

Exploring Key Educational Stakeholders Experiences of School-to-School-
Collaboration within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for Developing
Inclusive Education.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BES	Best Evidence Synthesis
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DE	Department of Education (formerly Department of Education and Skills, formerly Department of Education and Science)
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools
DS	Disadvantaged School
EADSNE	European Agency for Disability and Special Needs Education
EASNIE	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EPSEN ACT	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (GOI, 2004)
ESCI	Education Support Centres Ireland
GAM	General Allocation Model
GOI	Government of Ireland
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IDEA	Inclusive Development in Education for All
IEF	Inclusion Education Framework
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IPPA	Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action
IRIS	Inclusive Research in Irish Schools
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MATAIPPA	Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Action
MS	Mainstream School
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Oide	Teacher Support Service (formerly Professional Development Service for Teachers and Principals (PDST))
OLC	Online Learning Community
PD	Professional Development
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST now Oide)
PL	Professional Learning
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
SERN	Stockborough Equity Research Network
SET	Special Education Teacher
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SNAWDU	SNA Workforce Development Unit
SS	Special School

SSE	School Self-Evaluation
TA	Teaching Assistant
TC	Teaching Council
TE4I	Teacher Education for Inclusion
UN	United Nations
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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Abstract

Exploring Key Educational Stakeholders Experiences of School-to-School-Collaboration within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for Developing Inclusive Education.

Máire Love

Inclusive education in Ireland has evolved over the past two decades, with policymakers and teachers striving to improve learning for all students by addressing barriers to equity and fostering student participation (Ainscow, 2020). Despite adopting a capacity-building model aimed at encouraging schools to ‘take ownership of their ...development and improvement’ (Department of Education [DE], 2016, p. 6), Irish schools face challenges in accessing appropriate Professional Learning [PL] experiences to support and enhance inclusive education.

This study addresses the gap in interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration necessary for building school capacity to develop inclusive education. It involved thirteen key educational stakeholders (five teachers, five Special Needs Assistants [SNAs], and three principals) from three categories of schools (special, disadvantaged, and mainstream) within a Professional Learning Community [PLC] over four months. The development of the PLC was informed by literature on key components of interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration and PL. Underpinned by the Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action [MATAIPPA] Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), the study employed UNESCO’s Inclusive Indicators (2021) to stimulate critical reflection, discussion, and inquiry.

A qualitative multi-site case-study approach was used, with data generation methods including PLC transcriptions, participant photographs, reflections, a researcher-reflective journal, and semi-structured interviews. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) constructed key findings on collaboration and PL for developing inclusive education.

A major contribution of this study is the Inclusive Development in Education for All (IDEA) Framework (Figure 5.1), derived from the findings to offer flexibility and applicability across diverse contexts. In addition, the Collaborative Inquiry Framework for Schools (Table 5.2 and 5.3) provides a structured approach to tangible collaborative practice, enhancing understanding of how collaboration promotes inclusive education. The implications of these findings, along with policy, practice, and future research recommendations, are discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

Inclusion is an international imperative aimed at ensuring that all individuals can fully participate in education and society (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, [UNESCO], 2005). Inclusive education calls upon schools to identify and overcome barriers to equity by valuing diversity and enabling the participation of every student in the classroom (UNESCO, 2005; National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2011; Tiernan, 2022). However, this goal is challenging due to persistent barriers (Ainscow, 2020) and the absence of a universally accepted definition of inclusive education (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins, 2023). This lack of consensus can make it challenging for key educational stakeholders, such as teachers, to fully understand and discuss inclusive education in their professional practice, potentially leading to a somewhat fragmented and inconsistent approach to its development (Florian and Linklater, 2010; Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Liasidou (2012, p.5) characterises inclusive education as a 'semantic chameleon', changing interpretation across different individuals and contexts, especially within schools. Therefore, collaboration and partnerships are essential to clarify what inclusive education means and overcome barriers and inequities in schools (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins, 2023). Effective collaboration among key educational stakeholders—teachers, Special Needs Assistants [SNAs]¹, and principals—is vital for establishing a shared understanding of inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Pantić and Florian, 2015).

Internationally and nationally, collaborative teacher Professional Learning [PL] has proven pivotal in fostering a shared commitment and developing inclusive education (Harris and Jones, 2010; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). Despite recognising its importance, schools sometimes struggle to allocate time for collaborative PL or implement collaborative practices effectively (Rose et al., 2015). This is especially true when policy promotes it as the panacea for inclusive education (NCSE, 2011) but, at a system level, fails to provide adequate support (for example, tangible guidance) for its advancement. While collaborative practice is recommended in policy, the model of PL used is transmissive in

¹ In Ireland, Special Needs Assistants [SNAs] are assigned to schools to support students with substantial care needs due to Special Educational Needs [SEN] or medical conditions. SNAs operate under the guidance of principals and teachers (Department of Education [DE], 2014). Their role does not include pedagogical instruction (NCSE, 2018). SNA's responsibilities include assisting with essential primary care tasks such as eating, taking necessary medications, toileting, mobility support, managing seizures, and other care needs.

nature and often does not support the development of effective teamwork and shared learning (Kennedy, 2014). In Ireland, the predominant focus of teacher PL remains on curriculum changes or national policy priorities associated with transmissive models, such as seminars (King and Nihill, 2019). These seminars often exclude SNAs who do not have a curricular role (Department of Education [DE²], 2014) and often involve schools of similar ‘types’ being grouped together.

In the Irish context, there are different types of schools—special, disadvantaged, and mainstream—that may operate differently because of their categorisation but ultimately should be learning from one another (DE, 2022). These varied school contexts offer unique opportunities for alternative perspectives as they face similar and distinct challenges in developing inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Recent international research advocates for schools to embrace collaborative networks, extending their responsibility beyond their own student body to encompass all students (Ainscow et al., 2023). However, less is known about inter-contextual and inter-professional collaborative learning among SNAs, teachers, and principals from different schools in the Irish educational context, making this an area that requires investigation. This research focuses on key educational stakeholders—SNAs, teachers, and principals from three diverse school contexts (special, mainstream and disadvantaged)—all of whom share a policy responsibility for developing inclusive education (NCSE, 2024). First, it is essential to define what PL means, as it can influence the understanding and development of PL experiences.

1.2 Professional Learning (PL) and Agency

The diversity of PL terminology remains a subject of debate (King, French and Halligan, 2022). For example, terms such as continuing professional development [CPD], Professional Development [PD], training, courses, and in-service training are used interchangeably in policy and research. This thesis adopts the term PL to align with current research preferences (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). The emphasis on agency in PL (King, 2014; Brennan and Gorman, 2023) connects directly with discussions on how

² In Ireland, the ‘Department of Education and Science’ was renamed the ‘Department of Education and Skills’ in 2010. In 2020, it changed and is currently known as the ‘Department of Education’. For brevity and consistency, all documents and references to this department, regardless of the year, will be referred to as the Department of Education [DE] throughout this thesis.

empowering key educational stakeholders to take an active role in their learning can lead to transformative outcomes (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). In this thesis, PL emphasises developing agency and autonomy of SNAs, teachers and principals in learning, empowering them to drive change collaboratively.

Agency has been broadly defined as the ability to ‘intervene in the world,’ to ‘act otherwise,’ to ‘make a difference,’ and to exercise ‘some sort of power’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 14). Agents (individuals) engage intentionally in actions they believe will produce specific outcomes, using their knowledge to influence these outcomes (Pantić and Florian, 2015). According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency involves the interplay of past experiences (iterational dimension), practical considerations in the present (practical-evaluative), and future aspirations (projective). In the context of PL, agency involves more than just initiating actions; it encompasses the power to influence and shape inclusive education and school contexts (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015). Acting with agency means key educational stakeholders are more willing to identify and address barriers to inclusive education (Pantić and Florian, 2015). It involves the belief that individuals have the knowledge and capacity to enhance access, participation, and overall educational outcomes for all learners (UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, providing key educational stakeholders with the conditions (for example, building trust, space and opportunity) to act with increased agency can help develop a shared understanding of how to effectively ensure all students' participation (Campbell, 2020). This thesis' approach and understanding of agency align with the principles of PL, where the collective expertise and shared commitment of key educational stakeholders will support and drive innovation in the development of inclusive education (Timperley et al., 2007). As a result, my past experiences with PL, the present practical considerations of supporting PL, and the future aspirations of this research (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) will be explored next.

1.3 Professional Rationale

Based on my experience working as a primary school teacher in various national and international contexts, I have had the privilege of collaborating with some of the most knowledgeable SNAs, teachers, and principals. While researching for the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs [SEN] and, subsequently, a Master's in Special and

Inclusive Education, I focused on collaborative, inclusive practices such as team teaching³ to make a difference in my context (Cook and Friend, 1993). This led to changes in how my school valued and supported diversity. A key factor in this change was the organisational capacity provided by the school principal, who allowed me to lead the inquiry and offered additional support through in-school planning time and resources.

When I was seconded to the Professional Development Service Teachers [PDST] (now Oide, a support service for teachers funded by the DE) as a literacy advisor, I carried my values of collaboration and inclusive education into my daily work. However, this often conflicted with the 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum-focused seminars I was responsible for facilitating. Additionally, I noticed that schools of similar categories were often grouped together for curriculum change (special schools with special schools), which led to a practice where schools often did not meet settings that differed from their own. Similarly, despite schools being near each other, they rarely collaborated except on mandatory curriculum days or for logistical arrangements (for example, sharing cleaning companies). After six years, I transitioned from a literacy advisor to a Team Leader for PD and Design, where I worked towards developing more sustained, collaborative and facilitative support models in the support service (Kennedy, 2014). When the opportunity arose to join a Higher Education Institute [HEI] and support undergraduate teachers with inclusive education and post-graduate teachers engaging with the Post Graduate Diploma in SEN, I knew my experience facilitating national PL would benefit me.

During my work, particularly with post-graduate teachers, I noticed an acute desire among practising teachers to include all students. However, they often lacked confidence in discussing or identifying inclusive education in their practice (Travers et al., 2010). Additionally, teachers often strongly preferred not to be placed in groups with teachers from different contexts (for example, post-primary with primary, special with mainstream) during lectures and workshop tasks, as they preferred to only work with others who understood their specific contexts. In tandem with this, I started engaging with SNAs undertaking accredited PL in the HEI. I realised that many core concepts we discussed about inclusive education, such as valuing diversity, were similar to those in teacher PL. Still, SNAs

³ Team teaching is where two or more teachers come together to teach a group of students collectively. It is also referred to as co-teaching or collaborative teaching. It involves multiple teachers working together to plan, deliver, and evaluate teaching and learning (Cook and Friend, 1993).

were always separated, and there was an acute focus on their being aware of their care role (DE, 2014). Teachers and SNAs also often expressed a need for more collaborative interprofessional PL, as it was challenging individually to convey the messages or new learning back to their schools. This led me to question whether there could be a better way to work together towards a common purpose. Throughout my career, PL has provided new perspectives, helped challenge my beliefs, and innovated my practice. My doctoral journey is an inquiry into this problem, aiming to find solutions that will benefit my future work in this context.

However, before continuing, it is essential to note that the professional experiences outlined and the diverse contexts and key educational stakeholders I have worked with have shaped my attitudes, knowledge, and values throughout my research journey (Mercer, 2007). My extensive work with schools, mainly through my involvement in PL, meant I had previously focused on supporting the teachers and principals from this study with implementing new curricula and embedding these changes within schools. This involved facilitating PL with the whole school staff and smaller groups within the schools focused on new policy and curriculum changes. This previous connection aligns with Mercer's (2007) discussion on the benefits of insider researchers, where I have easier access to participants and settings as a sampling criterion, allowing me to leverage pre-existing relationships to build rapport and trust. It also provides me with a deeper understanding of the school contexts, which can lead to richer, more nuanced data (Mercer, 2007). As a result, I need to disclose these previous relationships and my insider positionality in this study because research is not value-free (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Therefore, I am aware of the impact of my values on data generation and analysis, and I am committed to conducting this research to reflect the participants' perspectives (Bryman, 2015). As an insider researcher, I must also navigate biases and the preconceptions participants may have about me, which can influence the data generation and interpretation (Mercer, 2007). Sharing this background provides insight into my 'insider' relationship with the schools and the work being presented. More complex issues related to positionality will be explored in detail in Chapter 3, particularly in 3.4.3 Insider/Outsider Perspective.

