and space to reflect on their schools, their students and their leadership practices. This echoes the advice of Netolicky (2016) who purports the importance of leaders making decisions anchored by moral purpose (commitment to inclusion) and taking cognisance of the range of impacts of those decisions. Previous research on PL in education emphasises the principal’s commitment to PL as a pivotal factor in sustaining a culture of PL and school improvement (King, 2016; Labone and Long, 2016; Brennan, 2019). The findings here add to that body of knowledge to include factors that sustain a principal in their own PL. Furthermore, findings suggest that the ‘one small’ step section supported accountability as participants felt this was achievable within the timeframe (2 weeks in between meetings) and they felt accountable to the group when they met again. The critical component of reflection mirrors the research on effective PL models (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). The SISLCoP experience goes some way in answering the call of the SISL project (EASNIE, 2019) offering a bespoke PL experience to school leaders to support them in developing ISL.

5.4.2.5 Facilitator Support, Leadership and Community Development

The researcher's reflections and participant interviews provided insights into the role of the CoP leader or facilitator. The facilitator played a key role in keeping the domain of the CoP in focus. The facilitation of the SISLCoP was quite nuanced as the researcher acted as facilitator, participant and researcher. Other studies have alluded to the importance of the external facilitator in CoPs (Diaz *et al.*, 2021) and PLCs (Brennan, 2019; Brennan and Gorman, 2023). However, in this CoP, the researcher had a unique role as he was external to their schools but also shared the same (principal) role under similar geographical contexts. Findings suggest that this gave the facilitator a sense of credibility as he understood their role or could empathise through 'struggling...in their harsh reality as an act of solidarity' (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2022, p. 278). Participants also highly regarded the researcher element as having the potential to engage in deeper learning. Therefore, there is a case for leadership CoPs to have a facilitator with practitioner and academic experience, who can relate to the participants, as well as bring the university partnership element that has been successful in similar collaborative PL models (Crawford, Roberts and Hickmann, 2008; Brennan *et al.*, 2019; Johnson *et al.*, 2021).

Another factor that supported the PL experience was developing the community domain of the CoP. This took the form of trust-building and rapport-building exercises, such as the learning walk, a participant-led initiative whereby each host participant would take the group on a tour of their school and highlight practices or physical spaces that supported inclusion. These elements of the PL design proved insightful for the participants as the critical dialogue that took place before these walks continued in an informal manner with visual reference points used by host participants to illustrate what they had been discussing. Participants valued the positive and collegial atmosphere where all felt comfortable to share their voice, identifying such an atmosphere as creating a safe space (Poekert *et al.*, 2020; Brennan and Gorman, 2023). Insights from this research also extend this notion of a safe space to support principals' wellbeing, a critical factor in the sustainability of school leaders in their roles (McGovern, 2015; IPPN, 2022). Collectively, these design principles enabled the conditions for the outcomes of the PL experience, which are discussed next.

5.4.3 Outcomes

The PL experience of the SISLCoP resulted in specific outcomes relating to learners, teachers, school leaders, the school and the wider school community and education system. This is supplemented by the planning framework (Table 5.1) and design principles (Table 5.2) proffered in the previous sections which can be adopted by facilitators of PL networks (such as CoPs and PLCs). These outcomes are discussed next in more detail.

5.4.3.1 Learners

At the micro level, and although not the core focus of this study, was the impact on students observed by participants. In this research, the focus was on learners in the special class and the impact of the SISLCoP on this cohort is therefore prioritised. King *et al.*'s (2023) framework recommends consideration of the short and long-term impacts of the PL on student outcomes, a central purpose of PL in education (Guskey, 2002; Timperley *et al.*, 2007; Desimone, 2009; Kennedy, 2014; Dunst, Bruder and Hamby, 2015). The short-term impact on learner outcomes was evidenced by those participants who trialled or piloted inclusive practices that were discussed and developed at meetings. One example highlighted in the findings was the reciprocal benefits of reverse inclusion on the special class learner and their mainstream peers. Examples of the benefits include increased social interactions for the special class learner, and the sense of empathy developed by their mainstream peers (Schoger, 2006). Findings also revealed a need for planning for outcomes related to the achievement of learners enrolled in special classes. The long-term impact of the SISLCoP on learner outcomes is yet to be fully appreciated or understood and therefore further research into this would be necessary.

5.4.3.2 Teachers and School Leaders

In terms of outcomes for the participants, this construct can be explored through the impact of the SISLCoP on them, both personally and professionally. The focus of the CoP was initially rooted in developing ISL. This manifested as leadership practices that supported the development of inclusive practices in their schools (such as creating the space for staff to implement inclusive practices). A secondary, unexpected outcome was the impact on participants' wellbeing, which in turn had a positive impact on their leadership performance upon returning to their schools with a renewed sense of purpose in their role as an inclusive leader. In an era of school leadership where retention and recruitment of school leaders is a significant challenge (IPPN, 2022), PL opportunities that support the sustainability of school leaders in their role must be interwoven into these PL experiences. Similarly, the findings suggest the need for time for such PL to be prioritised by school leaders and be viewed as an important element of their working week and not an add-on.

The findings revealed that participants' perspectives on inclusion have been challenged following their participation in the SISLCoP. The group started off with a broad concept of inclusion which developed towards a focus on meaningful inclusion that centred around presence, participation and achievement (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006). This is a testament to the trust built within the group and participants being able to challenge the status quo (DeMatthews and Mawhinney, 2014; Coviello and DeMatthews, 2021; DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson, 2021; King and Holland, 2022) and question traditional practices within their schools. Despite findings alluding to participant frustrations with implementing special class policy handed down to them, challenging traditional practices is an example of school leader agency, or a variation on teacher agency for inclusion where people work purposefully together to challenge the norm and develop inclusion and equity in schools (Pantić and Florian, 2015). Given the level of autonomy bestowed on school principals, developing their sense of agency is crucial and the SISLCoP supported them in this regard.

As a result of participation in the SISLCoP, participants spoke of using and adapting the practices that were shared during meetings. Adapting the practices was an example of how school leaders were aware of the necessary adaptations that were needed to suit their contexts. For example, some participants identified the barrier of mainstream teacher attitudes as an issue for reverse inclusion, and this needed to be addressed through communication and whole school discussion on the necessity and right of special class

learners to be included with their mainstream peers. These participants found the transformational leadership practice of aligning staff to shared goals (Figure 5.3) supported them in this regard. Other participant schools had full staff buy-in to the practice of reverse inclusion, making the practice easier to implement. This signals the impact of context and the need to meet schools where they are at in terms of their inclusion journeys (Ainscow, 2024). This emphasises the need for space to be created for staff to collaborate and goes some way to answering the call for teachers to work together to identify and remove barriers to participation when designing learning experiences for their learners (Waitoller and Artiles, 2013).

5.4.3.3 School

Another school-based outcome was evident through participants putting inclusion ‘back on the agenda’ (Cáit, Interview 10) following the perceived negative impact of COVID-19 on inclusive practices. Furthermore, participants returned to their schools with a more intentional approach to inclusion in their schools. This ties in with the leadership practice of sharing the vision and making steps towards making that vision a reality (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013). Similarly, this vision where all learners’ needs are met and educated as much as possible alongside their peers is a hallmark of an inclusive school (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013; Esposito, Tang and Kulkarni, 2019; DeMatthews, 2020). As a first step, participants spoke of carrying out a review of their approaches to inclusion which could be done using a framework for reflection with staff (NCSE, 2011; EASNIE, 2020a). This could support an approach to inclusive education that can incorporate special classes and mainstream classes within a rights-based framework (Flanagan, 2022).

5.4.3.4 System Level

At the system level, the evidence here suggests that the SISLCoP can act as a planning template for PL which will go some way in satisfying the European Agency's recommendation (EASNIE, 2019) to engage with PL that enables school leaders to develop ISL through practical, reflective and collaborative formats. It also aligns with policy (King *et al.*, 2023) as Ireland strives to meet its obligations under the UNCRPD. Oide, the professional development service for teachers and school leaders (Oide, 2024) could also adopt such a PL format, which could satisfy the authenticity criteria of the facilitator that was deemed important in this research, as their facilitators are on secondment from their roles as teachers and principals.

Participation in the SISLCoP led to increased school-to-school collaboration, with participants discussing examples of learning communities for special class teachers being started as a result. Given the evidence from this research and the important role of the facilitator, it is advisable that such learning communities are supported by an external facilitator to ensure the promotion of inclusive practices, meaningful inquiry and that the PLC aligns with best practice (Brennan *et al.*, 2019) and avoid the potential danger of reinforcing non-inclusive practices (Timperley *et al.*, 2007).

There was also evidence of a willingness to collaborate with other support services to improve outcomes for learners, such as collaboration with therapeutic service providers. The NCSE did roll out a pilot programme known as the school inclusion model which included therapeutic support delivered in school to support inclusion (NCSE, 2019). No participant school had experience of the pilot and despite no further review or expansion of the pilot, there remains potential merit in the model (Gardiner, 2023). Further opportunities to collaborate with multidisciplinary professionals to develop inclusion in schools is something that was coveted by participants in this study.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the research findings in tandem with the literature to argue the suitability of the ISLA framework as a PL planning and design tool for ISL. Leading special class provision in the context of inclusion is complex and the framework utilises Ainscow's (2020) framework for promoting inclusion and equity in education systems as a foundation

for ISL development. Next, the leadership practices of participants were examined, developed and adapted through the lens of ISL theory (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020). The third section concluded with a discussion of the suitability of the ISLA framework using evidence from the SISLCoP experience. This resulted in a planning framework (Table 5.1) grounded in the King *et al.*, (2023) PL planning and evaluation framework and also offered design principles (Table 5.2) to inform future PL for ISL. These outputs can support practitioners in designing their own learning community focused on inclusion and leadership. The next chapter will bring the thesis to a conclusion where the research questions will be directly addressed. A summary of the research is provided along with the limitations of the research. Finally, recommendations are made for practice, policy and future research.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This research explored the role of a CoP in supporting principals to make their schools more inclusive of learners enrolled in special classes. The findings add to the body of knowledge on ISL and more specifically add to the knowledge base on PL for school leaders to develop leadership practices that support inclusion in their schools. The findings from this study have implications for policy, practice and future research in terms of developing inclusive schools. The research project began with a literature review that supported the development of a conceptual framework for the study (Figure 3.2, Chapter 3). A qualitative case study design was used to investigate the role of the CoP in supporting ISL, with data gathered from a pre-meeting survey, CoP meeting recordings, interviews, researcher reflections and a focus group interview with participants. Findings were analysed through a six-step process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021).

There is widespread agreement that PL and ongoing support is needed for school leaders to develop inclusion and equity in their schools (EASNIE, 2019; Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020; Dennehy *et al.*, 2024; NCSE, 2024a). However, what such a PL experience should look like is less clear and this research fills this knowledge gap by putting forward a model of PL that is collaborative, bespoke and context-sensitive. This has led to the most significant output from this study being the ISLA framework (outlined in Chapter 5) for planning and designing PL experiences to support principals in leading special class provision and inclusion in their schools. In addition, a plan for leading special class provision in the context of inclusion from an Irish policy perspective (Figure 5.2, Chapter 5) is proposed. This chapter presents a conclusion to the study by summarising the key findings to answer the research questions and offer recommendations for policy, practice and further research. The limitations of the research are also outlined and the chapter concludes with a personal reflection of the research project.

6.2 Answering the Research Questions and Contributions to Knowledge

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the role of a CoP in supporting school leaders to develop inclusion in their schools through ISL practices, with a specific focus on learners enrolled in special classes. This section will summarise the findings in Chapter 4 to succinctly address the three overarching research questions (Table 6.1) of the study and demonstrate this study's contribution to knowledge.

Table 6.1. Research Questions

Research question 1	What are school leaders' current experiences of leading mainstream primary schools with special classes in the context of inclusion?
Research question 2	What leadership practices and activities are principals who lead special classes in primary schools engaging in?
Research question 3	To what extent is a CoP an effective model of professional learning to support principals in enacting ISL in their primary schools?