1.4 Research Aims

This research investigates the potential for collaboration between diverse school contexts and key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) within a Professional Learning Community [PLC] to develop inclusive education. The study will address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

RQ2: How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education?

RQ3: What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

1.5 School Policy Context

The study involves three distinct school types: a special school (NCSE, 2019), a mainstream school and a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools [DEIS⁴] school (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023) with a special class⁵ (NCSE, 2019). Below is an overview of the three school contexts and a rationale for their inclusion in the study.

1.5.1 The Special School Context

There is no clear definition of a special school in Irish policy. As a result, there is contestation on the exact number of special schools in this jurisdiction due to the lack of a policy definition (Ware et al., 2009). However, the DE (2023a) provides a broad categorisation of 130 schools that include 120 special schools, seven hospital schools, and three schools attached to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) units (DE, 2023a). Each of these special schools, as was envisaged in the Special Education Review Committee [SERC] Report (Government of Ireland [GOI], 1993), is part of a continuum of

⁴ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools [DEIS] is the DE's main policy initiative aimed at tackling educational disadvantage of children from disadvantaged communities. The DEIS policy focuses on targeting additional resources to those schools labelled 'DEIS' to ensure every child has an equal opportunity to achieve their potential (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023). An example of additional resources includes lower class sizes than mainstream schools and additional funding to ensure equitable access to education, such as homework clubs.

⁵ Special classes are part of a continuum of educational provision that enables students with more complex SEN to be educated in smaller class groups within their local mainstream schools. Students enrolled in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities (NCSE, 2019).

educational provision for students with SEN⁶. This continuum of educational provision includes access to mainstream education with additional support, special classes, or special schools. Placement in a special school is intended for those with the most complex SEN and highest support requirements (GOI, 1993). Although the DE does not explicitly define ‘complex needs,’ it requires a professional report indicating the necessity of a special school placement (NCSE, 2019). While SERC laid the foundation for this continuum and envisioned a system where both mainstream and special schools would coexist and collaborate (GOI, 1993), many special schools have become the ‘placement of last resort’ (Ware et al., 2009, p. 7), or the ‘the end of the line when all else fails’ (Merrigan and Senior, 2023, p.285) and mainstream schools are unable to support the needs of all students adequately. This marginalisation highlights the ongoing struggle experienced by some students and special schools to find their place in an inclusive education system (Merrigan and Senior, 2023).

Furthermore, Ireland's current system, characterised by the separation of mainstream and special education, is misaligned with Ireland’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] in 2018. The UNCRPD (United Nations [UN], 2007) mandates the end of segregated education, particularly as it separates some children from their local school (Tiernan, 2022). Therefore, the debate over *full* inclusion has gained momentum, with examples like New Brunswick, Canada, being promoted where all students are educated together (NCSE, 2019; AuCoin, Porter and Baker-Korotkov, 2020). While Ireland operates a continuum of educational provision, it is important to create more inclusive spaces within the current framework (Shevlin and Banks, 2021; Tiernan, 2022). This means fostering inclusive school environments to support students with diverse needs (Chapman and Ainscow, 2019). Overcoming challenges to this process includes addressing attitudinal barriers among key educational stakeholders like teachers, implementing whole-school approaches to inclusive education involving all stakeholders (including SNAs, teachers, and principals), and fostering consistent collaboration between special and mainstream schools (Rose et al., 2015). The SERC Report (GOI, 1993), acknowledging the importance of collaborative

⁶ In this thesis, the term Special Educational Needs (SEN) is used to align with Irish policy. However, I acknowledge the importance of language choice, advocating for terminology to be based on individual preferences. Some suggest SEN is linked to a deficit-oriented, medical model, and ‘Additional Educational Needs’ is seen as more inclusive. However, as the key educational stakeholders in this study utilise Irish policy to guide their practice, SEN was chosen at this juncture (NCSE, 2024). The terminology reflects an ongoing discussion in the field (FASD Ireland, 2023).

practice between schools, recommended establishing deep links between special and mainstream schools, including sharing teachers, facilities, and student interactions, to foster more inclusive environments. This is because special schools can serve as models of inclusive education and contribute to a broader understanding of inclusive education in mainstream settings (Merrigan and Senior, 2023).

1.5.2 The Mainstream School Context

In Ireland, mainstream schools refer to primary (students aged 4-13 years) or secondary schools (students aged 13 -18 years) that cater to most of the student population. Mainstream education has evolved significantly to include students with SEN. Policy and legislative changes, such as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs [EPSEN] Act (GOI, 2004), have promoted inclusive education by stipulating that all children with SEN have the right to be educated within the mainstream setting with peers who do not have SEN, whenever feasible. The intrinsic belief is that 'exclusion from mainstream education [is] considered the exception rather than the norm' (Shevlin and Banks, 2021, p.3). As a result, it is now estimated that more than 25% of students in Ireland's mainstream schools have an diagnosed SEN (Banks, 2021).

To support the sharing of expertise required within schools to include all students with SEN, the General Allocation Model [GAM]⁷ (DE, 2005a) promoted teacher collaborative practices such as joint planning and team teaching. However, teachers (who were separated as learning support or resource teachers dependent on student needs) often withdrew students from the mainstream classroom for support, leading to isolated practices (DE, 2008). Some schools also focused on accessing assessments to guide their practice rather than developing context-specific interventions or collaborative approaches (DE, 2008; NCSE, 2014; Rose et al., 2015). Further concerns arose that the diagnosis-based system of the GAM (DE, 2005a), which divided teaching supports based on access to psychological assessments, favoured economically advantaged parents and reduced school autonomy in deciding appropriate supports for individual students (NCSE, 2014; Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). The National Educational Psychology Service [NEPS] thus focused

⁷ The General Allocation Model [GAM], introduced by the DE in 2005, provided schools with resources for both high and low incidence SEN, with specific hours allocated based on individual needs (DE, 2005a).

its resources on producing assessments rather than building capacity and collaborating with schools (DE, 2008).

Some years later, 'A Pilot of a New Model for Allocating Teaching Resources to Mainstream Schools to Support Pupils with Special Educational Needs' (DE, 2016a) was piloted in DEIS and mainstream schools. Under the new pilot model, resources were allocated based on the needs of each school rather than requiring a disability diagnosis (DE, 2016a). The distinction between learning support and resource teachers no longer existed; instead, Special Education Teachers [SETs] were to complement and support the class teacher's work (DE, 2016a). To complement one another's roles and ensure the flexibility required by what would become the 'New SET Allocation Model' (DE, 2017a), all school staff needed to be familiar with and confident in the three-step process through 'The Continuum of Support Framework' (DE, 2007; DE, 2017a; NCSE, 2020) (Figure 1.1).

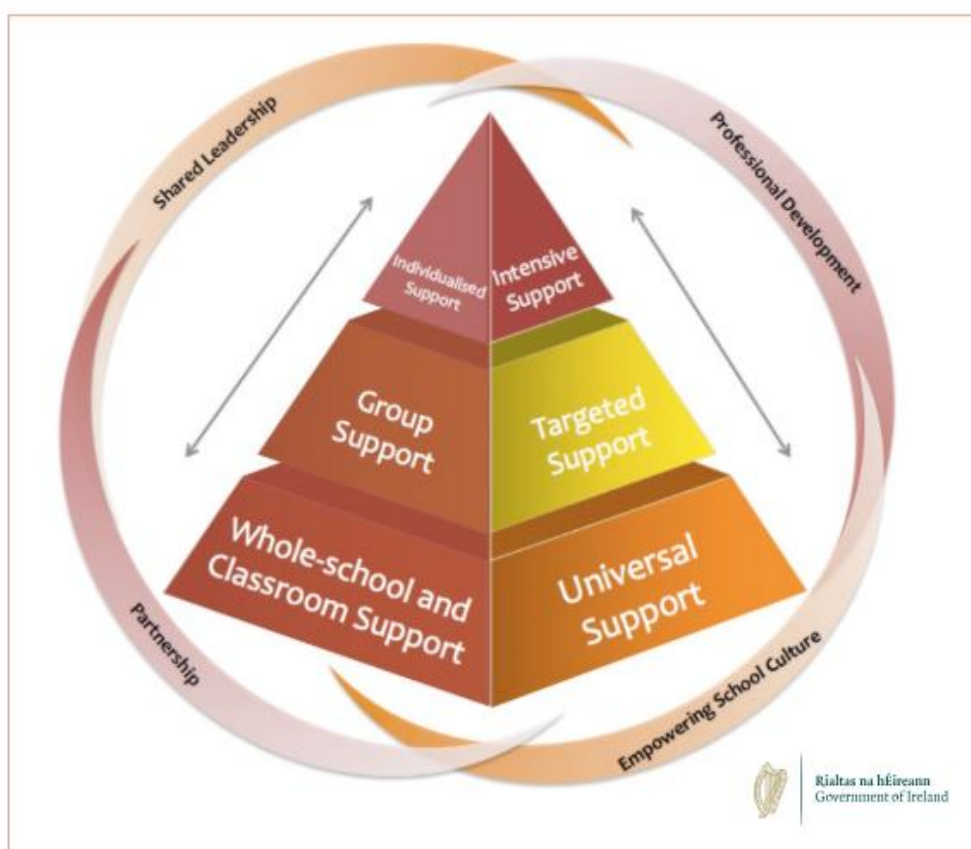


Figure 1.1 The Continuum of Support (Source: NCSE, 2020, p.21)

The Continuum of Support Framework (see Figure 1.1) supports all schools in identifying, intervening, and monitoring outcomes for students with SEN. It emphasises a flexible and collaborative approach to inclusive education involving three levels of support:

Whole-School and Classroom Support, School or Group Support (Targeted), and Intensive Support (Individualised), each tailored to the student's needs. As emphasised in (Figure 1.1) shared leadership, PD (referenced as PL in this thesis) and partnerships were essential for fostering an empowering school culture conducive to inclusive education (NCSE, 2020). To develop these aspects effectively, the schools involved in the pilot benefitted from building a whole-school approach through dedicated time for collaborative PL, sharing knowledge within schools and external support from NEPS psychologists and the inspectorate (DES, 2016a). This purposeful approach led to increased stakeholder collaboration and a better understanding that inclusive education was a collective responsibility (DE, 2016a). It also allowed for the building of capacity and distributed leadership (empowering others to lead) that was envisioned in the policy advice of the new model (NCSE, 2014).

However, despite an awareness of 'what worked' during the pilot (DE, 2016a) and 'what didn't work' during GAM (DE, 2008), the implementation of the SET allocation model (DE, 2017a) employed transmissive information models of PL (Kennedy, 2014), limited to one staff member who was expected to disseminate the information to others. This process of PL did not maintain the sustained external support from services such as the inspectorate and NEPS psychologists that had been available and worked effectively during the pilot (DE, 2016a). As a result, some of the same barriers identified in the GAM review (DE, 2008)—including the lack of whole-school approaches, confusion regarding the flexibility of The Continuum of Support (DE, 2007), and the need for more collaborative PL to foster inclusive education—persisted under the 'New SET Allocation Model' (Raftery and Brennan, 2021). Consequently, this has led to a belief that certain students are better educated in special schools or classes, where it is assumed that teachers possess the necessary skills despite requiring no specialist qualifications (NCSE, 2019). As a result, it is often seen as 'more feasible' for some students to receive education outside mainstream settings in special classes or schools (Travers, 2023).

1.5.2.1. The Special Class Context

Similar to special schools, placement in a special class requires a professional report confirming the student's complex SEN (NCSE, 2019). These classes, whether attached to mainstream or DEIS schools (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023), benefit from a lower student-teacher ratio tailored to the category of SEN. For instance, a special class for children with moderate

general learning disabilities has one teacher for every eight children. The advantages of inclusion in special classes are emphasised in research, as they can serve as ‘a secure transition’ (Hebron and Bond, 2017, p. 8) or ‘a safe step to a mainstream school’ (Henefer, 2010, p.9). This approach to inclusive education encourages the integration of students in special classes with their mainstream peers for parts of the day, week, or specific activities, based on their individual needs and abilities (NCSE, 2019). This desired ‘flexible’ approach between inclusion in a special class and the mainstream school is viewed as a middle ground between full inclusion and special education (Ryan and Mathews, 2022).

Interestingly, the concept of special classes was initially met with resistance, as it was feared it would lead to isolation for teachers and students within schools (GOI, 1965). It was noted that special classes, with one teacher working alone, might hinder collaboration between teachers and SNAs that special schools facilitated (Travers, 2023). A recent Irish study surveyed ($n=125$) primary school teachers working in special classes for autistic students and examined the teachers' PL needs using a quantitative design and online surveys (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022). The study confirmed that these concerns were somewhat valid, as many ($n=77$) of the teachers surveyed experienced isolation, with some noting it contributed to higher stress levels and challenges in managing classroom dynamics and implementing appropriate curricula (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022). While most teachers surveyed ($n=111$) deemed PL beneficial, they highlighted several associated challenges, such as location, frequency, lack of collaboration, and quality of the PL experience, as hindering its overall effectiveness for change in classrooms (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022). Specifically, ($n=29$) of respondents indicated that the location of PL was a big challenge (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022). However, collaboration between teachers and SNAs emerged as the most crucial support system mentioned by teachers in the study. They cited SNAs as their primary source of support in the special class setting, highlighting the importance of these collaborative relationships in mitigating feelings of isolation and enhancing inclusive education between mainstream and special education (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022).

The recent rise in special classes—growing over 50% from 356 in 2010 to 1807 in 2022 (NCSE, 2024)—suggests that mainstream schools face challenges in implementing inclusive education for all children (Tiernan, 2022). For example, the 2023 budget has

funded 287 new primary special classes (NCSE, 2024). Although this number remains low compared to international standards, representing just over 2% of the student population (Travers, 2023), it challenges the full inclusion model (Kenny, McCoy and Mihut, 2020). This trend sparks debates on the effectiveness and equity of different support models, with some arguing that parallel systems like special classes allow mainstream schools to avoid addressing barriers to full inclusion (Travers, 2023). Despite these concerns, special classes have become a big part of the educational landscape, shaping the approach to inclusive education through distinct school types, where schools often develop isolated approaches without collaboration (Rose et al., 2015). These issues are particularly significant for DEIS schools, where children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be diagnosed with SEN (McCoy, Banks and Shevlin, 2016).

1.5.3 The DEIS School Context

In Ireland, DEIS schools serving economically disadvantaged communities are identified using a model that incorporates statistics from the national census, including the number of students experiencing educational disadvantage (for example, residing in direct provision or emergency homeless accommodation) (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023). 1,194 schools (both primary and post-primary) and over 240,000 students benefit from additional funding through the DEIS policy (DE, 2023). However, DEIS schools and students are often overlooked in discussions of inclusion, which in the Irish context traditionally focus on SEN (NCSE, 2011). This approach neglects broader socio-economic factors influencing educational outcomes for students in disadvantaged schools (UNESCO, 2021). Internationally, Sustainable Development Goal 4 [SDG4] emphasises inclusive and quality education for marginalised and disadvantaged communities (UNESCO, 2017). In New Brunswick and elsewhere, inclusion encompasses all students, including those who are socially disadvantaged, those with SEN, and those with exceptional abilities (Shevlin and Banks, 2021).

This holistic approach to inclusive education is a fundamental human right underpinning the education system (Shevlin and Banks, 2021). While the DEIS policy (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023) provides additional targeted funding to address the educational needs of disadvantaged communities, it operates somewhat separately from the SEN policy (DE, 2017a). For example, using the same weighting system, the SET allocation model ensures

consistent support for students with SEN in mainstream and DEIS schools. However, DEIS schools receive additional resources, such as smaller class sizes and specific funding, not covered by the SEN policy. Incorporating DEIS schools (DE, 2005; 2017; 2023) into this study provides a more holistic view of inclusive education, encompassing diverse socio-economic challenges alongside SEN (UNESCO, 1994). This approach highlights that inclusive education should overcome barriers and promote fair access and opportunities for all students (Lowden, Hall and Neary, 2021). Consequently, this thesis adopts a definition of inclusive education that elevates and empowers all voices, ensuring a holistic approach to addressing the barriers students face and the challenges diverse school contexts must overcome (Ainscow et al., 2006; Chapman and Ainscow, 2022; Ainscow et al., 2023).

1.6 Towards a Definition of Inclusive Education

While there is ongoing debate about a comprehensive definition of inclusive education, there is a consensus that it involves the full participation of all students (Ainscow, 2024). Inclusive education aims to facilitate this participation, recognising that external factors such as personal and social circumstances can impact student engagement (Head and Pirrie, 2007; Ainscow et al., 2012; Grudnoff et al., 2017). Ensuring genuine participation necessitates addressing fairness in school environments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, [OECD], 2012). Countries with highly inclusive education systems prioritise participation, emphasising support for vulnerable students within mainstream settings (OECD, 2012). Viewed as an ongoing journey of growth and adaptation, inclusive education requires continuous PL and development (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). It involves identifying and overcoming barriers that hinder every student's participation, ensuring their presence, engagement, and academic achievement (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). This emphasis on an evolving process guides schools in creating inclusive environments, fostering collaboration and shared responsibility among key educational stakeholders (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Therefore, inclusive education, as defined in this thesis, is fundamentally about expanding schools' capacity to cater to the diverse needs of their student populations, valuing each individual equally within their local communities (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Expanding a school's capacity to respond requires collaboration between diverse contexts but also emphasises the importance of uniting diverse key educational stakeholders such as SNAs, teachers, and principals towards a common inclusive purpose (NCSE, 2024).

1.7 The Research Rationale: Key Educational Stakeholders

Collaborative efforts are crucial for sharing knowledge and nurturing a shared commitment among SNAs, teachers, and principals towards inclusive education (Kenny, McCoy and O'Higgins Norman, 2023). Joint collaborative opportunities through PL are particularly important for developing an inclusive school culture (NCSE, 2018). Empowering SNAs, teachers, and principals to focus on contextual priorities aligns with the whole-school approach outlined in 'The Continuum of Support Framework' (DE, 2007; DE, 2017a; NCSE, 2020). Through collaborative experiences, school staff establish shared attitudes, knowledge, and values by working together towards common goals (Dyson, Howes and Roberts, 2002). In a whole-school approach, each key educational stakeholder (SNA, teacher and principal) has the right and responsibility to engage in collaborative PL that empowers them to contribute to inclusive education for all (UNESCO, 2021). This is particularly significant in special school settings, where SNAs often comprise a substantial portion of the school staff (NCSE, 2018). To build interprofessional collaborative PL, exploring the specific roles of SNAs, teachers, and principals in promoting inclusive education is essential. Each key educational stakeholder brings unique perspectives and responsibilities, contributing to the holistic support necessary for creating inclusive schools (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). For more detailed insights into their PL needs, Chapter 2 will explore each key educational stakeholder's PL policy context and experiences. However, the next section provides a brief introduction to their roles and responsibilities for developing inclusive education within schools (DE, 2017a).

1.7.1 Teachers

Teachers have a pedagogical role in schools (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011) and are central to promoting inclusive education. However, many teachers face challenges in translating inclusive education into practice (Florian, 2014; Hick et al., 2019). In Ireland, where there is a continuum of educational provision (GOI, 1993), it is important to note that it exists without requiring any teacher (in special classes, special schools, or SETs) to hold specific specialist qualifications in these roles. However, the Irish SEN policy notes the need for teachers 'to become involved in local professional networks (within the school itself and with other schools) where good...practice...can be shared and promoted' (DE, 2017a, p.27). This recommendation implies a need for more collaborative PL for inclusive education.

Developing PL that empowers teachers to embrace classroom diversity is essential (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], 2021). However, a mismatch often exists between teachers' PL needs and the policy system's demands. In a climate often dominated by standardisation and performativity (Ball, 2003), standardised and mandatory PL can reduce teachers to implementers of external policies, undermining their confidence and making them feel they need expert guidance (King, Ní Bhroin and Prunty, 2018). Instead, PL should consider specific school contexts and learners (Bolam et al., 2005). Teachers need space to critically reflect on their actions (Schön, 1983), examining their past and present practices to influence their futures and develop agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). This reflective practice empowers teachers to continuously improve and adapt their teaching methods, fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment (Ainscow, 2024). Therefore, a collaborative, context-sensitive approach to PL can help teachers better embrace diversity, promoting a more inclusive school environment (EASNIE, 2021). As teachers become more confident in their ability to include all learners, they are more likely to collaborate with other stakeholders (Woodcock et al., 2022) such as SNAs.

1.7.2 Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)

Within the Irish educational context, the role of SNA is non-teaching and specifically designed to support students with complex SEN and care needs (DE, 2014). The duties of SNAs are twofold: supporting the care needs of these pupils and fostering their independence (DE, 2014; NCSE, 2018). Over the past 20 years, the SNA scheme in Ireland has expanded (NCSE, 2018), but this rapid growth has not been matched by substantial research that verifies the scheme's effectiveness (Morrissey, 2020). However, there is research to identify the benefits of SNAs in supporting inclusive education (NCSE, 2018). For instance, SNAs influence inclusive education by ensuring support for students with SEN so they can fully participate in learning that might not otherwise be possible (Morrissey, 2020). At the same time, tensions exist between the role of the SNA and their enacted duties in schools, highlighting numerous issues and challenges (Elliott, 2004; Logan, 2006). There is research evidence of SNAs involved in menial duties such as making tea for teaching staff or cleaning school buildings and pedagogical activities that extend outside their remit, such as teaching groups (NCSE, 2018). In answer to some of these issues in Ireland, the DE announced a national training programme to be delivered by a HEI to

support the PL of SNAs (Lanigan, 2021). However, frustrations arose when it became apparent that this programme lacked accreditation, leading to perceptions that there was a lack of value in the role of the SNA (Lanigan, 2021). Responding to pressure from stakeholders such as Fórsa, the largest SNA trade union and SNA advocacy, a Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications was aligned to the course (Fórsa, 2022).

However, challenges remain in accessing and valuing SNA PL, including the voluntary nature of the Level 6 programme and an apparent contradiction that the minimum SNA qualification requirements remain at a Level 3 or three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate (Carolan, 2023). This is despite evidence in the NCSE 'Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme' (2018, p. 20) that many SNAs are highly qualified and 'had undertaken qualifications in their own time and at their own expense'. As a result, grassroots campaigns such as 'Respect for SNAs' call for greater recognition of this expertise, particularly with the growing acknowledgement that a Level 3 qualification would not support them working in more complex settings (Carolan, 2023). To address these and other issues, the DE established the SNA Workforce Development Unit [SNAWDU] (DE, 2024). This unit's task force conducted focus groups across Ireland to gather feedback from SNAs regarding their PL needs (DE, 2024). The recent findings revealed eagerness among SNAs for practical, context-specific PL that might be more tailored to their roles' complexity (DE, 2024). The report, similar to challenges acknowledged by teachers in special classes (Finlay, Kinsella and Prendeville, 2022) also highlighted major challenges to SNAs accessing PL: location, time constraints and financial barriers, especially when they receive no support from their schools (DE, 2024). A critical gap in the report is the lack of emphasis on collaboration between SNAs and teachers, particularly as more recent research has highlighted a clear desire among SNAs to interact more with teachers (RyanSheehan, 2023). In previous research, when SNAs had more collaborative experiences, this was often attributed to the attitude of the teachers they worked with (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021) and the vision of the school's leadership (NCSE, 2018).

1.7.3 School Leadership - Principals

Effective school leadership plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive education by focusing on values like empathy, diversity, and equity (Shogren et al., 2015). Equity in education refers to the fair distribution of resources and opportunities to ensure that every

learner receives a quality education, regardless of background or circumstances (UNESCO, 2021). It emphasises fairness, recognising the equal importance of every learner's education (Ainscow, 2024, p.198). However, challenges arise when equitable values conflict with accountability agendas and narrow views of achievement (Armstrong, 2005). The emphasis on results and standardised testing can overshadow discussions on equity and inclusion (Livingston, 2020). Therefore, school leaders must balance accountability with their vision for inclusive education, ensuring all students are treated equitably (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). For example, a recent quantitative study of school leaders ($n=301$) in Estonia revealed that those with a positive vision for inclusive education strongly influenced positive attitudes towards implementing inclusive education in schools (Pedaste et al., 2021).