6.2.1 Research Question 1

The research set out to establish the current perspectives of school leaders in leading special class provision in the policy context of a country moving towards a fully inclusive education system. From analysis of the findings, opportunities and challenges relating to leading special class provision inclusively were put forward. In summary, the core findings here can be aligned with Ainscow's (2020) framework for promoting inclusion and equity (Figure 2.2, Chapter 2) and highlight the current realities for school leaders in leading special class provision.

There was a clear commitment among the participants to the principles of inclusion where every child has a right and *should* attend their local school and receive meaningful education alongside their friends and peers. The principals demonstrated that the principles of inclusion permeated all aspects of school life and extends beyond policy guidelines handed down to them. Findings concur with research that illustrate the challenges in agreeing on a concept of inclusion, but most of the participants' understanding of inclusion

could be linked to concepts of presence, participation and achievement (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006; Ainscow, 2024). There were also challenges in aligning all stakeholders to an inclusive school vision with differing perspectives among stakeholders on inclusive education. Therefore, agreeing a definition of inclusion is a starting point for inclusive school development as it gives a guiding vision from which all decisions can be made (Ainscow, 2024). Interrogating where the special class sits within that definition of inclusion also needs to be explored.

Participants valued how the special class acted as a positive step towards inclusion as it enabled a cohort of learners, traditionally educated elsewhere, to be educated in their local school. There were many examples shared by participants of children enrolled in the special classes participating in school life like their mainstream peers. What was less clear was how achievement was measured, although some examples were given where achievement was linked to their support plans or IEPs. Using evidence like this related to presence, participation and achievement can act as a baseline for school leaders to reflect on their school's levels of inclusion. Ainscow (2024) recommends a good starting point for evidence gathering is to look at who is included, who is segregated within the school and who is left out completely.

Participants were frustrated with the limitations placed on their autonomy as a result of special class policy. There were mixed motivations for opening a special class, but all participants agreed that they found support lacking once they opened a special class, similar to other studies that examined principal perspectives on special class provision (McCormack, 2019; Dennehy, 2023). For some, this gap in support acted as a motivator for engaging with this research. Opening special classes with an inclusive vision was challenging with experiences of participants feeling rushed into opening classes without efficient time to set it up in an inclusive manner. This study has highlighted a need for policymakers to review policy and this could be done using the European Agency's guide (EASNIE, 2020).

In particular, the involvement of the wider community in developing the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes was hindered by the lack of input and collaboration with external professionals. This is something regarded by participants as a key issue for developing inclusion in schools as they feel their staff do not have the expertise to meet certain needs during the school day. This issue has been ever present in the literature around

special class provision (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2016) and needs immediate attention given the struggles highlighted by participants in this study.

6.2.2 Research Question 2

The second research question sought to ascertain if the participants were engaging in ISL practices in their schools and if the SISLCoP could support them in this regard. Particular focus was put on the leadership practices that supported the inclusion of learners with more complex needs, who were typically enrolled in special classes. This research found that the principals were implementing key leadership practices that supported ISL development and were further enhanced by engaging in the SISLCoP. These practices drew from traditional leadership models including transformational, distributed and instructional leadership. This aligned with the theory of ISL put forward by Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, (2020) and findings from this research added emphasis to the influence of context at the macro, meso and micro levels of the education system.

Firstly, transformational leadership practices were seen as the ‘go to’ when establishing a special class or changing the vision (an inclusive turn) of a more established class. Findings here suggest that school leaders wishing to develop an inclusive vision for special class provision need to be mindful of their communication strategies. A clear vision that was clearly communicated supported the notion of collective responsibility proffered by Ainscow (2007; 2016; 2020). The use of evidence was also discussed as a supportive tool to make the vision a reality, with examples of participants’ intentions to carry out inclusion audits as a data generation tool for the ‘gathering evidence’ phase of the SSE process (DE, 2022d). An important aspect of leading change is for school leaders to have autonomy in how that change is implemented, with findings here highlighting the damage when such autonomy does not exist. However, the SISLCoP demonstrated its potential as a PL mechanism to support school leaders to be confident in dealing with increased autonomy when leading special class provision and making decisions around levels of support for their learners. In the same vein, the SISLCoP can support school improvement through school-to-school collaboration and sharing in the collective responsibility of all learners (Ainscow, 2010).

Developing leadership capacity was identified as a key enabler of DL. Despite some misconceptions of authentic DL practices, all participants agreed that developing leadership capacity alongside a culture of collaboration was a prerequisite to enacting DL and developing inclusive practice. In addition, some participants felt mirroring the structure of the SISLCoP within their schools could support this. In turn, participants felt developing leadership capacity was a necessary practice in striving to be an inclusive school. They acknowledged the important role of expertise in certain areas, but that essentially these roles (such as SENCOs) were carefully aligned to DL to maintain collective responsibility towards inclusive education.

Finally, participants lacked confidence in supporting their staff through traditional instructional leadership practices, such as providing curriculum guidance, an area they were comfortable with in mainstream education. However, they were able to adapt and turn to other forms of instructional leadership practices such as coaching, developing a culture of PL and policy development. Their gap in pedagogical knowledge was supported by the teacher leaders with expertise in inclusive and special education pedagogy, highlighting the emergence of teacher leaders within their schools as a result. Coaching was used to support their staff in finding the solutions to issues through collaborative problem-solving. This often involved pursuing PL experiences to support staff and the principal acknowledging their key role in supporting and sustaining PL in schools (King, 2016; King and Stevenson, 2017; King and Holland, 2022). This active solution-focused approach is a key leadership practice that can be used by school leaders to deliver instructional leadership to their colleagues. Participants also felt affirmed through engagement in the SISLCoP as they were supported in mandated policy requirements such as SSE (DE, 2022c) where they borrowed the core values of the SISLCoP domain to guide policy development in their own contexts.

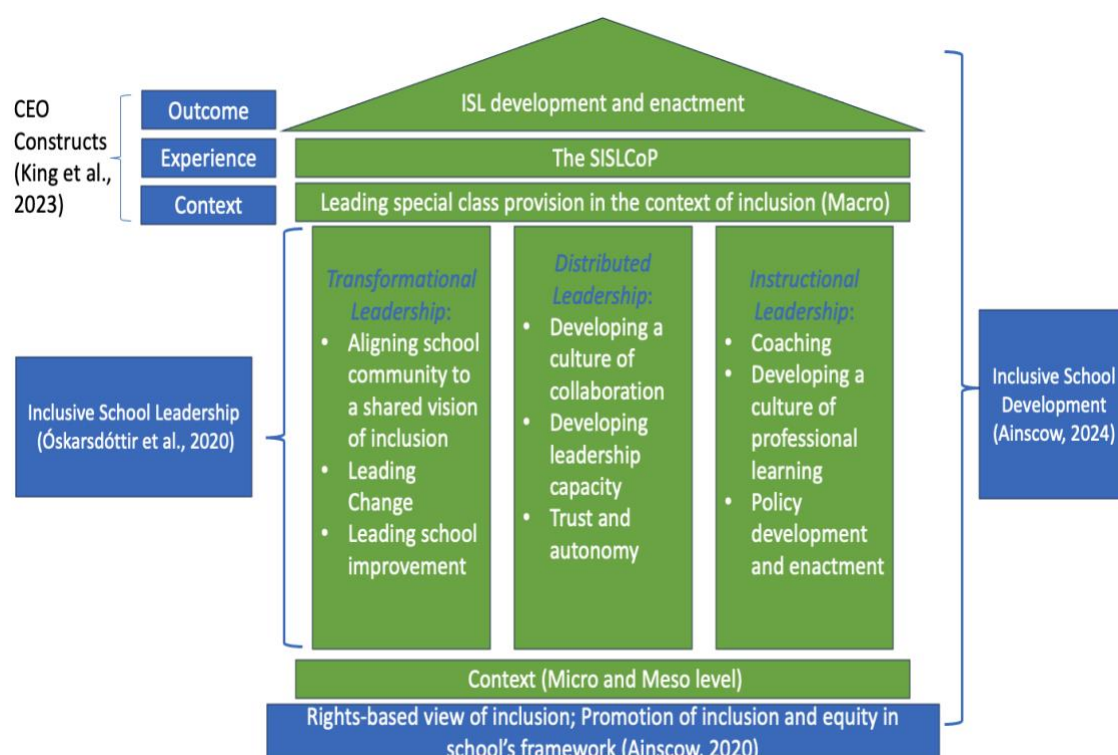
6.2.3 Research Question 3

Finally, the research investigated if a CoP was an effective model of PL to support principals in enacting ISL in their schools and in turn develop more inclusive schools. Findings revealed that careful attention needs to be paid to the planning and design of the CoP and this has resulted in the ISLA planning framework (Figure 5.1) which can be adapted to facilitate any PL focused on developing inclusion in organisations through ISL practices. This is supplemented by the design principles outlined in table 5.2 (Chapter 5)

which emanated from the findings of this research and built upon previous research on PL for inclusion (e.g. Brennan and Gorman, 2023). The core findings that support the argument that the SISLCoP is an effective PL platform for ISL development are:

- The impact of the SISLCoP as demonstrated by the ISLA planning framework (Table 5.1)
- Examples of meaningful inclusion of learners enrolled in the special class and other outcomes relating to learners, teachers, schools and wider school community as a result of engaging in the SISLCoP

Figure 5.1 The Inclusive School Leadership in Action (ISLA) Framework



The most significant finding of this research is the suitability of the ISLA framework as a planning tool for the design of PL for school leaders to promote inclusion and equity. This significance is based on the numerous calls for PL for school leaders to support them in developing inclusive schools, with specific references to special class provision (Daly *et al.*, 2016; McCormack, 2019; Dennehy, 2023; NCSE, 2024a). However, to date, there is no clear guidance on how this might be achieved or what such PL would look like. The collaborative nature of the experience also supports the call for a collective responsibility approach to meeting the needs of all learners, regardless of what school they attend (UNESCO, 2017; Billingsley *et al.*, 2018; Ainscow, 2020;). The SISLCoP provided a safe space for schools to collaborate, discuss issues, share expertise and develop this sense of collective responsibility to meet the needs of all. The findings in this study have a number of implications for practice, policy and future research and these are discussed next.

6.3 Recommendations for Practice:

In light of the findings of this research, a number of recommendations for developing ISL practice in schools are made relating to developing a shared understanding of inclusive education, developing school-to-school collaboration, PL for school leaders and using evidence as a lever for developing the inclusion of learners enrolled in special classes.

6.3.1 Building a Shared Understanding of Inclusive Education

A starting point for developing inclusive education in schools is for organisations to have a shared understanding of it (Ainscow, 2024). This requires an understanding of a rights-based lens of inclusive education and a commitment to principles of inclusion. This should underpin all actions and decisions schools make, with careful attention paid to what evidence is gathered and measured. Evidence from this study revealed the role of these principles as anchors in discussions of problems of practice where the facilitator supported participants by reminding them of their anchor question: is this practice inclusive and is anyone being excluded? This also emphasises the domain aspect of a CoP and its centrality to aligning participants to intended goals (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Therefore, school leaders should adopt principles of inclusion as part of their school ethos or vision to create an inclusive mindset in their schools.

6.3.2 Collaboration: *Ar Scáth a Chéile a Mhaireann na Daoine*

The subsection title here is an old Irish proverb that when translated literally, means ‘it is in each other’s shadow that people live’, meaning we are shielded from the sun by each other and we rely on each other for shelter. In other words, it invokes a sense of community and a need for humans to collaborate to succeed. Applying this concept to inclusion, a collaborative approach to delivering an inclusive education system is the way forward, with all stakeholders taking an active part in a collective responsibility for inclusive education. This involves inter-school collaboration where schools take a collective responsibility for meeting the needs of all learners, and not limited to those in their schools.