School leaders can actualise this vision by developing staff capacity through collaborative practice. Recent Irish policy places a responsibility on formal school leadership (school principals) to 'create and motivate staff teams and working groups to lead developments' within schools (DE, 2022, p. 41). Effective inclusive school leaders do not work in isolation but support distributed leadership among key educational stakeholders within the school community and between other schools (EASNIE, 2020). Therefore, school leaders must cultivate partnerships with diverse stakeholders (Spillane, 2006) to nurture a supportive and inclusive learning environment (Mac Ruairc, 2016). School principals can foster a shared responsibility and commitment towards inclusive education by facilitating critical reflection on attitudes, knowledge, and values to ensure that school communities collectively strive towards a common purpose (Pantić and Florian, 2015).

1.8 Core Concepts: Attitudes, Knowledge, and Values

This study aligns with recent international efforts for developing inclusive education, as highlighted by initiatives such as the Teacher Education for Inclusion [TE4I] project conducted by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education [EADSNE] across 26 member countries (EADSNE, 2012). The TE4I project aimed to enhance Initial Teacher Education [ITE] by identifying essential attitudes, knowledge, and values for teachers to support diverse learners in inclusive settings effectively (EADSNE, 2012). This study (RQ2) investigates how key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes,

knowledge, and values toward inclusive education. Definitions of these essential concepts are drawn from the TE4I project (EADSNE, 2012) and the conceptual working paper on teacher PL by Lani Florian (EASNIE, 2021) and utilised to reflect the key educational stakeholders involved in this study.

Table 1.1 Definitions of Attitudes, Knowledge and Values (Adapted from Source: Shulman 2004; Rouse, 2008; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011; EADSNE, 2012; EASNIE, 2021)

Essential Conceptions	Definition
Attitudes	Attitudes are predispositions or tendencies to respond positively or negatively towards a particular idea, individual, or situation. They can influence behaviours, actions and decision-making.
Knowledge	Knowledge and understanding are acquired through experience and collaboration—knowledge of pedagogy, learner diversity, and inclusive policy and practices—before resulting in action.
Values	Values in education encompass ethical and moral dimensions, including social justice, equity, diversity, and the right of all learners to an excellent quality education. Values reflect a commitment to fostering an inclusive and fair school culture.

1.9 Contribution to Knowledge

This research makes significant contributions to inclusive education and interprofessional school-to-school collaboration, offering new insights and practical approaches for developing more equitable and inclusive educational systems. It highlights the essential and often overlooked role of SNAs in fostering interprofessional learning, demonstrating their capacity to support collaborative inclusive practice and develop broader school and societal goals. The study also positions special schools as possible agents and bottom-up leaders of educational change, illustrating their potential to lead collaborative practices and inform the development of inclusive education. Additionally, it introduces photo-elicitation as an important data generation method for facilitating critical dialogue and reflection, enabling participants to articulate abstract concepts like inclusive education through tangible, visual means. By identifying the key elements of effective interprofessional PLCs, this research advances understanding of how PLCs can foster trust, critical reflection, and shared responsibility among diverse educational stakeholders. Finally, this study advocates for using the Inclusive Development in Education for All (IDEA) Framework, demonstrating its potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice and

guide future school-to-school and interprofessional collaboration. These contributions collectively provide a foundation for rethinking inclusive education, equipping key educational stakeholders, policymakers, school leaders and researchers with a blueprint for fostering meaningful, sustainable change. The next section outlines the structure of this thesis, exploring these contributions in more detail in relation to current research.

1.10 Structure of the Thesis

The second chapter explores the literature pertinent to inclusive education, collaboration, school-to-school collaboration, PL, particularly concerning SNAs and teachers and school leadership's role in supporting collaborative PL. It will analyse the conditions necessary for supporting the design of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC and culminate in the conceptual framework used to guide my decisions. Chapter 3 will outline the qualitative approach to address the research questions, the data generation methods chosen, and the data analysis process undertaken. Chapter 4 presents the qualitative descriptive research findings, which will be critically reviewed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 will provide recommendations for policy, practice, and future research within the field.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by analysing the relevant literature on international and national perspectives of inclusive education. From there, the chapter explores key conditions for developing inclusive schools. As collaboration is an essential element of inclusive education, it is explored in detail, including the conditions that either aid or hinder the development of school-to-school collaboration. Next, the PL policy context for inclusive education will be explored, including the importance of interprofessional collaborative learning and the role of leadership in supporting PL. Subsequently, PLCs will be justified as a collaborative inquiry approach for developing inclusive education. The last section concludes with an outline of the conceptual framework that will guide this study and the collaboration among the key educational stakeholders and their diverse contexts for developing inclusive education.

2.2 Literature Review Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was used to obtain studies relevant to exploring the experiences of diverse key educational stakeholders collaborating across contexts for developing inclusive education. Initial scoping searches included a range of electronic index databases, including ERIC, EBSCO, Connected Papers and the DCU search engine, which can search multiple academic databases, peer-reviewed journals, and the DCU library catalogue. Additionally, non-indexed databases, such as Dissertation Abstracts and Digital Dissertations, were utilised, along with Google Scholar, to ensure a detailed understanding of the topic. Keywords used in the search included 'inclusive education', 'special education', 'equity', 'social justice', 'collaboration', 'whole-school collaboration', 'school-to-school collaboration', 'school networking', 'between school collaboration', 'teacher collaboration', 'interprofessional collaboration', 'PLCs in education', 'teacher PL' (and associated phrases such as in-service training), 'SNA training/development', 'school leadership', 'distributed leadership', 'power dynamics', 'power differentials', 'external facilitation', 'inclusive pedagogy', 'agency', and 'teacher efficacy'.

No specific time frame was imposed, ensuring a collection of historical and contemporary studies. Other relevant studies were identified through the screening of reference lists. This approach ensured a broad and detailed perspective, incorporating

insights to inform the study's objectives. The review process involved an initial screening of abstracts, followed by a full-text read-through, focusing on identifying recurring themes and findings. The synthesised information was organised to identify strengths, limitations, and gaps in the current literature, offering new insights and suggesting directions for future research. This critical approach ensured a thorough understanding of the topic, highlighting areas for further investigation.

2.3 Global Perspectives of Inclusive Education

Over the last thirty years, inclusive education has gained traction and become central to international policy discourse (Rose et al., 2015; Ainscow, 2020). Taking the lead from supranational organisations such as UNESCO, many countries have departed from using deficit ideologies that espoused the need to fix the 'problem' of students with SEN towards a biopsychosocial model where all children are valued equally within the school system (Tiernan, McDonagh and Casserly, 2020). The biopsychosocial model approach highlights the importance of addressing physical health, well-being, and a social environment to support all students effectively (Tiernan, McDonagh and Casserly, 2020). In contrast, the traditional medical model 'diagnoses' the problem within the individual and can lead to more exclusionary practices as society aims to 'fix' or 'cure' the individual rather than addressing systemic barriers (Slee, 2011). This international movement away from the medical model has resulted in schools developing more inclusive approaches to learning whereby all children are educated side-by-side (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian, 2014; Rose and Shevlin, 2020).

Influenced by international agreements such as the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and subsequent reports such as the Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All (UNESCO, 2005), countries placed inclusion high on their policy reform agendas. In particular, the World Congress on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain, produced the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), with 92 governments and 25 organisations having endorsed this document. This policy was seen as a landmark as it broadened inclusion to reference 'accommodating all children' (UNESCO, 1994, p.1) and provided a framework to achieve the objectives outlined in Education for All (UNESCO,

1990). It challenged countries to reconsider the need for parallel special and mainstream education systems in favour of developing practices that support all learners (Florian, 2019). However, while the statement provided a framework for action, it did not impose legal obligations on participating countries (Hunt, 2011). Instead, it encouraged each nation to interpret and implement its principles according to its context and priorities. While this allowed countries autonomy, the voluntary nature of the framework meant that there were no mechanisms for enforcement or accountability. As a result, implementation varied considerably across countries (Magnússon, Göransson and Lindqvist, 2019), with more recent observations detailing disappointment that despite its vision, many students remain excluded from education (Ainscow, Slee and Best, 2019) or in segregated educational provision (Hunt, 2011; Florian, 2019; Magnússon, 2019).

At its core, inclusive education is for *all* children. As Slee (2001, pp.116-117) argued, 'inclusive education is not about special educational needs, it is about all students' and that the debate shouldn't focus on 'who's in or who's out' but instead on identifying and removing barriers to educational participation. Therefore, an unintended consequence of inclusive education policy is that it is usually framed as a special education policy (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2019), making it education 'for some' but not 'for all' (Florian, 2014). As a result, inclusive education policies and practices are being drafted to support only those with 'additional', 'different' or 'special' educational needs. This can 'paradoxically create[d] problems of inequality within education' (Florian, 2013, p.9). As a result of these debates, inclusive education has evolved (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; Florian, 2014). Countries have broadened their education policies to reflect 'more equitable educational provision for everyone' (Florian, 2013, p. 21). These shifts in perspectives also have seen considerable movements in language, with EADSNE moving to the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education [EASNIE], highlighting their responsibility from solely addressing special needs education to a broader conception of inclusive education. Such discourse has resulted in a closer examination of the diverse needs of all learners and enhancing their participation in learning, cultures, and communities while reducing exclusion from education (UNESCO, 2013; UNESCO, 2021). Consequently, conceptions of inclusive education have broadened to encompass not only ideas around equity, which attends to issues of fairness, particularly for vulnerable learners (Ainscow, 2020), but also the broader

goals of social justice, which seeks to overcome systemic inequalities and promote the full participation of all students in education (Hyttén and Bettez, 2011)

2.3.1 Updating Ideas on Inclusion: Considering Equity and Social Justice

The concept of equity in inclusive education emphasises that it involves the fair allocation of resources and opportunities to ensure that every student, regardless of background or circumstances, receives a high-quality, excellent education (UNESCO, 2021). Equity and inclusive education are not just parallel concepts but are deeply intertwined, forming the foundation of a socially just education system (Hyttén and Bettez, 2011). This interconnectedness between equity and inclusive education ensures that participation is not merely about physical presence but about providing the necessary resources and support for every student to achieve their full potential (Ainscow, 2024). Integrating equity with inclusive education aligns with the principle that ‘every learner matters equally’ (UNESCO, 2021, p.10). As Pelletier et al., (2010, p.6) explain, ‘inclusion ...[is]...defined as the careful and thoughtful marriage of educational excellence, equity and social justice’, ensuring that every learner is valued and supported in ways that recognise their unique circumstances. In this thesis, the terms ‘equity’ and ‘inclusive education’ are used interchangeably to reflect their interconnectedness in fostering a fair and just environment within schools. Consequently, equity is not seen as separate from inclusive education but as integral to it (Chapman and Ainscow, 2022).

This relationship between equity and inclusive education is essential for realising the broader goals of social justice, which aim to address the inequalities that students face when they enter school (MacArthur, 2009). As MacArthur (2009) notes, a social justice perspective acknowledges that children come to school with unequal situations and opportunities, and while it is the responsibility of schools to help compensate for these disparities, it must be recognised, as Berkovich (2014) argues, that schools alone cannot fully address or rectify the wider societal inequalities that contribute to these challenges. Still, social justice is the guiding principle driving the integration of equity and inclusion in education (UNESCO, 2023), where schools must actively, where possible, address and compensate for systemic inequalities (Hyttén and Bettez, 2011). This requires that schools include all students and do so in a fair and just manner, addressing barriers to equal opportunity (Ainscow et al., 2012). By embracing this perspective, key educational

stakeholders can move beyond superficial inclusion to a deeper commitment to equity that challenges and transforms existing inequalities (UNESCO, 2023). Thus, inclusive education becomes a call to action, embodying a commitment to advocacy and solidarity in respecting and valuing diversity (Brown, 2006).

In the American context, the 'Principles of Social Justice Education: The Social Justice Education in Schools Project' analysed the relationship between social justice and student achievement within urban schools (Carlisle, Jackson and George, 2006). The study represented a collaboration between the University of Massachusetts and a large urban school. It involved diverse participants, including teachers, parents, community members, and university lecturers, working together to reflect on and improve equitable educational practices. The study's findings emphasised the importance of a systemic approach to social justice in education and highlighted the connection between social justice, equity and inclusive education. Constructed within the study's findings, Carlisle, Jackson and George (2006, pp. 57-61) proposed five 'Principles of Social Justice Education in Schools' that include: 'inclusion and equity', 'high expectations', 'reciprocal community relationships', 'system-wide approach', and 'direct social justice education and intervention'. These principles provided a framework for schools to actively integrate equity and inclusive education into their practices, ensuring that every student is given the support and opportunities necessary to achieve their full potential (Carlisle, Jackson and George, 2006). Notably, the principles align closely with the more recent 'Facets of Equity' constructed by Grudnoff et al., (2017, p.17), particularly in their shared emphasis on creating supportive environments and overcoming barriers to learning.

An international Best Evidence Synthesis [BES] investigated and identified specific teaching practices that effectively promote equitable learning outcomes across diverse educational contexts (Grudnoff et al., 2017, p.17). It provided valuable insights into effective pedagogical strategies that can contribute to achieving equity in education (Grudnoff et al., 2017). The six facets (Table 2.1) constructed from the analysis imply a holistic approach to promoting equity in education, essential for creating truly inclusive and more socially just schools where all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, are supported to succeed (Grudnoff et al., 2017). For instance, by selecting meaningful content and designing learning opportunities aligned with valued outcomes (Facet 1, Table

2.1), schools can ensure that all students have access to excellent and equitable educational experiences, considering their backgrounds.

Table 2.1 Facets of Equity (Source: Grudnoff et al., 2017, p.17)

Facet	Facet Description
1.	Selecting worthwhile content and designing and implementing learning opportunities aligned with valued outcomes.
2.	Connecting to students as learners and to their lives and experiences.
3.	Creating learning-focused, respectful, and supportive learning environments.
4.	Using evidence to scaffold learning and improve teaching.
5.	Adopting an inquiry stance and taking responsibility for professional engagement and learning.
6.	Recognising and seeking to address classroom, school and societal practices that reproduce inequity.

This interconnectedness between the ‘Facets of Equity’ (Grudnoff et al., 2017, p.17) and the ‘Principles of Social Justice Education in Schools’ (Carlisle, Jackson and George, 2006, p.57) highlights the strong relationship between equity and social justice (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, Grudnoff et al.’s (2017) emphasis on creating supportive and respectful learning environments (Facet 3) resonates with Ainscow et al.’s (2012, p.6) ‘Ecology of Equity’. The ‘Ecology of Equity’ (Table 2.2) research spans over five years of engagement with schools, particularly those involved in the Stockborough Equity Research Network [SERN], where staff inquiry groups from different schools worked with the researchers to address equity issues to ‘sharpen the ways in which questions are asked’ and look at how ‘inequities can be traced back to their root causes’ (Ainscow et al., 2012, p. 6).

Table 2.2 Ecology of Equity (Source: Ainscow et al., 2012, pp.141-148)

Factor	Description
Within-School	Concerns arise from school practices, including teaching methods, organisation, social relations, and responses to valuing diversity.
Between-School	Issues stemming from the characteristics of the local school system, such as hierarchies, competition, segregation, and the distribution of educational opportunities.
Beyond-School	Factors beyond individual institutions (universities and schools) encompass policy contexts, family dynamics, professional interests, collaborations and broader socio-economic processes.

Within this framework, Ainscow et al., (2012) outline three dimensions of equity as: within-school, between-school, and beyond-school factors. Both Grudnoff et al.'s (2017) 'Facets of Equity' and Ainscow et al.'s (2012) 'Ecology of Equity' highlight the crucial role of teachers in connecting with students' lives and experiences (Facet 2 and Within-school Factors), promoting a sense of belonging and engagement among diverse student populations. Both frameworks advocate for collaborative efforts among teachers and other stakeholders to overcome barriers to equity. Similarly, the 'Principles of Social Justice Education' (Carlisle, Jackson and George, 2006) emphasise the necessity of systemic change and collaboration, particularly through the principles of 'Inclusion and Equity' and a 'System-Wide Approach.' While slight divergences exist between Grudnoff et al.'s (2017) 'Facets of Equity,' which focuses more on individual teacher actions, and the Ecology of Equity (Ainscow et al., 2012), which emphasises the need for systemic changes, such as enhanced collaboration among schools, these differences suggest the two frameworks can be used to complement each other. Additionally, their convergence and links with the 'Principles of Social Justice Education' (Carlisle, Jackson and George, 2006) highlight the evolving discourse on how equity is essential to developing inclusive education and realising the broader goals of social justice.

Considering these international standards, Ireland's efforts to value diversity and establish an inclusive education system must be carefully considered.

2.4 Inclusive Education in Ireland

2.4.1 Historical Developments

Ireland's inclusive education system has changed in the last few decades. The developments in the Irish context were primarily influenced by international policy (UNESCO, 1994; 2000; 2005) that highlighted the move away from segregated provision for students with SEN towards more inclusive education (Banks, Frawley and McCoy, 2015). For Ireland, a continuum of educational provision of 'special' and 'mainstream' education upheld the principles of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), as most students with SEN were educated in mainstream schools. The SERC report promoted the 'integration' of students with SEN into mainstream classes but only wherever 'appropriate and feasible' ensuring 'as little segregation as possible' (GOI, 1993, p. 22), reflecting Slee's (1996) 'clauses of conditionality'. While SERC (GOI, 1993) proved a welcome development in

supporting increased inclusion of students with SEN, barriers to effectively implementing its recommendations remained, particularly in defining what access to an 'appropriate or feasible' education meant.

Disagreement between the State and parents on what an 'appropriate and feasible' education meant resulted in several litigation cases. One such influential case, *O'Donoghue vs Minister for Health* (1993), obliged the state to provide education for all children 'in as full and as positive a manner as it has done for all other children in the community' (O'Hanlon, 1993). In this case, the state contended that a child with severe or profound general learning disabilities was 'ineducable' and, therefore, that the child's education should fall under the purview of the Department of Health rather than the DES (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). The case was ruled in favour of O'Donoghue, and the legal finding was important as it forced the DE and schools to make more appropriate educational provisions for students with more complex SEN (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). This litigation case and the SERC report were a significant impetus for section 7 of the Education Act 1998 (GOI, 1998). The Education Act 1998 (GOI, 1998) unequivocally stated that all children, including those with a disability, should have access to a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person (GOI, 1998, section 7, p.1). The Equal Status Act (GOI, 2000) went further. It prohibited nine grounds under which discrimination could not occur: gender, marital status, family status, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, and membership in the Traveller community (GOI, 2000). The Education Act 1998 (GOI, 1998), in tandem with the Equal Status Act (GOI, 2000), widened the parameters of special education provision beyond the charitable model of disability and moved it toward a more biopsychosocial model of disability (Tiernan, McDonagh and Casserly, 2020).

2.4.2 Continuum of Educational Provision

In line with the principles of equity and inclusion, the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) represented Ireland's most significant legislative milestone. It stressed the concept of inclusion by guaranteeing that all individuals, including those with SEN, experience the same rights as their peers to participate in and benefit from education (GOI, 2004). For example, it set up the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), an independent statutory body whose primary goal is to enhance educational support for individuals with SEN (NCSE, 2011). This is accomplished, in part, through one of its key roles: providing the

Minister for Education with research and policy advice (NCSE, 2019; 2024). Section 20 of the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) emphasised the need for the NCSE to plan for and ensure a range of educational options for students with SEN while also mandating that parents be informed about their child's entitlements (GOI, 2004, p. 21). This requirement aligns with and complements the right to education enshrined in Article 42 of the Constitution, which mandates state intervention to ensure a minimum standard of education for all children (Murphy et al., 2023). By reinforcing parents' rights to be informed and ensuring educational provisions for students with SEN, Section 20 of the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) strengthens the constitutional guarantee, working to uphold and actualise the principles of equitable and inclusive education.

However, despite some progress, Ireland falls short of its constitutional obligations (Murphy et al., 2023). Families have increasingly turned to the media to advocate for their children's right to education as the implementation of this right remains inadequate. (Conroy, 2019; Ó Cionnaith, 2024). For example, the failure to fully enact the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004)—a situation partly attributed to economic constraints—has hindered its effective development within schools (Rose et al., 2015). Although the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) initially included provisions for mandating IEPs, these were never fully implemented. This may reflect a broader lack of commitment to inclusive education within the macro system level. For example, IEPs are widely recognised as valuable tools for inclusive education, helping teachers connect assessment data, learning targets, and instructional strategies to enhance the educational experience for students with SEN (Blackwell and Rossetti, 2014). However, merely mandating IEPs is not enough. Ní Bhroin and King (2020) found that in regions where IEPs are legally required, they often become bureaucratic rather than serving their intended pedagogical purpose. For IEPs to be effective, there must be a systemic commitment to the collaborative process necessary for their development, involving key educational stakeholders, parents, and most importantly, the students themselves (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). To navigate the lack of enactment of all parts of EPSEN (GOI, 2004), 'The Continuum of Support Framework' (DE, 2007; DE, 2017a; NCSE, 2020) promoted using 'Student Support Plans'—essentially another term for IEPs. Again though, Student Support Plans were introduced without sustained whole-school PL and without sufficient emphasis on the collaborative processes needed to make them dynamic and inclusive. Section 2 of the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) also includes conditional provisions

stating that a child with SEN should be educated in an inclusive environment unless it is not in their 'best interests' as determined by assessments conducted under the Act. This clause allows for the exclusion of some students from mainstream education if deemed not feasible, leaving some children without suitable school placements and denying them their constitutional right to education (Conroy, 2019). In response to these issues, the DE has called for a review of the EPSEN Act (GOI, 2004) to ensure that the law better reflects the interests and experiences of families (GOI, 2022). Although this review was expected to be completed in 2023, it remains ongoing.

While broader societal and structural issues can act as facilitators or barriers to improvement, schools can still develop inclusive education. Developing inclusive schools requires fostering an environment where collaboration is encouraged among teachers (O'Sullivan, 2011), support staff (Logan, 2006), and the wider school community (Ainscow et al., 2012). Furthermore, a commitment from leadership is essential to drive and sustain inclusive education within schools (EASNIE, 2020). Several key conditions need to be addressed to develop more inclusive schools, particularly focusing on how teachers believe in themselves (teacher efficacy) and their ability to include all students (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teacher efficacy is crucial as it influences teachers' attitudes and willingness to develop inclusive education effectively (Woodcock et al., 2022). The following section thoroughly explores these conditions, particularly regarding the key educational stakeholders responsible for developing more inclusive schools in this study.

2.5 Developing Inclusive Schools

This section focuses on two critical components that underpin the development of inclusive schools: teacher efficacy and the adoption of a shared understanding of inclusive education. Teacher efficacy is examined because it influences attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusion education. It also has implications for how key educational stakeholders adopt a shared understanding of inclusive education. A shared understanding of inclusive education is analysed by exploring international frameworks and indicators that guide schools in creating inclusive cultures and developing a language of practice. While collaboration is fundamental to both developing teacher efficacy and a shared understanding of inclusive education, because of its complexity, which is often ignored in policy, and its significance, it requires dedicated discussion in section 2.6. By separating the

discussion, this thesis emphasises the essential role of effective collaboration in developing inclusive schools and teacher efficacy.

2.5.1 Teacher Efficacy

The concept of teacher efficacy comes from Bandura's theory of behavioural change (Bandura, 1977). It is defined as 'the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to affect student performance' (Berman et al., 1977, p. 137) and linked to how much energy a teacher may spend on problem-solving in practice (Bandura, 2001). Thus, it influences the learning environment that teachers create and their judgements about teaching tasks (Bandura, 1977). Weisel and Dror (2006) examined how school organisation, educational climate, and teachers' efficacy influence attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN. Their study, which involved 139 teachers from 17 primary schools in Israel, revealed that teachers' sense of efficacy was a factor shaping their attitudes towards inclusive education (Weisel and Dror, 2006). They also noted that a supportive school environment, characterised by positive leadership, collaborative planning, and teacher autonomy, contributed to higher teacher efficacy (Weisel and Dror, 2006). Thus, teachers in positive school climates with access to PL tended to have more favourable attitudes towards inclusive education (Weisel and Dror, 2006). As a result, in an inclusive environment where all students are valued and supported, teachers are more persistent in facing classroom challenges (Barni, Danioni and Benevene, 2019), open to collaboration (Pantić and Florian, 2015), and willing to try new ideas (Guskey, 1996). Consequently, teachers with higher efficacy are flexible, creative, resilient, and motivated to try different approaches when things do not go as planned (Woodcock et al., 2022).