6.3.3 Bespoke PL for School Leaders: Using ISL to Promote Inclusion in Schools

The terms principal and school leader have been used interchangeably in this research and for this recommendation, the term school leader is chosen to represent the need for all school leaders (both formal and informal) to commit to PL for inclusive practice to support the distributed leadership element of ISL. Whilst there is a body of literature concerning the PL needs of aspiring and newly appointed school leaders (e.g. Murphy, 2020) there is limited research in relation to their ongoing professional learning needs in the Irish context. There is a dearth of literature focusing on the PL needs of school leaders to lead inclusively. However, this research plays a significant role in answering the call for ongoing professional learning for school leaders to lead inclusive schools (EASNIE, 2019).

The most significant contributions to knowledge are the ISLA framework (Figure 5.1, Chapter 5) and design principles for CoPs for ISL (Table 5.2) which can support researchers, practitioners and PL leaders in planning and designing PL for ISL. At the same time, it can be adapted to suit the various contexts but would also require a set of guidelines (or a handbook, such as the SISLCoP handbook, Appendix S) or schools could be supported in applying the framework through a sustained support model, which could be offered by Oide or the NCSE. Alternatively, support could be given to school leader organisations such as the IPPN through principal networks and education centres.

6.3.4 Using Evidence as a Lever for Change

Finally, this research calls for the inclusion of special class learners to be the focus of an SSE cycle for schools with special classes. Adopting the SSE framework that incorporates Ainscow's (2020) inclusion and equity promotion framework can assist schools with this process (Figure 5.2, Chapter 5). Whilst there is not a universal approach adopted by schools to engaging with the SSE process (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021), there is potential for schools to take ownership of this policy mandate and adapt it to their contexts to support them in leading special class provision inclusively. Support plans (or IEPs) could assist in this process and offer evidence that can support schools in measuring levels of inclusion through target setting.

6.4 Recommendations for Policy:

Based on the findings, three recommendations for policy are made.

6.4.1 Reconfiguration of Special Classes as Part of Continuum of SEN Provision

As Ainscow (2020) argues, the policy landscape at the macro level needs to align with an inclusive vision that supports schools in their inclusive school development and not undermine their efforts. Similarly, the European Agency recommends policy that is underpinned by a rights-based view of inclusive education (EASNIE, 2021) that supports the vision that all learners receive a meaningful, high-quality education in their local school, alongside their peers (EASNIE, 2015). This research argues that one way of achieving this is through the development of more flexible learning locations and innovative ways to organise learners and personalise learning experiences. The SSE process could be used to support this implementation also, by identifying the continuum of provision as a focus for improvement.

Given the findings in this research, it is argued that although special class provision does maintain the presence and participation of some learners, there are still issues around equity of access and measuring achievement. This equity impediment is reinforced by special class policy that focuses on a medical model of access, whereby class places are issued based on an assessed diagnosis and that their needs are so ‘complex or severe’ that they require a specialist setting (NCSE, 2016, p.2). Given the admission of the DE that previous allocation models were not equitable (DES, 2017) when based on diagnoses by an external professional (such as a psychologist), it is timely to look at a similar approach to special class provision. Furthermore, the issue of designation proved problematic according to some participants. Therefore, it is argued that special class provision is reconceptualised to align closer with the continuum of provision for learners with SEN. It is envisaged here that learners still receive the same level of support available in a special class setting, with the school having more autonomy over the learners who access this highest level of support (Travers, 2023). The level of PL required should be commensurate with this autonomy and this is argued next.

6.4.2 Official Time Set Aside for PL for School Leaders

Official time for PL needs to be supported and acknowledged by the DE for school leaders to prioritise their PL needs within their work schedules. Whilst the NCSE does offer some PL in the form of one-day seminars for newly established and established classes (Cullinane *et al.*, 2022), there needs to be a further extension of these offerings, which can incorporate the bespoke and on-going PL that is proposed in this research. This could go some way in satisfying the recommendations of the European Agency's supporting inclusive school leadership project who call for PL that is collaborative, reflective and practical in nature (EASNIE, 2019). There lies potential in the Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) network to bring schools together in collaborative forums such as CoPs to develop inclusive education. The ESCI could act effectively as a 'middle tier' to bridge the gap between policymakers and schools. This could potentially serve as a coordinating influence that can support the necessary accountability for improvement and reduce variability in standards across schools (Ainscow, 2020).

6.4.3 Inter-Agency Working Framework

In order to foster inclusion and equity in education, partnerships between stakeholders are essential (Ainscow, 2020) and this requires action from government departments to ensure cooperation between education, health and any other departments involved in supporting young learners. The lack of support from external services such as therapeutic support providers for learners with more complex learning, physical and behavioural needs was highlighted by all participants, suggesting that there has been no improvement in this regard when previous research indicated the same issue (Ware *et al.*, 2009; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2016; Daly *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, a willingness to engage with other professionals to promote the inclusion of such learners in schools, was also evident. Therefore, the evidence in this research advocates for a model of inter-professional working that can support all stakeholders in collaborating to meet the needs of all learners. This could involve an expansion of the school inclusion model that has been previously piloted (Gardiner, 2023).

6.5 Recommendation for Further Research

As the fieldwork and subsequent data generation phases were carried out in a 6-month period, a follow-up study to investigate the long-term impacts of the SISLCoP experience would be insightful. This would supplement the positive short-term impact evidenced in this research and also determine the sustainability aspect of this PL format. A secondary longitudinal study examining these aspects of the PL experience would better answer the questions about CoPs as a sustainable PL mechanism. This could involve a revisit to the SISLCoP and investigate its sustainability, similar to other follow-up studies in the Irish context (e.g. Brennan and King, 2022).

Another area of potential research would be to evaluate the ISLA framework as a tool to plan and develop PL for inclusion and equity in schools. This framework has evolved throughout the research process and therefore can be considered a work in progress which can be adapted by other researchers and practitioners. This research could also be enhanced by researching its application in other educational contexts and testing the flexibility of the model argued here.

6.6 Limitations of this Research

As with all research endeavours, it is important to acknowledge that the findings and contributions should be considered within the context of the limitations of this research. This case study provides valuable insights into how PL for ISL can be planned and designed and has the built-in flexibility to cope with the context-sensitive nature of leadership in schools (Hallinger, 2005; Spillane and Anderson, 2019). Recruitment of participants was challenging due to the time commitments expected of participants, and this was articulated by a principal who politely declined the invitation to participate due to the workload associated with the role of principal. Therefore, not all school contexts were represented, nor would this have been feasible given the lack of diversity of patronage in the locality. In addition, attendance at SISLCoP meetings varied as school-related issues prevented some participants from attending.

Unfortunately, not all participants completed the pre-meeting survey (Appendix E). This affected its value as a data generation tool, despite the promise shown for the tool during the pilot phase. The researcher did not pursue the completion of the survey once meetings

had started as they were already giving a significant portion of their valuable time to the study. The questionnaire did however provide a stimulus for discussion at the first meeting when the results were shared and supported the group in agreeing on a focus for subsequent meetings, i.e. building staff capacity to meet diverse learning needs. It would be interesting to see how this survey could be utilised more effectively in the future.

Given the distributed nature of ISL that has been revealed by the findings in this research, it may have been beneficial to include the voices of other formal and informal leaders within the participant schools. For example, many participants alluded to the key role of SENCOs and SNAs in their schools as part of their DL approach to ISL. Other research has also pointed out the SENCO role as a potential enabler in the promotion of inclusion in schools (Fitzgerald and Radford, 2020; Colum and Mac Ruairc, 2023). Hearing their voices would add to the findings in relation to the DL element of ISL theory (Óskarsdóttir *et al.*, 2020).

6.7 Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I will switch to first-person language to give a personal reflection of my experience of starting out my doctoral journey to where I go next with this piece of research. I might also add that this journey coincided with a lot of significant life moments, including the birth of two of my three children, which brought me great joy and great challenges to complete the study. This also acted as a motivator to produce impactful research that may have a bearing on the education that my own children receive in years to come.

Central to the study was my own professional experience of setting out to lead a more inclusive school through a culture of collaboration and desire for all children to attend their local school. One of the driving questions behind my research was if there was a way for special class provision to be compatible with inclusive education and move away from a ‘one or the other argument’ to a third option, or what Covey (2020) might describe as a ‘win-win’ for all. This coincides serendipitously with the NCSE’s (2024a) vision where special schools and special classes will play a vital role in the progressive realisation of inclusive education in Ireland where all really means all. School principals play a significant role in the lives of our young learners and their PL needs ought to be prioritised if the goal of inclusion is to be realised.

It is my hope that this research and the emerging blueprint of school leader PL to support ISL will be useful to those who share the vision of all learners being educated and included meaningfully in their local schools alongside their friends and peers (EASNIE, 2015). Before I set out on this research journey, I found the role of principalship very challenging in terms of sharing my vision for an inclusive school, often wondering was my vision more aspirational than possible. Engaging in this in-depth research has resulted in clarity for me that it is possible if approached in a collaborative manner: *Ar Scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*. I would also conclude that if we are to become truly inclusive, a focus on the most vulnerable learners, such as those traditionally recommended for placement in special schools and classes, is a good place to start.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Dr Aoife Brennan
School of Inclusive and Special Education

25th January 2023

REC Reference: DCUREC/2022/250
Proposal Title: Exploring the Role of Communities of Practice in Supporting Inclusive School Leadership
Applicant(s): Dr Aoife Brennan, Dr Fiona King, Mr Aidan Raftery

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee



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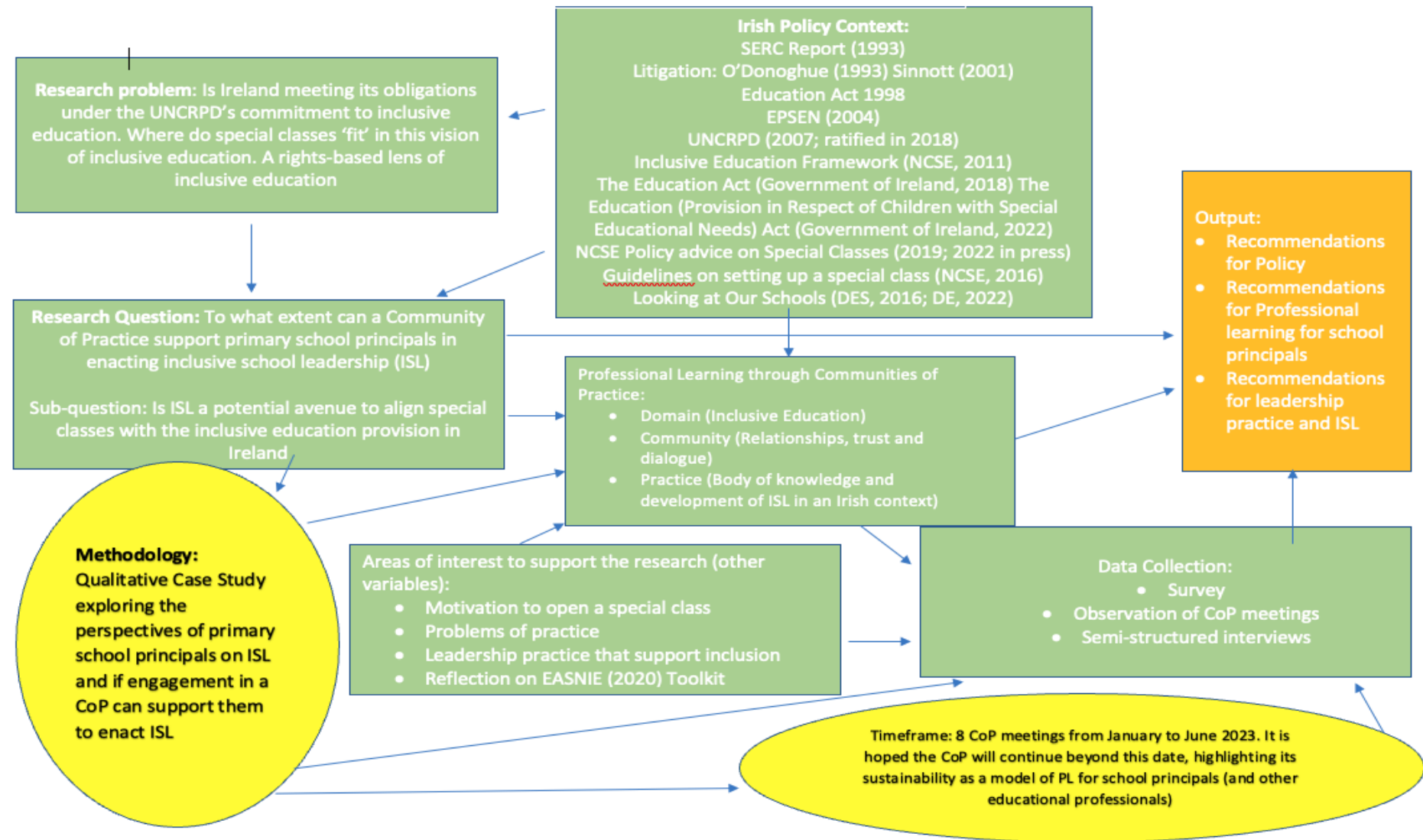
Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes (for research students, this includes incorporating the letter within their thesis appendices).