The efficacy of teachers influencing the development of inclusive education and the value placed on diversity is reflected in longitudinal research in Ireland by Rose et al., (2015) called the 'Inclusive Research in Irish Schools' (IRIS) Report. The IRIS study was conducted on behalf of NCSE and involved a national electronic survey of schools, focus groups with service providers and support groups, and case studies in 24 schools (10 primary, 10 post-primary, and 4 special schools). Researchers visited each case study school twice over a minimum of one year to gather insights from school staff (teachers, principals, and SNAs, parents, students, and other service providers (for example, psychologists with NEPS and advisors with the NCSE), examining SEN provision and school responses to policy

implementation. The findings revealed that many teachers felt ill-equipped to develop inclusive education effectively (Rose et al., 2015). SETs benefitted from quality PL and were confident in including all students. In contrast, class teachers without the same PL opportunities appeared less confident in teaching all students (Rose et al., 2015). Some class teachers were overly reliant on SNAs, leading to SNAs working beyond their remit (Rose et al., 2015). The study called for more collaborative models of PL to build teacher confidence, particularly in team teaching, enabling teachers to work towards a common purpose (Rose et al., 2015). It also highlighted limited interaction and sharing of good practices between mainstream and special schools. The authors noted that strengthening these connections could boost teacher confidence in mainstream schools (Rose et al., 2015). This could be achieved by providing access to specialised expertise available in special schools, enhancing the school's ability to value diversity (GOI, 1993; Rose et al., 2015; Merrigan and Senior, 2023).

During the NCSE (2019) consultation, special school teachers expressed concerns that mainstream school staff lacked the necessary skills and experience to meet the complex needs of students (NCSE, 2019). Recent Irish policy advice titled 'An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society' (NCSE, 2024) advocates a cautious approach to full inclusion. It echoes concerns from special school staff and parents about the readiness of mainstream teachers to support and value diversity in classrooms (NCSE, 2024). This policy advice highlighted the need to gradually build confidence and teacher efficacy through a targeted whole-school approach (NCSE, 2024). Despite teachers' grasp of the philosophical underpinnings, translating this understanding into effective classroom practices remains challenging (Travers et al., 2010; Hick et al., 2019). This knowledge-practice gap is evident in longitudinal studies, particularly among preservice and early-career teachers in Ireland who feel ill-equipped despite their theoretical knowledge (Hick et al., 2019).

Consequently, inclusive education often remains a theoretical concept, accessible only to some teachers who feel confident in its application (Florian, 2013). Recognising the potential of PLCs to bridge this gap and cultivate teacher confidence (Hick et al., 2019), there is a growing call for collaborative inquiry-based approaches to developing inclusive education (Miles and Ainscow, 2011). However, achieving this requires an understanding and thorough examination of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021).

2.5.2 Adopting a Shared Understanding of Inclusive Education

Internationally, the transformative potential of more just societies is a compelling argument for understanding and developing inclusive education (EASNIE, 2022). However, key educational stakeholders must fully comprehend the concept to harness this potential. The first step in this journey is an examination of the concept (Ainscow, 2020). This necessitates school staff to critically reflect and inquire into what it means to be 'inclusive' and how it can be effectively measured (Schuelka, 2018). This task, which is not to be underestimated, is challenging, as selecting relevant evidence for measurement is a complex decision (Loreman, Forlin and Sharma, 2014). Over the last two decades, resources of established indicators and innovative tools that aim to capture quality and inclusive education have been developed (OECD, 2023). These tools include indicators that serve as benchmarks for evaluating whole-school practices, such as collaboration, student presence and participation, and areas for improvement (OECD, 2023).

2.5.2.1 The Inclusive Indicators

A systematic review of the literature on measuring indicators of inclusive education by Loreman, Forlin and Sharma (2014) found that creating universally relevant indicators is a difficult task that lacks a quick fix. Therefore, countries might best adopt common principles such as the Facets of Equity (Grudnoff et al., 2017) rather than trying to create the perfect universal set (Loreman, Forlin and Sharma, 2014). The concern is that a fixed set might overlook different countries' diverse contexts and priorities (OECD, 2023). This approach encourages reflection and discussion among stakeholders within and between schools to foster inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). In some contexts, studies have indicated the judicious use of inclusive indicators to compare and contrast inclusive education across different schools. For instance, researchers in Catalonia (Spain) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the level of inclusive education within each school, involving 615 schools (Sabando, Puigdemívol and Torrado, 2019). This approach enabled them to compare inclusive education practices across different schools (Sabando, Puigdemívol and Torrado, 2019). The study found that most Catalan schools strived to value student diversity with some supporting collaborative approaches to inclusion, where multiple stakeholders, such as teachers and support staff, worked together in classrooms to enhance inclusive education. However, many schools still faced challenges. While they commonly worked on reducing absenteeism and welcoming new students, there was still

a need for more collaboration, increased reflection and better PL to create inclusive schools (Sabando, Puigdemívol and Torrado, 2019). Most schools lacked systematic PL on inclusive education, with only 7.2% providing such PL for both teachers and other members of the school community. As a result, the findings called for more qualitative studies to reflect the nuances of evaluating inclusive education. This recommendation is important because using indicators to quantify and compare inclusive education across schools could lead to competition and move schools away from working together, the opposite intent of the 'Index of Inclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

The internationally recognised 'Index for Inclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) is one resource that facilitates schools' use and adaptation of indicators according to their diverse context and emphasises the importance of all school stakeholders in the process. The 'Index for Inclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), focuses on three main dimensions of inclusive education: creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). It guides schools and key educational stakeholders through a collaborative self-reflection and inquiry process that stresses the importance of involving all school stakeholders and outlines a collaborative self-review, where schools can identify areas for growth and develop action plans to address them. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for developing inclusive education. Furthermore, the 'Index for Inclusion's' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) flexible nature allows schools to adapt it to their specific contexts while still providing a common framework for discussion. This adaptability encourages schools to collaborate, learn from one another, and share best practices in developing inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; OECD, 2023).

Internationally, more frameworks of indicators exist, such as the 'A Quality Education for All: A History of the Lao PDR Inclusive Education Project' (Grimes, 2009) that undertook longitudinal research with 539 schools and culminated in the construction of 17 indicators (Grimes, 2009, p.44). It was developed to promote reflection, measurement and evaluation of inclusive education within the country. The study emphasises that the indicators developed were based on the work within the 'Index for Inclusion' (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) and included mixed-methods data generation. Similar to Loreman, Forlin and Sharma (2014), the findings emphasised the interaction of the education system's micro, meso and macro levels in developing inclusive education (Grimes, 2009). For

example, at a micro classroom, it states that the class atmosphere should be calm, at a meso level, it suggests schools should be in strong partnerships with other schools, while at a macro policy level, it states that ‘districts’ should take an active role in supporting schools to collaborate (Grimes, 2009, pp.145-147). Similar to the Facets of Equity (Grudnoff et al., 2017), they focused on practical, observable practices so there is no confusion over what inclusive education looks like at each level. I have taken these statements on board and reviewed the 17 indicators (Grimes, 2009, p.44) and found that many align with the eight indicators suggested more recently by UNESCO (2021, p.16), whose work was also heavily influenced by the ‘Index for Inclusion’ (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). The work by UNESCO (2021, p.16) specifically calls on school leaders to review their schools and offers advice on the involvement of the whole school community in the process. The similarities between both sets of indicators are aligned below in Table 2.3. Where some of UNESCO’s (2021) indicators would fit across multiple Grimes (2009) indicators, this duplication is noted in yellow. The overlap and duplication among indicators illustrate their interdependent nature.

Table 2.3 A Comparison of Inclusive Indicators (Source: Grimes, 2009; UNESCO, 2021)

Indicator	Grimes, 2009, p. 44	UNESCO, 2021, p.16
1	All pupils feel welcome in the school.	Everyone is made to feel welcome.
2	All students support each other in their learning.	Students are equally valued.
3	All students are well supported by school staff.	There are high expectations for all students.
4	Teachers and parents cooperate well.	Staff and students treat one another with respect.
5	All students are treated equally as valued members of the school.	There is a partnership between staff and families.
6	All students feel that their opinions and views are valued.	Students are equally valued Staff and students treat one another with respect.
7	All students can access learning in all lessons.	The school is accessible to all students.
8	All students can access all parts of the school building.	The school is accessible to all students.
9	All students attend school every day.	The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.
10	All students enjoy lessons.	Students are equally valued. Staff and students treat one another with respect.

		There is a partnership between staff and families.
11	All students are engaged in all lesson activities.	The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students. There is a partnership between staff and families.
12	All students achieve their learning in all subjects according to their individual ability.	There are high expectations for all students. The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.
13	All students learn together.	Students are equally valued Staff and students treat one another with respect.
14	All students have access to appropriate health services as necessary.	The school is accessible to all students.
15	School ensures that all students enter the school.	The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students.
16	All vulnerable children are successful in their learning	Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn.
17	The school creates a school environment which supports all students' learning.	Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn.

The examination was conducted to inform the PL framework utilised in this study. Additionally, the national framework from the Irish context, the Inclusion Education Framework [IEF] (NCSE, 2011), was reviewed as a possibility for guiding the interprofessional and inter-contextual PL involved in this study. The IEF (NCSE, 2011) was introduced to support reflection and collaboration within Irish schools, structured around ten themes and sub-themes. These themes align inclusion with SEN (NCSE, 2011) and mirror UNESCO's (2021) indicators, focusing on welcoming environments, high expectations for all students, collaborative practices, access to learning, and regular monitoring and support to developing inclusive education.

In this regard, choosing one set of indicators, the Inclusive Indicators from UNESCO (2021), does not imply that it is best for everyone. It was a deliberate decision to provide participants in this study with more recent resources that they were less likely to be familiar with. Therefore, it was hoped to stimulate inquiry and introduce a new knowledge base to

encourage fresh perspectives on inclusive education and develop a common language of practice (Messiou and Ainscow, 2020). On a logistical level, the eight indicators (UNESCO, 2021) are manageable for busy schools to interact with and do not specifically mention SEN, so participants were encouraged to define inclusive education on their terms and in relation to their attitudes, knowledge and values. While no additional indicators from Grimes (2009) or the IEF (NCSE, 2011) were added to this study's UNESCO (2021) set, some of their concepts were incorporated into the prompts (Appendix A). For instance, Indicator 6, 'All students feel that their opinions and views are valued' (Grimes, 2009), is reflected in this thesis's adoption of Indicator 3 prompts from UNESCO (2021), particularly in the question: 'How is student voice gathered and implemented?' As with the definition of inclusion, the indicators used by a school should be contextually appropriate. The crucial, common element is that they must initiate a process of critical reflection (Schön, 1983) and inquiry (Messiou and Ainscow, 2020), and support collaboration between and within schools (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Collaboration, therefore, emerges as a fundamental condition for fostering inclusive education. However, while collaboration is widely championed, its implementation often faces challenges that can hinder its success (Campbell, 2020). For instance, power dynamics (Gerdes et al., 2020), varying levels of commitment among stakeholders (Ainscow, 2024), and differing understandings of inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2002) can all impact the collaborative process. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse collaboration as essential for developing inclusive education.

2.6 Collaboration

Collaboration is seen as a process involving individuals coming together with a shared focus, sharing expertise, critically reflecting and inquiring into alternatives in practice (Campbell, 2020, p.339). This definition purposefully does not restrict collaboration to teachers in schools but represents all individuals who may support inclusive education. Collaboration requires several conditions to foster its development, including strong leadership (EASNIE, 2020), clear communication, developing roles and responsibilities (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020), setting clear goals and objectives (Hargreaves and O' Connor, 2018), mechanisms for monitoring progress (O' Sullivan, 2011) and attention to building mutual trust and responsibility (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Collaboration is also widely acknowledged in research as central to educational effectiveness and successful change (Ainscow et al., 2012; King, 2014).

Irish and international policy and research appear to emphasise the capacity-building nature of professional collaboration and how it should ultimately encourage individuals to support the PL needs of others (Muijs et al., 2014; DE, 2022). Therefore, collaboration for inclusive education becomes a social process that creates a collective understanding and commitment to change (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). This may start with establishing a culture where key educational stakeholders such as SNAs, teachers, and principals unite in a social process to develop the collective will and common understanding necessary for inclusive education (Pantić and Florian, 2015). However, interprofessional collaborative learning between SNAs, teachers, and principals for a sustained period is a relatively emerging concept in the Irish education system and, therefore, is an avenue that needs to be explored in research and practice. Placing value on bringing key educational stakeholders from diverse backgrounds together to collaborate can likely generate more innovative solutions to challenges by drawing on their unique knowledge and experiences (Antinluoma, Ilomäki and Toom, 2022). The next section will explore one aspect of this diversity of voice: collaboration between schools.