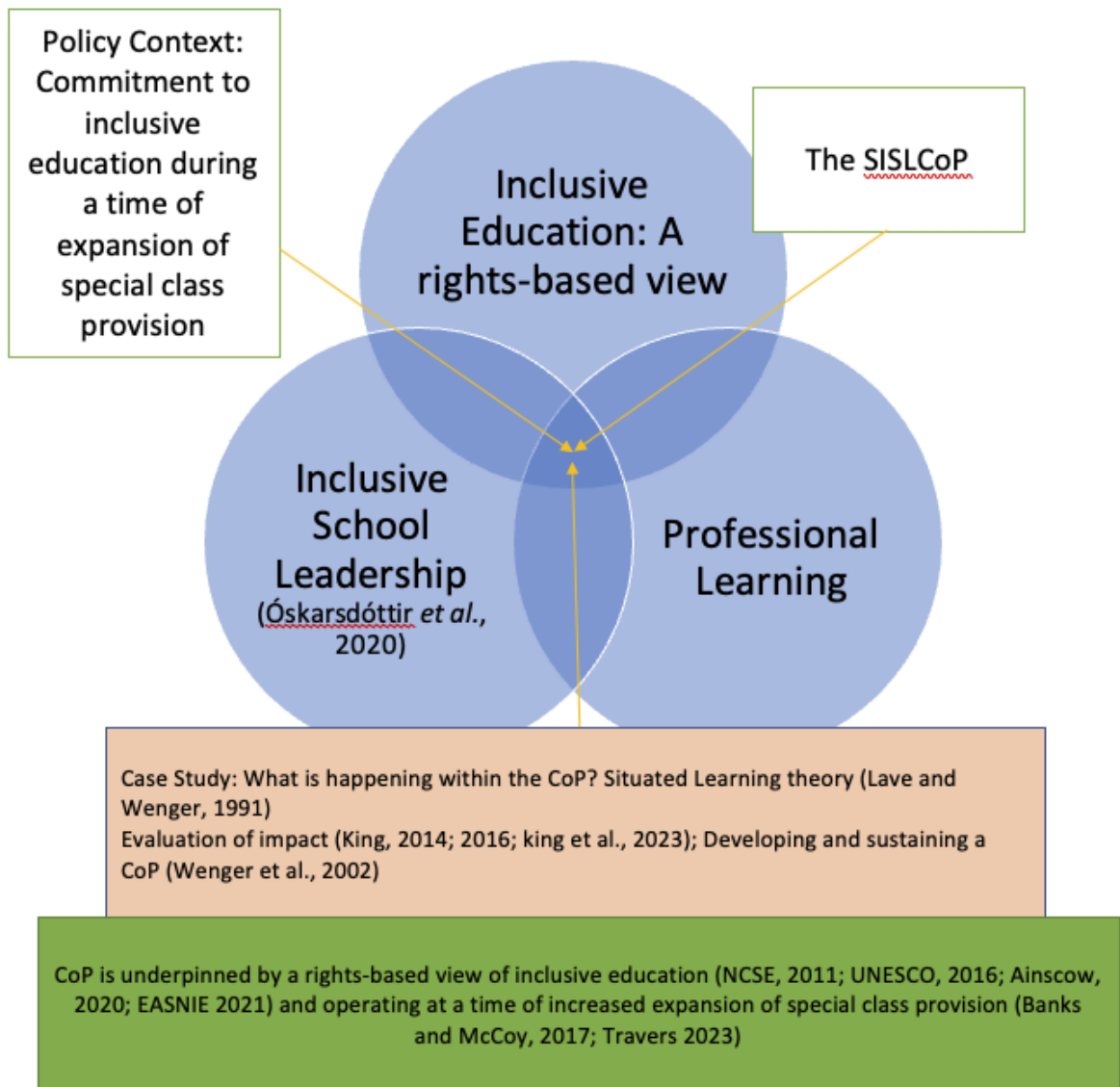
Appendix B: Conceptual Framework Journey

Conceptual Framework:
Developing the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP)

Inclusive Education	Inclusive School Leadership	The SISLCoP
A rights-based approach to inclusive education underpinning the SISLCoP UNCRPD (2007; ratified in 2018) Inclusive Education Framework (NCSE, 2011) Reaching Out to All Learners (UNESCO, 2016) Key Principles: Supporting policy development and implementation for inclusive education (EASNIE, 2021)  These inclusive education frameworks underpin the research study and SISLCoP	Models of leadership that support ISL and reflected upon at SISLCoP meetings Óskarsdóttir, et al., (2020) identify the following leadership models as supporting the core function of ISL • Transformational Leadership • Distributed Leadership • Instructional Leadership 	Planning for and evaluation of PL impact (King, 2014), 2016: • Baseline • PL experience • Learning outcomes • Degree and quality of change • Systemic factors The SISLCoP PL experience aligns with: • Cosán (Teaching Council, 2016) • Centre for School Leadership (CSL, 2022) • Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (EASNIE, 2020)
Special Class Provision and the UNCRPD: Are they compatible? (Raftery, 2022) NCSE Policy advice on Special Classes (2019; 2022 in press) Guidelines on setting up a special class (NCSE, 2016) Looking at Our Schools (DES, 2016; DE, 2022)	Inclusive School Leadership in action (Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; DeMatthews, Serafini and Watson, 2021): • Building the vision • Understanding and developing people • Redesigning the organisation • Leading learning and teaching	Three characteristics that ensure the SISLCoP is a CoP (Lave and Wenger, 2011): • Domain • Community • Practice
The 'inclusive school' SDG4: 'To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO, 2016)	Principal participants will reflect on ISL prior to, during and after engaging with the SISLCoP. Principals will reflect on problems of practice (Bickmore et al., 2021). The shared practice and learning will be analysed through situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991)	Planning and Evaluating CoPs Diaz et al., (2021): • Content • Conditions • Processes • Structures SISLCoP Structure informed by: • Bickmore et al., (2021) • Diaz et al., (2021) • King and Logan (2022)

Conceptual Framework





Appendix C: Plain Language Statement (PLS) for Participants

Study Title: Exploring the Impact of Communities of Practice in Supporting Inclusive School Leadership

University: DCU Institute of Education – School of Inclusive and Special Education

Principal investigator: Aidan Raftery

Supervisors: Dr Aoife Brennan and Dr Fiona King

Dear Participant,

I cordially invite you to participate in a study that will investigate if engagement in a Community of Practice (CoP) can support school leaders to develop the skills necessary to lead their increasingly diverse schools. More specifically, the CoP will focus on what school leaders can do to support the inclusion of students in special classes with their mainstream peers. The CoP will be known as the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP) and will meet regularly to discuss challenges in implementing inclusive practices in their schools and work together to form solutions.

Firstly, you will be asked to fill a short survey of approximately 20 minutes in duration. This will gather information about you, your current leadership role, experience of inclusive practices and perceived challenges in striving to be an ‘inclusive school’. This will inform initial topics in our SISLCoP meetings. These meetings will take place via zoom and face-to-face at schools where the principal is willing to host a SISLCoP meeting. Each meeting will be approximately 1 hour in duration and will be audio-recorded for analysis by the researcher. Please note all meetings will take place outside of school hours at a time that is convenient to all participants.

After the 8th CoP meeting, participants will be invited to take part in a 30-minute interview. This interview is intended to collect more detailed information from you on your experience of engaging with the SISLCoP. This will also be recorded on a digital audio device to assist me in writing up the findings of the research project.

Many of you are part of principal support networks and it is my hope that this variation of a learning network of principals can contribute to the professional learning of school

principals and support them in meeting the needs of all their students. It is also hoped the research will support the INTO, DE and CSL in designing professional leadership supports for school leaders in Ireland. All participants will be invited to a feedback session in October 2023 to provide you with the findings and to facilitate the continuation of the SISLCoP, should you wish to continue to engage with the group.

The findings from the research will appear in a thesis which may be published. It is also my intention that the findings will be used to inform articles which may be published in academic journals or member magazines such as InTouch and Leadership Plus.

Information supplied is subject to GDPR regulations on confidentiality. Your name will not be used in any part of the study or subsequent publications.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,

please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Sincerely,

Aidan Raftery

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person,

please contact:

The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form for Participants

Research Study Title: Exploring the Role of Communities of Practice in Supporting Inclusive School Leadership

Purpose of the research: To investigate if participation in a Community of Practice can support primary school principals to enact inclusive school leadership.

Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement:

You are invited to participate in the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP). This will involve a short survey before commencing the meetings, participation in 8 meetings (4 on zoom and 4 face to face at participant schools) and you are also invited to participate in a 30-minute interview after the 8th meeting. During meetings, participants will be invited to bring in artefacts for discussion, such as photos of inclusive environments or policy documents.

Before signing – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me).	Yes/No
I understand the information provided.	Yes/No
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection.	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.	Yes/No
I am aware that the meetings will be audio-recorded.	Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be audio-recorded.	Yes/No
I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without any repercussions, at any time, and any data I have provided will not be used in the study	Yes/No
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.	Yes/No

I understand that confidentiality will be ensured in any publications based on the research by using pseudonyms (fictitious name).	<i>Yes/No</i>
I understand that extracts from the participant survey, SISLCoP meetings, and my interview may be quoted in the research project, journal articles and presentations. All identifiers, such as names and school location will be removed.	<i>Yes/No</i>
Based on the information provided, I agree to participate in this study	<i>Yes/No</i>

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Pre-Meeting Survey

Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP)

Research Study Title: Exploring the Impact of Communities of Practice in Supporting Inclusive School Leadership.

Purpose of the research: To

investigate if a Community of Practice can support primary school principals in leading more inclusive schools

This initial survey is designed to gather your views and experiences of leading your school inclusively and in particular, looking at how the special classes in your school are operating to support inclusion. For the purpose of this study, inclusion refers to the process of including children from the special class with their typically developing peers. The data collected here will inform the content of the SISLCoP where we will identify 'problems of practice' and generate solutions through the shared practice and wisdom of the collective group. Please note this survey is anonymous. Please begin by indicating Yes or no to the next 9 questions, and then move onto section 2.