2.6.1 Collaboration Between Schools: Core Concepts and Principles

Much of the literature on collaboration between schools focuses on 'school networks'. In social science research, Borgatti and Foster (2003, p.992) outlined that a network is a 'set of actors, connected by a set of ties...[where] the actors...can be persons, teams, organisations or concepts'. Muijs, West and Ainscow (2010, p.6) built on this definition and defined a network in education as 'at least two organisations working together for a common purpose for at least some of the time'. This thesis adopts this broader educational definition of a network for school-to-school collaboration as it allows for the 'organisations' to be 'schools' but also considers related 'organisations', important for developing collaborative practices. It promotes flexibility (required for inclusive education) as it does not stipulate that only one particular type of 'actor' should be involved, allowing a common purpose between different key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) across different schools to be forged. This diversity of perspectives is important as it can offer learning opportunities where better relationships

can be constructed through professional links across contexts (Azorín and Muijs, 2017). The diversity of key educational stakeholders proposed in this study can also overcome the associated challenges of 'network homophily' (Lima, 2001). Network homophily can occur when only certain 'types' of stakeholders collaborate (for example, only mainstream teachers with mainstream teachers), leaving groups more susceptible to 'groupthink' as they may not bring varied, rich and diverse experiences to the collaboration (Lima, 2001, p.113). A broader representation helps prevent the domination of one 'particular view' or 'agenda' within the school-to-school collaboration (Lima, 2001).

Internationally, there is evidence that schools from across policy contexts are coming together to develop inclusive education. For example, in the Netherlands, inclusive education policy promotes collaboration between mainstream and special schools to develop capacity and respond to diversity (Thijs, Van Leeuwen and Zandbergen, 2008). A study commissioned by the Ministry of Education in Israel acknowledged that partnerships between special and mainstream schools 'can and do promote the inclusion of students with SEN, particularly those with more complex conditions' (Avissar, 2018, p. 154). More recently, EASNIE (2022) published the 'Changing Role of Specialist Provision' (CROSP) report in Supporting Inclusive Education. The CROSP report (EASNIE, 2022), conducted in two phases, thoroughly examined inclusive education practices across 26 member countries of the European Agency and outlines specific guiding principles and policy priorities as a reflective tool to support countries in advancing inclusive education. For example, Guiding Principle 2 explicitly calls for education systems to promote 'knowledge exchange and acquiring inclusive competencies through co-operation and networking' (EASNIE, 2022, p. 40). Further policy priorities linked with this principle include (2.1) and (2.2) which stress that countries should establish PLCs to facilitate knowledge sharing between special and mainstream schools (EASNIE, 2022, p.40). It, like Irish policy advice (NCSE, 2024), promotes that collaboration between special and mainstream schools would allow the expertise in special schools to be unlocked and contribute to an overall more inclusive education system (EASNIE, 2022). Policy priority (2.3) (EASNIE, p.40) also links with suggestions from Booth and Ainscow (2002) and UNESCO (2021), which advocate for the use of inclusive indicators to assess the quality of inclusive education across special and mainstream settings.

In Ireland, collaboration between schools is voluntary and an emerging concept (Morrissey, 2021). New initiatives that incentivise (provide additional support to) schools to work in 'Creative School Clusters' are developing in the Irish context (GOI, 2024). In this process, clusters can consist of between 3 and 5 schools collaborating on innovative, creative learning projects to address common issues or challenges. The clusters can include primary, post-primary, special schools, and Youthreach (for people aged 15 to 20 who have left school early or experienced difficulty in the traditional education system). This demonstrates an interest in the DE in bringing diverse contexts together and ascertaining whether collaboration between schools might lead to innovation of practice (GOI, 2024). In a demonstration of this commitment, organisational capacity is provided through an external facilitator who will provide support for up to three local cluster meetings over the 2-year duration of the cluster. It also includes paid substitution for teachers attending cluster meetings for two to three local cluster meetings per school year (GOI, 2024). Although equity or inclusion is not explicitly mentioned, the application for 'Creative School Clusters' (GOI, 2024) emphasises principles of equity. Similar to the 'Hidden Voices' referenced in UNESCO (2021), the 'Seldom Heard Toolkit' (McEvoy, 2015) places a responsibility on schools to engage with voices that might be marginalised or disadvantaged. Additionally, it emphasises the responsibility of school leadership to leverage the expertise within their school community to do so (GOI, 2024). Collaboration among local schools in Ireland marks a shift in practice, as many traditionally compete for enrolment and resources. For example, with higher enrolment numbers, schools have access to more human capital (teachers and SNAs), and principals with higher enrolments are rewarded with a move from 'teaching principal' to 'administrative principal'. In the English context, Muijs (2015) found that competition can make schools, particularly rural schools, less likely to share 'what works' particularly as they try to attract families. As a result, an analysis of international literature is required to support collaboration between schools and fully understand its potential value to inclusive education in Ireland.

2.6.2 Collaboration Between Schools: International Perspectives

The benefits of collaboration between schools range from curriculum development and educational improvement to resource sharing and equitable practices (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009; Ainscow et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2020; Ainscow et al., 2023). Muijs (2015) conducted research in the English context, focusing on collaborative partnerships between

schools, particularly those involving rural underperforming and high-performing schools. The study found that such partnerships can improve student attainment, especially when targeted interventions and support are implemented at both the classroom and leadership levels. The successful networks in the study prioritised negotiating a common purpose rather than collaborating for the sake of it. This focused approach ensured that collaborative efforts were meaningful and productive and that the children ultimately benefited (Muijs, 2015). The research emphasised the importance of PL, where prior to starting, the potential benefits of harnessing collective knowledge were openly discussed. Notably, headteachers (school principals) of high-performing schools involved in the research emphasised the importance of convincing their Governors (equivalent to Ireland's Board of Management) of the learning opportunities the partnership could provide with an 'underperforming' school. To actively engage all stakeholders, they demonstrated enthusiasm and framed the collaboration as a valuable PL opportunity for 'everyone'. This modelling of enthusiasm and 'open-mindedness' to working with others is essential for inclusive education (Pantić and Florian, 2015), where 'by helping others, you help yourself' (Ainscow, 2016, p.2). Further research by Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) also emphasises schools supporting one another for mutual PL. Their research investigated insider perspectives of incentivised school-to-school collaboration in England, where schools applied to support more underperforming schools. In their findings, a pattern emerged where PL was an outcome for both schools, so it not only strengthened the 'weaker' schools but also harnessed the capacity of both the school receiving the support and the other providing it (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018). Building on the ideas of schools supporting each other, a study in the Dutch context, Poortman, Brown, and Schildkamp (2022) propose a conceptual model of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) that highlights their potential not only to foster PL but also to drive school improvement. Their research indicates that when collaboration between schools is designed to support reflective inquiry, the co-construction of knowledge, and the adoption of evidence-informed practices, it can foster collaborative environments that enable stakeholders to engage in these practices more effectively. Facilitating collaboration across schools helps schools learn from one another, enhancing their collective capacity to address shared challenges (Poortman, Brown and Schildkamp, 2022). A key strength of such collaborative practice lies in the capacity of school leadership to align individual teacher PL with whole-school priorities, thereby

supporting continuous improvement at both the classroom and school levels (Poortman, Brown, and Schildkamp, 2022) .

However, Lima (2010) has noted an imbalance in the literature on school networks where the focus is more on the advantages than the potential disadvantages or pitfalls and stipulated the need for a more detailed examination of the conditions, dynamics, and interactions of collaboration between schools so that researchers can better understand the factors contributing to their success or failure. For example, mixed-methods research involving surveys ($n=28$) and interviews ($n=18$) in West Belfast, Northern Ireland, by Brown et al., (2020) focused on promoting collaboration among schools and external stakeholders (the inspectorate) to enhance educational outcomes and equity. The research highlighted that where schools collaborated effectively, it was linked to their ability to accept feedback, set clear expectations, and focus on School Self-Evaluation ⁸(SSE) (DE, 2016b) processes like critical reflection and target setting with evidence. However, some competitive dynamics remained (Brown et al., 2020). For example, one participant noted that certain types of schools were sometimes suspicious of each other, particularly questioning whether grammar schools would want to be evaluated alongside non-grammar schools. This led the authors to question the level of collaboration possible in voluntary networks, suggesting that competitive pressures might significantly hinder the realisation of collaborative benefits (Brown et al., 2020). This is important for this research because of the ‘voluntary’ nature of the school-to-school collaboration. However, the voluntary aspect is often argued as important for engagement in networking (Kerr et al., 2003). Interestingly, other participants in the Brown et al., (2020) study felt competition dissipated over time, especially as structures were put in place to construct a clear purpose that informed and drove decision-making. Indeed, like other studies (Ainscow et al., 2023), the opportunity for schools to unite to support and develop equitable outcomes for disadvantaged contexts appears to have acted as a catalyst for cooperation. Poortman, Brown, and Schildkamp (2022) emphasised the importance of establishing trust as a catalyst for cooperation, as it makes teachers more inclined to share data and openly discuss challenges and create evidence-based targets, to guide inquiry and problem-solving. These points relating to

⁸ School self-evaluation [SSE] is a collaborative, reflective school review process. Through cycles of reflection and inquiry, it is envisaged to empower a school to identify and affirm good practice and to take action on areas that need improvement, fostering ownership of development and improvement within the school (DE, 2012; 2016b; DE, 2022).

trust, leadership and data-informed decision-making highlight the importance of establishing a common purpose that aligns with contextual factors to shape and sustain school-to-school collaboration (Ainscow et al., 2023). By understanding the complexities of collaboration between schools, policymakers, teachers, and stakeholders can develop conditions to address the challenges (Armstrong and Brown, 2022) and maximise the benefits of collaborating within and between schools in education (Ainscow et al., 2012).

While acknowledging the barriers to school-to-school collaboration, a comprehensive analysis by Armstrong and Brown (2022) outlines the critical enablers of effective school-to-school collaboration. Their work synthesises findings from 13 case studies, across five continents, focusing on understanding the diverse contextual factors that influence the effectiveness of school-to-school collaboration. The findings highlight the importance of the establishment of clear goals and vision (purpose) structures facilitating communication and resource sharing (including external facilitation), building trust and fostering relationships, promoting a culture of shared responsibility for student learning (including top-down and bottom-up approaches to collaboration), recognising power dynamics, addressing inequities among participating schools, and engaging in ongoing critical reflection and inquiry (Armstrong and Brown, 2022, pp. 3-7). These case study insights echo the research of Kerr et al., (2003), who identified external facilitation, building relationships, and shared decision-making as conditions for effective networks. Similarly, Daly and Finnigan (2010, p.114) stress the importance of ‘frequent and pervasive communication, shared understanding and purpose, joint challenging work, and relationships built on trust that enabled the transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge’ for developing effective networks. Katz et al., (2008, p.118) state the necessity of an articulated purpose and focus, while Hadfield and Chapman (2009, p.32) highlight the critical role of developing trust as an essential factor for school collaboration as it serves as the ‘glue that sticks together existing capacity so that it could be made to work collectively’. Indeed, Hadfield and Chapman (2009) note that creating specific conditions for between-school collaboration is instrumental in supporting individuals to develop agency. These conditions for collaboration are further emphasised by Poortman, Brown, and Schildkamp (2022), who highlight that effective facilitation, clear goals, and strong leadership in school-to-school collaboration are essential for achieving successful outcomes.

In the Irish context, the principles laid out in the Looking at Our Schools (LAOS) Framework (DE, 2022) align with these desired conditions for school-to-school collaboration. For example, LAOS (DE, 2022) advocates for principals to actively participate in professional networks, to enhance their practice and create opportunities for shared PL. This emphasis on networking and shared PL is consistent with the distributed leadership and collaborative inquiry highlighted in Armstrong and Brown's work and the relational conditions identified by Hadfield and Chapman (2009) (for example, developing trust and balancing the distribution of leadership roles). Overall, the alignment of these studies highlights the importance of creating conditions—such as trust, shared purpose, distributed leadership and effective external facilitation—that empower stakeholders to develop agency and influence their future practice (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Next is a synthesis of this research (Table 2.4) with particular attention to factors supporting a diverse stakeholder group (SNAs, teachers, and principals) to collaborate to develop inclusive education.