*Required

1. I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

2. I understand the information provided *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

3. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes
☐ No

4. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. I understand I may withdraw from the Research Study at any point *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. I have read and understand the arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

7. I have read and understand confirmations relating to any other information as indicated in the Plain Language Statement *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

8. I consent to participate in this research study *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No

**Principal
Profile**

To assist in the analysis of the responses, please provide the following information. Please be assured that all of the information provided in this study is absolutely confidential and anonymous

9. Completed years teaching experience *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ 1 - 5
- ☐ 6 - 10
- ☐ 11 - 15
- ☐ 16 - 20
- ☐ 21 or more

10. What is your leadership role in the school *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Administrative Principal
- ☐ TEaching Principal
- ☐ Administrative Deputy Principal
- ☐ Teaching Deputy Principal
- ☐ Assistant Principal 1 (AP1)
- ☐ Assistant Principal 2 (AP2)
- ☐ Special Educational Needs Coordinator

11. Completed years in a leadership role :

12. Please describe your school in brief (e.g. context, number of staff, etc) *

13. *Mark only one oval.*

☐ Option 1

Reflecting
on
Inclusive
School
Leadership:
Inclusive
school
leaders'
role in
setting
direction

The next set of questions are designed to prompt you to reflect on your own practices and are taken from the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE, 2020). The EASNIE define inclusive school leadership as school leaders who have 'a vision that 'all learners of any age' should receive 'meaningful, high-quality' education 'in their local community, alongside their friends and peers' (EASNIE, 2015, p.1). For more information on the agency and their Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) Project, please click [here](#).

In each of the next questions, you will be invited to indicate to what extent the question relates to your context. In each case, please indicate to what extent the question is:

- Something to consider: this is a practice that has not been considered yet, but should be.
- Emerging: the practice is being considered and planning for implementation is underway.
- In progress: the practice is partially in place with steps being taken to implement it more widely
- Implemented: this is leading the school's innovative use of best practice and has met implementation expectations.
- Sustainable practice: this practice is sustainable as an integral part of the total school organisation and culture.

14. Have we identified and articulated a vision of inclusive education built on children's rights and equity, in collaboration with the school community? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

15. Do we communicate and secure teachers' and staff's commitment to the school's guiding vision of inclusion? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

16. Can we translate and implement policies in ways appropriate to our school context and values? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

17. Can we influence the development of national policy on equity and inclusive education through consultation and communication, taking a rights-based approach? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

18. Do we invite others to collaborate and establish multi-disciplinary teams with the school community to secure commitment to the shared vision of inclusion? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

19. Do we collaboratively create and sustain a shared meaning and vision for inclusive education in the school community? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

20. Do we guide and influence school organisation and resources according to principles of equity? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

21. Do we promote a culture of continuous improvement, innovation and collaboration to develop teaching, learning and assessment? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

22. Do we set high expectations for all learners' well-being and achievement? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

23. Do we facilitate and empower learner-centred practice? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

24. Do we establish a school-wide ethos that enables learners to offer their views to inform all phases of education? Do we take their views seriously, consider them and act upon them where practicable? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

25. Do we develop a school ethos that supports respectful interactions among all stakeholders? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

26. Is there anything you like to add that the previous questions have not addressed?

Reflecting on Inclusive School Leadership: Inclusive school leaders' role in organisational development

In the same way, please reflect on the inclusive school leaders role in organisational development

27. Do we manage school-level change (e.g. regarding curriculum and assessment * frameworks; professional development/learning; funding and resource allocation; quality assurance and accountability)?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

28. Do we enable and build partnerships with support agencies, other schools/institutions at other system levels and with businesses in the community to benefit learners? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

29. Do we build school capacity for accommodating diverse learners through research engagement and collaborative professional learning and development activities, e.g. with universities? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging practice
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

30. Do we manage financial resources to meet the needs of the whole school community (learners, families and all school staff)? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging practice
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

31. Do we build processes that support collaboration with other schools, specialist services and the wider community to promote learners' academic success and well-being? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging practice
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

32. Do we ensure curriculum and assessment are fit for purpose and meet all learners' needs? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

33. Do we ensure a continuum of support in the school community for all learners, families and staff? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

34. Do we encourage engaging and challenging teaching and pedagogy and have high expectations to increase learners' interest in learning and raise their aspirations? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

35. Do we encourage and support innovative and flexible pedagogy and practice that serve a diverse group of learners and build on well-informed decisions? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

36. Do we provide a wide range of opportunities and support to ensure learners can take responsibility for their own learning, successes and achievements? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

37. Do we engage the learning community in self-review and reflect on data to inform on-going school improvement? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

38. Do we monitor classroom practice, assuring high-quality education and well-being for all? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

39. Do we build structures/processes that support collaboration with families and actively engage them to promote learners' outcomes and well-being? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

40. Do we develop a culture of collaboration – positive and trusting relationships? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

41. Do we organise special needs support equitably to ensure learner achievement ^{*} and well-being?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging practice
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

42. Is there anything you like to add that the previous questions have not addressed?

Reflecting on Inclusive School Leadership: Inclusive school leaders' role in human development

In the same way, please reflect on the inclusive school leaders role in organisational development

43. Do we engage in professional learning and development opportunities to enhance our capabilities to support inclusive education practices and raise all learners' achievement and well-being? ^{*}

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

44. Do we seek professional partnerships, critical friendships and networking with other school leaders for support? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

45. Do we promote and facilitate collaborative opportunities for all staff, both in routine aspects of learning organisation and through innovative approaches, including embracing new technologies? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

46. Do we focus on improving teacher and staff motivation, capacities and working environments to raise achievement and learner well-being? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

47. Do we ensure that expertise and experience are continually developed and shared within and across the school and beyond? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

48. Do we use distributed leadership to develop and enable leadership potential in teachers and others in the school community? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

49. Do we provide and foster professional learning and development opportunities for teachers and staff to develop their competences in raising learner achievement and well-being? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
☐ Emerging
☐ In progress
☐ Implemented
☐ Sustainable practice

50. Do we facilitate reflective practice with the aim of transforming teaching, learning and assessment? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

51. Do we use data as a basis for teacher reflection and on-going improvement? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

52. Do we ensure that teachers take responsibility for all learners, especially those vulnerable to exclusion, and promote professional responsibility and accountability? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

53. Do we foster a commitment to inclusion, equality of opportunity and each learner's academic, social and personal development? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Something to consider
- ☐ Emerging
- ☐ In progress
- ☐ Implemented
- ☐ Sustainable practice

54. Is there anything you like to add that the previous questions have not addressed?

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Google Forms

Appendix F: SISLCoP Meeting Plans

SISLCoP Meeting One: 1/2/23 Researcher's School

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (10 mins)	• Brief overview of the research via PowerPoint and its aims (This has already been covered in PLS, so just a refresher) • Introductions (Describe your school and context) • Ice-breaker: Principal Bingo
SISLCoP Protocols (20 mins)	• Discuss Protocols and Confidentiality agreement. • On flipchart, record what type of communication enables trust within the group (honest, confidential, open to feedback). On the other side, record what breaks trust within group
Goal setting (5 mins)	• Discuss what we hope to achieve from the SISLCoP e.g. better understanding of inclusive school leadership, • Record goals on jam board/flipchart to review at the final meeting
Inclusive Education (10 mins) (Think-Pair-Share)	• Ask participants to choose one word that comes to mind when we hear the words inclusion and inclusive education. Input on mentimeter.com and display on Interactive white board (IWB)/projector. • Share Literature Definitions (3/4) and discuss • Walking debate: Each definition is labelled (a, b, c, etc). Each letter is pre-placed around the room. Each member is invited to

	walk to the definition they feel they align with most.
Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins)	Recall SISLCoP survey the members completed....Identify the most common ISL practices that are 'something to consider' or 'emerging'. See PowerPoint
Problems of Practice (15 mins)	- Invite members to share 'problems of practice' that hinder inclusive education or inclusive school leadership. Share example from handbook - Collect on Jam board/Flipchart - Group discussion on addressing a particular problem of practice - Activity: The 'problems of practice' will be collated and in pairs, principals will provide a potential solution. All solutions will be fed back to the whole group. - Any problems not addressed are moved to the next meeting for discussion. The time in between meetings can also be used to reflect on the problem.
Personal Planning (5 mins)	Principals discuss actions to be undertaken between now and the next meeting.
Reflection (5 mins)	Participants invited to mention one key take away from the meeting. Participants invited to start a personal journal to inform future sessions and fill reflection sheet located in the handbook

Next steps (5 mins)	As CoPs are member lead, the group will agree on the focus of the next meeting. Agree method of interim communication, e.g. email or WhatsApp
School Walkabout	If time allows, bring participants on a tour of the school. This is an opportunity to network more and share ideas around good practice.

SISLCoP Meeting Two 22/2/23 Zoom

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session (PowerPoint) Recap on last session Recap on protocols Bear with me on the Tech side of things!
Goal Setting (10 mins)	Revisit member goals from last session: • Support for a newly established class • Share good practice • Time for reflection • Share what's going well • Access to expertise (lacking from support organisations)
Making links with policy initiatives (5 mins)	Remind participants that what we are doing here in the SISLCoP aligns with: • LAOS 2022 • SSE Point out PoP we are looking at today and seek agreement (Remind PoP that this problem of practice emerged from survey/last session).
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins)	• Recap on the definitions of inclusive education and where we aligned as a group • Recap on ISL definition • Identifying what elements of ISL we used this month: What's working well in our schools (examples of

	inclusive practice, what they are and why they are working well? Record on <u>Jam board</u>. How do we know they are working well?
Problems of Practice (30 mins)	Summarise the many PoPs raised at the first week. Focus discussion on what is in our control. The first PoP we will look at has come as a result of the emerging priorities from survey (which we can impact on): Building School Capacity for accommodating diverse learners through research engagement and collaborative professional learning and development activities. (<i>The SISLCoP is the CPL</i>) In break-out rooms, each group discuss what they are currently doing to develop capacity amongst staff to accommodate learners of the special class. Think of one practice working well in school and how principal is supporting it. Each group lists on <u>Jam board</u> Share example to stimulate discussion. <i>If time:</i> Equity Vs Equality: This has come up from Meeting 1 and we identified 'Organising special needs support equitably to ensure

	learner achievement and wellbeing' as a strength. On further discussion, we also identified it as a challenge. Tease this out by discussing equity Vs equality and then identifying on <u>jam board</u> why we see it as a strength and why a challenge?
Personal Planning (5 mins)	Using the list of actions schools are doing to support capacity building, each principal reflects on what they are doing and identifies one they could bring back to their school
Reflection (15 mins)	Start off with reflection on participants' reflections on Session 1 (emphasise the importance of reflecting on practice). On Google doc/Form each participant fills reflection with the following prompts: • What is your one key take away from today's session? • What one small step are you going to take between now and next week that aligns with the problem of practice we looked at? (facilitator provides examples). Share on <u>jam board</u> • How can you develop your 'one small step'?
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Next meeting in Beverley's school (Confirm Date)

SISLCoP Meeting 3 8/3/23 Beverley's School

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session (PowerPoint) Recap on protocols
Recap on last Session (10 mins)	Revisit main topics of discussion from last meeting: • Linking what we are doing to LAOS/SSE processes. How inclusive practices can be linked with wellbeing • Developing capacity amongst staff: Get the expert in or can this be done with current staff? What are we doing well? • Sharing Practice (Show jam board)
Our Current PoP (5 mins)	Seek agreement to continue with last week's discussion on: Building School Capacity for meeting the needs of diverse learners in our schools Our 'One Small Step': What went well? Share jam board from last session to prompt. See if any other participants took one small step?

	Identifying barriers: If you didn't get to try out your one small step, what were the barriers to this? List the barriers on flipchart.
Problems of Practice (25 mins)	<i>Digging deeper:</i> Looking at reverse integration/inclusion as a method of developing staff capacity: Flipchart displayed with who, what, when, why of reverse inclusion. Participants discuss in pairs/triads before group discussion. <i>Agreed language: is there a difference between integration and inclusion?</i> Autism Good Practice Guide for stimulation: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8d539-autism-good-practice-guidance-for-schools-supporting-children-and-young-people/ Highlight section(s) for participants on Reverse Inclusion. Introduction to Guide here (video)
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins) Bridging the theory to practice gap: This section will relate the inclusive practice of 'reverse inclusion' to ISL theory.	What are we doing in terms of ISL to support inclusive practice in our schools? How can we apply ISL theory to reverse inclusion:

	• Have we shared a vision for reverse inclusion? • Professional development: what is needed? • What Organisational structures are needed?
Reflection (15 mins)	Start off with reflection on participants' reflections on Session 2. Again, emphasise the importance of reflection during professional learning experiences. Each participant fills reflection with the following prompts: • What is your one key take away from today's session? • How did your 'one small step' go? • How can you further develop your 'one small step'? Where to next?
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Seek agreement to cancel next week's zoom session to allow participants more time to engage with their staff before our next session. Next session in Tess' school on Wednesday March 29th at 2pm.
Learning Walk/School Nosey (10 mins)	Participants requested we leave time at each meeting at a participant school to take a tour of the school. I will emphasise the focus of the learning walk to be on the look-out for inclusive practices. Encourage participants to take pictures of inclusive practices/spaces/ideas: Video to explain, if time:

	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUTIIOfma90
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SISLCoP Meeting 4 29/3/23 Tess' School

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session (PowerPoint)
Recap on last Session (10 mins)	Revisit main topics of discussion from last meeting, with further questioning following researcher reflection: • WWW from last meeting: inclusion back on the agenda via postholder • External expertise/facilitators cited as an affirmation of practice, but is this a sign of lack of confidence among staff in what they are doing? Why is external affirmation needed? • Communication a barrier: why resistance from mainstream teachers? Is it lack of time to communicate? • Equity and access to the special class: Why not make mainstream more inclusive? E.g. child with DS cited at last meeting sought access to special class • Children going full-time mainstream and parents are still concerned. What are the underlying concerns? • Job-sharing as capacity building • Peer reading programmes to support inclusive practice

Our Current PoP (5 mins)	Seek agreement to continue with last week's discussion on: Building School Capacity for meeting the needs of diverse learners in our schools Present the research on reverse inclusion Communicating Reverse inclusion with whole school community
Problems of Practice (25 mins)	What went well: Take feedback from participants on what went well with reverse inclusion since we last met. If not focused on reverse inclusion, what other inclusive practices have worked well? New PoP? Integration Vs Inclusion: Unpacking the language Communicating Reverse inclusion with whole school community: Communication: what works well?
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins)	What are we doing in terms of ISL to support inclusive practice

Bridging the theory to practice gap: This section will relate the inclusive practice of 'reverse inclusion' to ISL theory.	in our schools? How can we apply ISL theory to reverse inclusion: • Have we shared a vision for reverse inclusion? • Professional development: what is needed? • What Organisational structures are needed?
Reflection (15 mins)	Start off with reflection on participants' reflections on Session 3. Again, emphasise the importance of reflection during professional learning experiences. Each participant fills reflection with the following prompts: • What's working well in terms of inclusive practice or including those with more complex needs in your school? • What is your one key take away from today's session? • How did your 'one small step' go? • How can you further develop your 'one small step'? Where to next?
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Next session in Sadbh's School on May 3rd
Learning Walk/School Nosey (10 mins)	Video to explain, if time: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUTIIOfma90

SISLCoP Meeting 5 3/5/23 Sadbh's School

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session (PowerPoint)
Recap on last Session (10 mins)	• WWW: Examples of reverse inclusion (Eva/Bob) • Discussions on: • Professional learning and the external 'expert' • Communication: sharing the vision, whole school but in to inclusive practice • Resourcing Inclusion and the dangers of making access to support competitive • Making mainstream more inclusive: balancing the needs of all • External support services • Research on reverse inclusion • Inclusive School Leadership in action: Sharing the Vision • Learning Walk: Highlighted the benefits of in-house therapies to support inclusion (SLT)
Our Current PoP (5 mins)	Summarise our Journey on Reverse Inclusion and measures principals have put in place to support this inclusive practice.

	Seek agreement to look at developing staff capacity to deal with lack of external expertise
Problems of Practice (25 mins)	• Review participants 'one small step': What other inclusive practices are we engaged with or thinking about trying? How are we facilitating them? Gather examples on flipchart • Lack of support service/external expertise cited as a major barrier in previous meeting. Are there any interim solutions we can look at? • What professional learning can help in this regard?
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins) Bridging the theory to practice gap: This section will relate the inclusive practice of 'reverse inclusion' to ISL theory.	Move focus to linking with 'monitoring human development and professional development' which links with developing staff capacity
Reflection (15 mins)	Start off with reflection on participants' reflections on Session 4. Again, emphasise the importance of reflection during professional learning experiences. Each participant fills reflection with the following prompts: • What's working well in terms of inclusive practice or including those with more complex needs in your school?

	• What is your one key take away from today's session? • How did your 'one small step' go? • How can you further develop your 'one small step'? Where to next?
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Next session in Maeve's school on May 17th, 2023
Learning Walk/School Nosey (10 mins)	Video to explain, if time: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUTIIOfma90

SISLCoP Meeting 6 17/5/23 Maeve's School

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session (PowerPoint)
Recap on last Session (10 mins)	WWW: • Aistear as a vehicle for inclusion and reverse inclusion • Being creative with your space! • Sharing the vision for whole school buy in • Opening a 2nd class: Develops Staff capacity, expertise and removes isolation • Summarised approach to developing RI in school Discussions on: • Resourcing inclusion: The Great Debate! The principal being the face of allocating resources • Collective Action: Joining forces to fund SLT/OT between network of schools • Examples of good inter-professional working relationships • SNA voice and ensuring they are part of developing staff capacity
Our Current PoP (5 mins)	Developing Staff Capacity Summary of Reverse Inclusion: We summarised the approach to inverse inclusion and added to our shared resources toolbox: Target children Support teachers involved with the target child Pilot Share the vision with the whole staff

	Implementation phase Embed as a school practice
Problems of Practice (25 mins)	Review participants one small step What language are we using around inclusion to create a shared understanding? Is language a problem of practice? Making the mainstream more inclusive: What small steps are working?
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins)	Move focus to link with another ISL practice: The organisational structures needed: inclusive culture, collaboration, partnerships and shared tasks
Reflection (15 mins)	Start off with reflection on participants' reflections from Session 5. Again, emphasise the importance of reflection during professional learning experiences. Each participant fills reflection with the following prompts: • What's working well in terms of inclusive practice or including those with more complex needs in your school? • What is your one key take away from today's session?

	• How did your 'one small step' go? • How can you further develop your 'one small step'? Where to next?
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Next session via zoom on 31st of May Interviews with participants: Organise suitable dates to call for a 30-minute interview. Interviews can be done face-to-face or via Zoom, depending on the participant's preference.
Learning Walk/School Nosey (10 mins)	Video to explain, if time: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUTIIOfma90

SISLCoP Meeting 7 Reflection/Focus Group (Zoom) 31/5/23

Agenda	Description
Introduction: (5 mins)	Set out outline of today's session
Recap on last Session (10 mins)	WWW: • The potential of interprofessional collaboration in schools • Communication boards: devising multiple modes of communication as an example of inclusive practice • Respecting the process of inclusion and acknowledging where you are at and going from there • Avoid tokenistic inclusion and striving towards more inclusive practices • Discussions on: • Divide between health and education • Being the right headspace for professional learning • Lack of shared understanding of inclusive language: the 'name of the class' dilemma • NCSE's vision in terms of inclusion and special class policy • The Inclusion 'Utopia'
Reflection on our problems of practice	What problems of practice have we discussed and put forward potential solutions?

Matters arising from Interviews	Questions to be further explored: • Inclusion: How do you view inclusion since our first meeting where we explored an agreed definition? What <i>should</i> support for schools look like? • ISL: Has your leadership practice been impacted? Are there any ISL practice you now use, e.g. setting a clear vision around inclusion; Maintaining a culture of collaboration; Developing leadership capacity • SISLCoP Impact: How does the SISLCoP compare to other forms of PL? Has it changed your leadership practice in any way? • Has the interschool element had an impact? • Future structure of the SISLCoP to make it sustainable
Developing our understanding of Inclusive School Leadership (15 mins)	Summarise ISL for participants with concrete examples explored in our group: • Direction Setting: Vision • Managing the organisation: • Human Development: Professional learning and developing schools capacity
Next steps and wrap up (5 mins)	Where do we go next with our group in terms of structure. What supports are needed?

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule for SISLCoP Participants

Thank you sincerely for taking the time out of your busy schedule to take part in this interview. As per the PLS, confidentiality will be maintained but anonymity cannot be guaranteed and information subject to legal limitations, in any reporting of this interview and the audio recording and transcripts will be destroyed after five years. Please also be advised that despite every measure taken to protect your identity, you may still be identifiable to certain readers of the report who may know you, for example, the other members of the Community of Practice. This interview should take approximately 30 to 40 minutes and it seeks to get your views on inclusive school leadership and your involvement with the SISLCoP. It is more so a list of prompts to aid discussion as opposed to a list of questions. This interview is taking place on _____ at _____.

Are you happy to proceed?

(Each section has one or two overarching questions followed by a list of prompts to extend the conversation if necessary)

We will start with telling me a little about your career to date:

- Teaching experience
- Leadership experience
- Current school context
- Professional learning experience (leadership and/or Inclusive and special education)

SISLCoP as a professional learning experience

(Definition of Professional learning (PL): PL encompasses all professional development experiences, activities, workshops or programmes that educators engage with that may lead to teacher PL (King, 2014; Boylan et al., 2018)

1. Why did you choose to participate in the SISLCoP
2. What were you hoping to get from the SISLCoP?

3. How does this type of professional learning compare to more traditional styles (e.g. workshops) that may be provided by the PDST leadership team or CSL? (Other examples: individual V collaborative, job-embedded V generic, transmissive V transformative... dialogue based, critical reflection... facilitation, frequency, duration..... voluntary Vs mandatory)

Prompts:

- **Domain:** How did the group settle on a common interest or problem of practice? E.g. it was easy to get bogged down in the challenges of working in our system, so how did we overcome this?
- **Community:** What elements of the meetings supported the group in building a sense of trust and community? Collaborating with other school leaders was a big part of the CoP. What are your thoughts on inter-school collaboration? Are there any benefits to students from inter-school collaboration?
- **Practice:** Were there any practices shared in the SISLCoP that you applied to your own context?
- Research highlights the importance of reflecting on professional learning experiences (such as a CoP). How did you find the 'reflection and call to action' segment of our meetings?
- Do you think you will continue to be part of a CoP or join another CoP as part of your own professional learning?
- What additional supports are needed for a CoP to become sustainable over time?
- Do you think there is a need for an external facilitator? Is a university-school partnership a possibility?
- Are there any changes you would make or recommend in terms of the structure of the meetings?

Inclusion:

1. Can you tell me what inclusion means to you?
2. How does this look in your own school context?
3. Where do you think the special class fits in with the current climate of inclusion in schools?

Prompts:

- How many special classes do you have?
- Why did your school open a special class?
- Since engaging with the CoP, has your thinking around inclusion, special classes and SEN changed in any way?
- Do you have an inclusion policy that relates specifically to the inclusion of students attending the special class (this can be a written policy or otherwise)
- What do you perceive as the biggest advantages of having a special class in your school?
- What are the biggest challenges?
- If you were to sit down with a policymaker today and were asked to recommend any changes to special class provision, what would they be? (**Challenge responses related to resources: what can we achieve under current system with support of SISLCoP**)
- Stakeholders: How do you feel parents, staff and students feel about the special class? Is it regarded as 'inclusive' or another form of segregated provision?

Inclusive School Leadership (ISL):

1. Since engaging in the SISLCoP, what is your understanding of ISL?
2. Has engagement with the CoP led to any changes in your own leadership practice? (e.g. changes in how the inclusion of special class students with their mainstream peers is promoted by the school leader.)

Prompts:

- Do you think engagement with the CoP has had an impact on your personal or professional beliefs in terms of values, attitudes and practices? Has there been an impact on staff?
- **Setting Direction:** How do you promote your vision amongst staff? How do you foster a commitment to inclusion? How is this shared with the other members of the school community?
- **Organisational development:** How do you maintain a collegial school culture? Do your school policies align with the inclusive vision? Is collaborative practice and collaborative professional learning a feature of your school?

- **Human Development:** How do you promote inclusive practice? How is it monitored? Is distributed leadership practised? Does your school reflect on practice? Did the SISLCoP support you in developing leadership capacity in your school?
- **Leading teaching and learning:** Did the SISLCoP support you in this regard?

Is there anything else you would like to add that hasn't been addressed?

Thank you very much for taking part in this interview.

Appendix H: Extract from Researcher Reflection

Problems of Practice (25 mins)	- Review participants' 'one small step': What other inclusive practices are we engaged with or thinking about trying? How are we facilitating them? Gather examples on a flipchart - Lack of support service/external expertise was cited as a major barrier in the previous meeting. Are there any interim solutions we can look at? - What professional learning can help in this regard?	<i>Participants' one small step</i> Inclusion of pupils in special classes with mainstream peers. The principal spoke of a targeted approach to increase the child's independence skills to support his inclusion in the mainstream. The conversation then developed into participants sharing their positive inclusion stories: - One story of a child from the special class singing with her typically developing peers at Communion 3 members of a special class playing for the school rounders team - Another pupil representing the school at chess - Children presenting in front of the whole school: one child who was initially non-speaking when he started and is now addressing the whole school This was a very positive sharing of stories and it lead to considering the progress narrative: how we view progress and the need for it to be considered with the individual in mind and not compared with typically developing peers. <i>Making the Mainstream more inclusive</i> I then linked this conversation to our previous discussion on making the mainstream more inclusive and looking at the little tweaks and adjustments we can make to our traditional school environments. Participants cited lots of examples of this such as avoiding insisting on certain uniforms (that may impact sensory needs); Challenging long-established norms such as lining up (again, many children with sensory needs struggle with this); Using preventative strategies to support students, such as avoiding crowded areas at arrival/dismissal. The power of 'why' to challenge the status quo: Asking staff 'Why are we doing this practice'? Because we always did it is not a valid reason! A lot of these traditional practices were changed post covid: Interesting to see such a significant world event acted as a catalyst to challenge existing practices. Children's level of understanding is often better than some adults and their natural instinct to include is refreshing.	Domain: Practice. Sharing practice in the SISLCoP is a key component of the practice domain where the experiences and stories that are shared serve as a repertoire for their practice (Wenger, 2011) which members can draw from. Practice: In sustaining a CoP, Wenger et al., (2002) advise keeping the practice at the 'cutting edge', i.e. opportunities to discuss innovative inclusive practices.	
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AR

Aidan Raftery

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👍

Although well intentioned, I wonder about this conversation and if we are limiting our expectations sometimes?? Just a thought!

Reply

➤

Appendix I: PLS and ICF for Host School's Board of Management

Plain Language Statement for Board of Management and Consent to use premises to host meetings

Study Title: Exploring the Impact of Communities of Practice in Supporting Inclusive School Leadership

University: DCU Institute of Education – School of Inclusive and Special Education

Principal investigator: Aidan Raftery

Supervisors: Dr Aoife Brennan and Dr Fiona King

Dear Chairperson,

Your school principal has elected to take part in a research study which is investigating if engagement in a Community of Practice (CoP) can support school principals to develop the skills necessary to lead their increasingly diverse schools. More specifically, the CoP will focus on what principals can do to support the inclusion of students in special classes with their mainstream peers. The CoP will be known as the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP) and will meet regularly to discuss challenges in implementing inclusive practices in their schools and work together to form solutions.

The school principal will be asked to take part in a short survey, participate in 8 SISLCoP meetings and a 30-minute interview to receive feedback about their participation in the group. 4 meetings will take place via zoom and the other 4 will be taking place at a participants' school. We will be alternating the hosts to give principals an opportunity to explore each other's school and physical space. If you are willing to act as a host venue, please indicate your consent below.

Please note all meetings and interviews will take place outside of school time and no students will be present.

It is hoped that involvement in this research can contribute to the professional learning of school principals and support them in meeting the needs of all their students. It is also hoped the research will support the INTO, DE and CSL in designing professional leadership supports for school leaders in Ireland. The name of the school or school principal will not be used in any part of the study or subsequent publications.

If you require more information, please feel free to contact me or my supervisors by using the details below.

Sincerely,



Aidan Raftery,

Supervisor contact details:

Dr Aoife Brennan	Head of School, School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU Institute of Education, St. Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin 9	aoife.brennan@dcu.ie
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Dr Fiona King	Associate Professor School of Inclusive and Special Education, DCU Institute of Education, St Patrick's Campus, Drumcondra, Dublin 9	fiona.king @dcu.ie
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I consent to the use the school for the purposes outline above

☐

I do not consent to the use of the school for the purposes outlined above

☐

Signed:

Chairperson, Board of Management

School:

Appendix J: Confidentiality Agreement



Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice



Confidentiality Agreement

This form is intended to further ensure the confidentiality of data obtained during the course of the research project entitled:

All participants of the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP) are asked to read the following statement and sign their names indicating that they agree to comply.

I hereby affirm that when discussing this study, I will speak only in generalities about issues raised and will not attribute any comments made to specific individuals.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Study Researcher/s Signature: _____

Appendix K: Phase 1- Familiarisation

BE 01:51

I came here as a learning support teacher. And then it was learning support for a good number of years. And then I was a homeschool community liaison which I absolutely loved, then back to learning support for a year. And then the principalship.

Aidan Raftery 02:08

And how long have you been principal now?

BE 02:09

This is nearly the end of year four.

Aidan Raftery 02:12

Okay. And how are you finding it?

BE 02:17

It's great craic! I was so glad that I had been HSCL. Because that gives you a real opportunity, you actually step out of the classroom, and you do see things from the outside. So it wasn't a complete shock. Now the amount of admin... I've never come across it before. But in terms of the parents, and you know, what the demands are and what the issues were, what the problems are. I knew I had that already, because that was my job anyway looking after all that.

Aidan Raftery 02:48

My next question is about, your school context? And from that role of HSCL, you seemed to have known your context very well...

BE 02:55

Oh, yeah. Very much. So that was really, really useful.

Aidan Raftery 02:59

And can you describe your context a little bit?

BE 03:01

Well it is DEIS band 1. And what we always find here, and I don't know why, but a lot of the time when you get visitors to the school, they would say, Oh no, this isn't a DEIS school, and you're going oh, yeah, just because the children present well, the need is huge. And I think what, what helps, you know, in terms of them presenting well, is that it's the numbers, it's having the lower numbers, so that you're able to manage the challenges and keep everything nice and calm.

Aidan Raftery 03:38

This might be their calm space in their lives...

BE 03:41

Yeah, exactly. But my God. And there was a couple of years there where we kind of thought great, you know, there was so much coming our way in terms of funding and support. We've almost arrived now



AR Aidan Raftery ...
Said sarcastically

Reply

AR Aidan Raftery ...
referring to principalship

Reply



AR Aidan Raftery ...
DEIS perspective

Reply

Appendix L: Phase 2 – Generating Initial Codes (sample)

Phase Two Coding

Generating initial codes

Name	Description	Files	References
Access	Codes related to a student accessing a special class	9	13
Advocacy	Codes related to advocacy groups	1	2
Autonomy for school leaders	References to school leaders exercising or needing more autonomy	4	7
Barriers to inclusion	Perceived barriers to inclusion	6	10
Building community	References to building community in the SISLCoP	3	5
Challenges for school leaders	Challenges for school leaders with special class provision	8	12
Coaching	codes where the coaching PL experience is discussed	1	1
Collaboration with external professionals	Exmaples of collaboration with external professionals to support inclusion	7	10
Collaborative practice	Examples of collaborative practice to support inclusion	16	26
Community	references to the community element of the SISLCoP	10	13
Consultation with stakeholders	References to consultation with stakeholders relating to inclusion or special class provision	1	2
Context of other participants	References to other participant contexts	4	6
Culture	References to to school culture or 'how we do things here'	4	4
Current School Context	Participant descriptions of their current school context	9	14
Dealing with problems of practice	Discussing problems of practice related to special class provsion and/or inclsuive practice	3	3
Defining inclusion	Participants personal interpretation of inclusion	12	18

Appendix M: Phase 3 – Searching for Themes (sample)

Phase 3: Searching for themes (highlighted)

Blue: Special class and inclusion

Green: Leadership

Red: SISLCoP

Name of Code	Description	Files	References
Access	Codes related to a student accessing a special class	9	13
advocacy	Advocating for learners	1	2
autonomy for school leaders	Codes highlighting school leader's autonomy	4	7
barriers to inclusion	References to factors that hinder inclusion	6	10
challenges for school leaders	Challenges for school leaders with special class provision	8	12
coaching	codes where the coaching PL experience is discussed	1	1
collaboration with external professionals	Collaborating with external professionals to support inclusion of learners	7	10
collaborative practice	Collaborating with school staff to support inclusion	16	26
community	references to the community element of the SISLCoP	13	18
consultation with stakeholders	Consultation with various stakeholders in education	1	2
context of other participants	References to other participant contexts	4	6
culture	References to school culture	4	4
Current School Context	Participant descriptions of their current school context	9	14
dealing with problems of practice	Problems of practice segment of SISLCoP meetings	3	3
Defining inclusion	Participants personal interpretation of inclusion	12	18
Defining ISL	Participant explanations of inclusive school leadership as a concept or leadership practice	1	1

Appendix N: Phase 4 - Reviewing Themes (sample)

Phase 4: Reviewing and re-defining themes

Overarching theme 1: Inclusion and Special Classes

Name	Description	Files	References
Perspectives on inclusion	References to participant and stakeholder's understanding of inclusion		
Defining inclusion	Participants personal interpretation of inclusion	12	18
inclusion as a process	Defining inclusion as a process/journey	5	5
Experience of DEIS	References to teaching or leading schools categorised or labelled as disadvantaged	8	12
advocacy	Advocating for learners with additional needs	1	2
autonomy for school leaders	Codes highlighting school leader's autonomy	4	7
Barriers to inclusion	References to factors that hinder inclusion		
challenges for school leaders	References to challenges for school leaders in delivering inclusive education	8	12
Impact of covid	Examples of Covid-19 pandemic having an impact on inclusion	9	11
collaboration with external professionals	Collaborating with external professionals to support inclusion of learners	7	10
Opening a special class	School leaders' experience of opening a special class		
Access	Codes related to a student accessing a special class	9	13
Special Class Advantages	Examples cited by participants that can be categorised as benefits of having a special class	7	14
special class challenges	References related to challenges associated with special class provision	11	24
special class designation	References to labelling special classes by disability	4	4
special class teacher	References to the special class teacher	3	5

Appendix O: Phase 5 – Defining and Naming Themes (sample)

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Overarching theme 1: Inclusion and Special Classes

Codes and sub-codes related to inclusion and special class provision

Name of code	Description	Files	References
Defining inclusion	References to participants personal interpretation of inclusion	11	17
inclusion as a process	Descriptions of inclusion related to inclusion as a journey or process	5	5
rights based argument	Reference	4	4
sense of belonging	References to inclusion and the sense of belonging for the learner	2	2
Inclusion in action	What inclusion looks like in their own school context	15	29
Culture	References made to building a culture of inclusion	4	4
making mainstream more inclusive	References to adjusting or adapting mainstream to facilitate more inclusion	5	7
Experience of DEIS	References to teaching or leading schools categorised or labelled as disadvantaged	8	12
Opening a special class	School leaders' experience of opening a special class	13	31
Special class and inclusion	References to the special class in the context of inclusion	11	21
Special Class Opportunities	References to special class advantages and opportunities to develop inclusion in schools	7	14
special class teacher	References to the role of special class teacher	3	5
SNA	References to the role of SNA in facilitating inclusion	7	8
Inclusive practice	Examples of inclusive practice in action	12	17
collaborative practice	References to collaborative practice to meet the needs of diverse learners	16	26

Name of code	Description	Files	References
Special class challenges	Perceived challenges associated with special class provision	11	24
special class designation	References to the designation of special classes by disability	4	4
Access	Codes related to a student accessing a special class	9	13
Learners who cannot integrate	References made to students who are deemed 'not able for mainstream inclusion'	3	3
autonomy for school leaders	References to school leaders needing or exercising autonomy	4	7
collaboration with external professionals	Reference to collaboration with external professionals who can provide additional expertise	19	26
transitions	References to transitions to other school settings	2	2
Barriers to inclusion	Factors considered to hinder inclusion	6	10
lack of resources	References to lack of resourcing, including personnel	3	3
physical environment	References to the physical school environment that hinders inclusion	3	3
Support from External agencies (lack of)	References to the lack of support from external agencies to support school staff in meeting needs of more diverse learners	10	17
teacher fears	References to teacher feelings of inadequacy to meet the needs of more diverse learners	7	10
workload	References to the additional workload for inclusion to be successful	7	8

Appendix P: Phase 6 – Producing the Report

Selecting compelling extracts: This table illustrates how coded extracts were grouped and then the most appropriate quote was selected for inclusion in the narrative section of the findings

Code Name	extracts	Final report extract
Role of Facilitator	• No but I think it needs a facilitator. It needs a rudder • But I think that, you know, like, you had some very focused, focused examples of look, you know, this is an example of when we were building or this is an example of, you know, and then people came up with their own, you know, things that you that we had their own problems or their own things that they had identified that might need some work in their own schools. So, I think you were probably, you know you were pretty good at bringing people back around, okay, can we come back to what we are talking about and what is in our control... • Well, from your position like leading the group, I feel it's important to say I'm leading... I'm leading a group at the moment like and, yeah, at the end of the meeting, we have to throw it out, and a lot of it is just finalities • Like if it was someone from DCU coming in listening to some of our talks, they would say they're a pack of moaners, what are they on about?! And why would anybody listen to them? But you're listening to us they're going, I have exactly the same thing going on. This is what I did. Or do you know what I mean? Yeah, or go that's a good idea. I could bring that back to my school. So you're learning in the same as we're all learning. And no one looks at you going, oh, he thinks he knows everything. You know what I mean? Like, you're one, but it's the truth. Like you're one of us. We're all in the same situation together. And I think of that... And I think that's what is so important. We are all	Participants were also questioned on the possibility of university-school partnership to support the CoP which holds some promise in other research on developing inclusive practice (Brennan, King and Travers, 2019). There were mixed views on this idea. Two participants spoke of the need for a balanced facilitator who could draw from research as well as having authenticity in terms of knowing the role of the principal, as Freya describes: ‘you're one of us, we don't look at you as in you're up there they're telling us what to do...we all know that you're a principal, okay, in a school with special classes. So, you're exactly the same as all of us’ (Freya, Interview 6)

	in it together. And nobody has all the solutions. Like we're all still learning no matter what.	
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Appendix Q: Sample of Coding in Nvivo

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface for a project named 'SISLCoP.nvpx'. The left sidebar shows the project structure under 'IMPORT' and 'ORGANIZE' sections. The 'IMPORT' section includes 'Data' (Files, Literature, Meetings, etc.) and 'File Classifications'. The 'ORGANIZE' section includes 'Coding' (Codes, Lit Review Codes, etc.).

The top menu bar includes 'Home', 'Edit', 'Import', 'Create', 'Explore', 'Share', and 'Modules'. Below the menu bar are icons for 'Memo', 'Code', 'Document', 'Case', 'Case Classification', 'File Classification', 'Static Set', and 'Folder'.

The central text area shows a transcript from 'Interview 9 - MW Transcript'. The text is highlighted in yellow, and the codes are listed in the right sidebar. The codes are organized into a hierarchy: 'Sustaining the SISLCoP' (SISLCoP Structure, SISLCoP Structure, Distributed leadership, teacher leader, dealing with problems of practice, dealing with problems of practice), 'Defining inclusion' (Defining inclusion, Sharing the vision, Sharing the vision), and 'Inclusion in action' (Inclusion in action, Inclusion in action, Teaching experience, Coding Density).

The transcript text includes the following segments:

- Interview 9 - SB**: and shared experiences of overcoming these challenges or trying to work around them. Then we do kind of differences in our beliefs like, or our opinions about things. So it was building on those, you know what, at the end of the day, like being a principal is a very lonely, isolating role, we're all doing it. So rather than actually, you know, just kind of finding that same wavelength that we're on, I think we found that throughout the weeks. You know, as it built up, we found a common kind of common wavelength that we're on, and that we're here for the good of the children. And what you think might be good might be different to what I think. But I genuinely believe that you believe that. So...
- Aidan Raftery 10:33**: Yeah, and we all have different context. I think that was quite unique. Like we're all in the same job. We all have very different context. You were always very generous in sharing your practices with the group. Was there anything that you heard, or maybe one of your own, that you took back after discussing the group and adapted or changed in your own context?
- MW 10:53**: Certainly, I suppose, the discussion about inclusion, what inclusion means to you... I have a greater awareness now, that while I'm leading inclusion, it's not enough for me to just reflect on my thinking about inclusion. So it's something that I want to develop with the staff at some of the, you know, they are discussions that are going to be coming up now. And we, for example, where we were looking very much at routines, and the school creating more of a school culture, and embedding things in our school culture. And one of those things is like when we come into the hall in the morning, that transition space between home and school, what does it look like? And there were conversations that it's too noisy, and there were staff members saying, Well, you know, the children are entitled to speak to one another? And I said, Yeah, but, you know, for some children, it is absolutely, too overwhelming in that space, how do we make it more inclusive, and it seemed to just keep throwing that word into like visits to the beach, visits to the playground? How do we make that inclusive for our two girls in the wheelchair, you know? So even though, I'm not sure how it came about...it might of even been yourself, it was a discussion around, like, including the SNAs in those discussions. And so just this week, I had meetings with the SNAs to actually kind of I wanted their perspective and what we were thinking for in terms of the routines that we're thinking of setting up. So from their perspective, the children they work with, how was that going to work for them? You know, I think that was a valuable, kind of like, fount of knowledge that maybe I wasn't dipping into as much as I should have been, you know?
- Aidan Raftery 12:41**: Yeah, I can't take credit for that because I do know remember that conversation. No, and it was, it reminded me as a member of the group, yeah, God that voice. Like, we always know it's there. But maybe we should be tapping into it more... Would you continue to be part of a group or join another community of practice?

The bottom status bar shows '1 item selected' and the breadcrumb path: 'Data > Files > Interviews > Interview 9 - MW Transcript'.

Appendix R: Definitions of Inclusion (extracted from participant handbook)

Inclusion and Inclusive Education

Inclusion is a term that has gained increasing attention and focus in recent policy on special education provision in Ireland. However, the research literature in the area of inclusion in education does not reveal a common definition. In education, many practitioners view inclusion as a concept of including learners with special educational needs, with many also taking the broader view of inclusion as the inclusion of all learners, regardless of their needs or background. Consider the definitions set out below which are taken from books, research literature and policy documents:

- Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education...it involves a range of changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2005, p.13)
- A set of principles which ensures that the student with a disability is viewed as a valued and needed member of the community in every respect (Uditsky, 2007, p.88)
- Being in the ordinary school with other students, following the same curriculum at the same time, in the same classrooms, with the full acceptance of all, and in a way which makes the student feel no different from other students (Bailey, 2007, p.173)
- Addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and removing barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements, to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance in school (Winter and O'Raw, 2010, p.39)
- Inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise) (Goodall, 2020)

- All learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022)

As you can see, definitions of inclusion vary and an agreed definition remains elusive. Definitions also vary in their focus which include themes relating to values-based principles, increasing school capacity to respond, participation, access and a rights-based view.

The inclusion movement was initially rooted in the civil rights movement of the 1960s where the idea of segregated education began to be challenged. In most countries, inclusion is at the forefront of educational policy and is again taking centre stage in Ireland at this time as the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN, 2004) has commenced, with public consultation with stakeholders currently underway (see this link for more: <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/e3842-epsen-review-consultation/#consultation-process>)

As this research is focused on principals who lead mainstream schools with special classes, the focus will be on including those learners with more complex needs in the mainstream setting through the model of special class provision currently in operation in Irish primary schools.

Inclusive practice

Much like inclusion and inclusive education, examples of inclusive practice can vary greatly depending on the context in which they are being enacted. For the purposes of this study, inclusive practices and inclusive leadership practices will be viewed broadly and incorporate any actions undertaken by school staff that support the enactment of inclusion in schools and increase the meaningful participation of learners with SEN.

Appendix S: Sample Extracts from Participant Handbook

Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP) Participant Handbook



Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine

Aidan Raftery, Doctor of Education Candidate, DCU. February 2023



Welcome and Research Background

Firstly, a sincere thank you for agreeing to be part of the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership Community of Practice (SISLCoP). I hope this will be a worthwhile, insightful and practical form of professional learning to support you in your leadership role. This section will provide you with information regarding the rationale for launching the SISLCoP, the current policy landscape and a reminder of what your participation in the project involves.

Rationale

Firstly, I have a passion for inclusive and special education. I completed a masters in Special Educational Needs (MSEN) in 2019 where I explored principals' perspectives of the special education teacher (SET) allocation model (DES, 2017). I thoroughly enjoyed the fieldwork aspect of the research where I got to visit principals in their schools and listen to their experiences of leading inclusive and special education through the implementation of the new model.

It was also clear to me, from the principals I spoke with, that there was a commitment to inclusion and an agreement that all children should go to schools in their local community (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). However, many questions remained, particularly around inclusive practices and how school leaders can deploy the resources available to them in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Another motivating factor for this research project is the collective interest we share in operating special classes within a mainstream school. This may be a big change for some of the participants or for others, a long-established practice. Bringing this collective wisdom together has great potential to support all members of the group as we share common problems of practice. We will have opportunities to share practice and ideas on such topics as how we can maximise the participation and achievement of students enrolled in these classes. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is quite clear about segregated provision not being part of an inclusive education system and I'm sure you will recall the stir caused by the 2019 NCSE report where they posed the question about a move towards full inclusion, similar to that of New Brunswick in Canada. Whilst the report also stated Ireland was not currently

ready for such a drastic change in special education provision, it did put forward some more questions for me. I started to wonder if there is another way? Can we have both? Can inclusive and special education live together in harmony? It is hoped that we can discuss such questions in the SISLCoP and come up with solutions that we can implement now in our current system or make suggestions that can be forwarded to policymakers.

These questions, coupled with my interest in leadership and belief in the power of support networks and collaborative inquiry brought me to my research question: *How can a community of practice support school leaders to enact inclusive school leadership and in turn, lead more inclusive schools?*

Policy Context

Ireland's education system has undergone significant changes in the past three decades. Inclusive and special education provision has been at the forefront of policy development within this system as Ireland attempts to meet its obligations under the UNCRPD which was ratified in 2018. Similarly, many international policies in this area reflect the value and impetus that is placed upon inclusive education systems (Ainscow, 2020). The SISLCoP will be operating in the context of several recent policy changes in the provision of education for children with additional needs, alongside broader reforms in curriculum and assessment (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020) and the expansion of special class provision (Banks and McCoy, 2017). Through professional dialogue in the SISLCoP, it is my hope that we can provide some insights into how we can move forward and what supports will be necessary to do so.

What do I have to do?

Firstly, you will be asked to fill out a short survey of approximately 20 minutes in duration. This will gather information about you, your current leadership role, experience of inclusive practices and perceived challenges in striving to be an 'inclusive school'. This will inform initial topics in our meetings. These meetings will take place via zoom and face-to-face at schools where a participant principal is willing to host a meeting. Each meeting will be approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes in duration and will be audio-recorded for analysis by the researcher. You will be invited to bring your own

'problems of practice' to meetings and relevant artefacts such as policy documents or photographs to illustrate such. A problem of practice is an issue you have identified that hinders inclusive practice. As a community of principals, we aim to address these problems together and come up with potential solutions. An example of a problem of practice is illustrated on page 11. After the 8th meeting, participants will be invited to take part in a 30-minute interview. This interview is intended to collect more detailed information from you on your experience of engaging with the SISLCoP. This will also be recorded on a digital audio device to assist me in writing up the findings of the research project.