Table 2.4 Key Features of School-to-School Collaboration (Adapted from Source: Armstrong and Brown, 2022, pp. 3-7)

Key Feature	Description
Purpose and Focus	Collaboration should be underpinned by a clear, shared purpose that informs decision-making and actions. This purpose should align with the context of the schools and ensure that activities are focused on achievable common goals.
Relationships and Trust	Trust is crucial for productive relationships. To nurture and develop trust, norms and protocols must be established to govern social interaction. Structures regarding conflict and negotiation, building respect, and developing agreed-upon communication systems must also be developed.
Critical Dialogue	Critical dialogue that challenges attitudes about practices should include purposeful activities. It should include opportunities to hear alternative perspectives and create a forum for quality and meaningful professional dialogue.
Collaborative Inquiry	Collaborative inquiry allows stakeholders to collaborate, challenge attitudes, pose questions, and consider knowledge to create new collective knowledge. Inquiry and investigation are encouraged, expected, and modelled for collective meaning-making.
Distributed Leadership	Distributed leadership across the schools and within the collaboration is emphasised. Formal leaders (school principals and external facilitation) provide direction, support, motivation, and feedback and encourage bottom-up leadership. Distributed leadership empowers individuals to take on leadership roles, developing their agency as they contribute to decision-making.
Accountability	Internal accountability uses evidence and data to identify priorities, evaluate decisions, establish areas for investigation, and monitor progress. It fosters shared responsibility.
Power Dynamics	Recognise power dynamics and address inequities among participating schools and stakeholders. Create a democratic culture and bring together diverse people and ideas.
Critical Reflection	Critical Reflection makes practices that are taken for granted open for scrutiny. Critical reflection can help stakeholders explore alternative approaches and lead to practice innovation.
External Facilitation	External facilitation contributes to creating an environment that supports critical reflection and inquiry. They can mediate conflicts, provide support, and encourage a culture of trust and openness.

Table 2.4 highlights that school-to-school collaboration demands a thorough understanding of influencing factors (Armstrong and Brown, 2022). As Ainscow et al., (2012) suggest, bringing schools together is not straightforward, and success rests on

navigating the diverse challenges of collaborative efforts. It also requires a thorough understanding of collaboration within schools.

2.6.3 Collaboration Within Schools

Irish educational policies, such as LAOS (DE, 2022) and the IEF (NCSE, 2011), emphasise the importance of whole-school collaboration within schools for inclusion and school improvement. However, despite this emphasis, collaboration sometimes falls short of being truly inclusive. For example, only certain voices within the school community—primarily teachers—are often involved in these discussions. In contrast, others, such as SNAs, are frequently excluded (RyanSheehan, 2023). This selective engagement is evident in Irish policy, such as LAOS (DE, 2022), where the valuable role of SNAs in collaboration for school improvement is notably absent. Such omissions can undermine the goals of inclusive education by reinforcing hierarchical structures and limiting the diversity of perspectives in within-school collaboration. A recent mixed-methods study by RyanSheehan (2023), involving teachers ($n=56$) and SNAs ($n=56$) in the Irish context, demonstrates that despite policy emphasis on whole-school collaboration for inclusive education, frustrations persist regarding the inclusion of all key educational stakeholders. As RyanSheehan (2023) points out, joint collaborative PL opportunities involving teachers and SNAs could foster a more inclusive school environment. For example, in Finland, fostering active participation and trust among school assistants and other key educational stakeholders led to a positive school environment (Sirkko, Sutela and Takala, 2022). Weekly team meetings attended by teachers and support staff created a platform where support staff developed collective agency and felt empowered to initiate school projects. This inclusive approach towards support staff cultivated a positive school culture, where everyone became ‘supporters of pupils and collaborators in inclusive education’ (Sirkko, Sutela and Takala, 2022, p.8).

However, challenges within school-teacher collaboration are also noted, as it can sometimes become a top-down process where teachers are expected to align with predefined standards (Barron, Gorman and Looney, 2023). In these instances, teachers may focus more on meeting externally imposed criteria (within policy) rather than exercising their professional judgement and creativity. Barron, Gorman and Looney (2023) argue that the managerial model of teacher professionalism—emphasising accountability, standardisation, and compliance with external evaluations—often dominates, which can

marginalise those who do not conform to this framework. They suggest that a shift towards a more democratic model of teacher professionalism—one that values teacher autonomy, broader collaboration with various stakeholders, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives—could enhance the effectiveness of collaboration (Barron, Gorman and Looney, 2023). Ní Bhroin and King (2020) emphasised the need for policy and leadership to focus on the collaborative process required to support IEP planning. Their findings emphasise how accountability to the product outlined in policy (for example, the IEP) can take precedence over the process required (for example, collaboration). The authors drew particular attention to often overlooked practices intrinsic to team functioning, such as establishing roles and responsibilities and developing communication skills and placed particular responsibility on school leadership to support collaborative PL for inclusive education.

2.7 Collaborative Professional Learning (PL) and Inclusive Education

The transformative impact of collaborative PL on empowering teachers has been widely acknowledged (King, 2019; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021; King and Holland, 2022). However, in the often-hectic environments of schools, such collaborative opportunities are frequently scarce (Ainscow, 2007). While time is essential, fostering critical reflection is vital to support creativity and nurture teachers' commitment to holistic education (Sugrue, 2002). Despite the significance of critical reflection and dialogue in enabling effective PL (Parker, Patton and O'Sullivan, 2016) teachers frequently struggle to allocate sufficient time to engage in these essential practices (Brennan and Gorman, 2023; King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). The challenge is compounded by the task of changing mindsets and generating new knowledge (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Brennan and Gorman, 2023). If, as Mac Ruairc (2016) suggests, the battle for inclusive education will be won in the hearts and minds of teachers, then it is necessary to ensure that teachers are given the necessary time and resources to collaborate and learn with teachers and fellow key educational stakeholders.

2.7.1 Teacher PL: The Policy Context

Professional Learning is recognised as an evolving process (Huberman, 1989). This idea is particularly relevant for teachers who have different learning needs at various stages of their careers (King, 2016). In Ireland, the implementation of Cosán (Irish for Pathway) by

the Teaching Council [TC] in 2016 marked a pivotal juncture for teacher PL. It is the first national framework (TC, 2016) for guiding and supporting teacher PL (King and Nihill, 2019). Cosán acknowledges the influence of school context on PL needs and recognises the necessity for diverse formal and informal learning opportunities (TC, 2016). The policy identifies six key learning areas, allowing teachers to consider various pathways for learning (TC, 2016). Inclusive education is one area of a focus for ‘improving their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of students’ needs’ (TC, 2016, p.18). Furthermore, Circular 0009/2021 (DE, 2021) outlines how SETs in mainstream and DEIS schools and special class or special school teachers can access a fully funded Post-Graduate Diploma Programme of PL for SEN through six national HEIs. The Post-Graduate Diploma in SEN provides teachers with eight weeks of release from their school context to engage in teacher PL while a substitute teacher is placed in their classroom. However, class teachers cannot avail themselves of the accredited teacher PL despite being a cohort that has called for more support to build their confidence and capacity to support all learners (Travers et al., 2010; Rose et al., 2015). Classroom teachers have reported that they do not always have the opportunity to develop expertise in inclusive education in the mainstream setting (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020).

While the TC promotes and ‘supports the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their careers’ (TC, 2016, p.16), Ireland does not mandate ongoing teacher PL post-induction and incentives for continuing education are limited, exacerbated in 2011 by reduced salary benefits for accredited postgraduate education amid economic austerity (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023). A pattern between teacher PL and economic conditions emerged when mandatory non-contact teaching time (33 hours), known as *Croke Park* hours in Ireland, was introduced as part of pay negotiations during the same economic downturn (GOI, 2010). *Croke Park* hours can address needs within the school context, where some but not all can be used for promoting PL, engaging in planning meetings or providing additional supervision (DE, 2011a). *Croke Park* hours are important for the key educational stakeholders of this study as they are offered as an incentive for voluntary participation and a means for school principals to provide organisational support for PL (King, 2011). Interestingly, despite the barriers that a lack of incentives for teacher PL might bring, recent research in the Irish context highlights that there are ‘high levels of teacher engagement with professional development’ (Broderick, 2019, p.94).

However, teachers' engagement in teacher PL in Ireland has become synonymous with formal DE-mandated 'input' or one-off 'transmission' seminars (King and Nihill, 2019). These seminars can present a 'technical rational approach to teaching and learning instead of one which more accurately represents its complexity' (King, Ní Bhroin and Prunty, 2018, p. 616). The focus of these one-off training seminars is usually centrally designed using standardised 'scripts' delivered by teacher support services such as Oide (formerly PDST) and NCSE. Oide usually focuses on introducing DE priority policies, such as SSE (DE, 2012; 2016b; DE, 2022) or new curriculum developments like 'The Primary Language Curriculum' (PLC) (DE, 2019). Senge (1989) has coined such 'in-service' courses as changing the educational landscape but not how things are operated. While mandatory seminars may appear efficient, they frequently lack meaningful collaboration and fail to lead to substantial changes in practice (Fullan, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2011; Owen, 2014). In a system where teachers are accustomed to mandatory PL leading important change because 'attention is directed precisely to what is done... [and] the way they do it' (Foucault, 1984, quoted in Bacchi, 2009, p. 32), the lack of prioritisation of inclusive education is evident when it does not receive the same attention. For example, with the IEF (NCSE, 2011), which provided a pathway for schools to evaluate and reflect on inclusive education through themes and linked to SSE (DE, 2012; 2016b; DE, 2022)—no mandatory teacher PL was rolled out in this area. As a result, many schools were unaware of the existence of the IEF (NCSE, 2011) or that it could be used to align with SSE policies and procedures (Brennan, 2017). Therefore, the IEF (NCSE, 2011) might have lost momentum compared to other policy changes. This highlights an apparent lack of value at the system level, despite international recognition that inclusive education and equity should drive curriculum development and whole-school capacity building (UNESCO, 2017).

The challenges of traditional one-size-fits-all PL for teachers resulting in change are well documented (Little, 2002) and raise questions regarding mandatory versus voluntary teacher PL. Regardless of whether participation is compulsory or optional, Dewey (1933) highlighted that it is the process of critical reflection that determines growth and understanding within teacher PL. However, critics argue that compulsory teacher PL may only demand presence without active engagement, as it often lacks the critical elements necessary for meaningful development (Owen, 2014). For instance, administrators often gather teachers from similar school contexts for one-off input sessions in mandatory

curriculum-focused PL. This approach fails to acknowledge the non-linear nature of PL, where growth and understanding do not follow a straightforward path but rather a complex process (King, Poekert and Pierre, 2023). Also, inclusive education demands that teachers confront their attitudes, biases, and deep-rooted assumptions regarding learners (Liasidou, 2008). This has caused Parker, Patton and O' Sullivan (2016) to emphasise that simply gathering teachers in the same space does not guarantee meaningful critical dialogue that leads to professional growth. Joyce and Showers (2002) highlight the drawbacks of relying solely on off-site PL experiences. They argue that challenges in applying newly acquired knowledge in the classroom may stem from inadequacies in 'in-service training' rather than the learning capacities of teachers themselves (Joyce and Showers, 2002). Recent researchers have emphasised the importance of learning within school contexts (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). They advocate for establishing safe and supportive learning environments with critical features such as dialogue, reflection, and inquiry, where teachers can communicate without fear of judgement (Deglau and O'Sullivan, 2006; Gonçalves et al., 2022).

2.7.1.1 An Inquiry Approach

Central to teacher PL is using inquiry to overcome barriers and engage in critical activity for inclusive education. Messiou and Ainscow (2015) highlighted findings from a three-year study conducted in three European countries—England, Portugal, and Spain—emphasising the use of student voices to drive teacher PL. The study involved collaborative action research in eight diverse secondary schools (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015). Teachers, students, and researchers worked together to collect student views and use them to inform teaching practices. The research showed that engaging with student perspectives stimulated critical reflection and experimentation among teachers. This led to significant changes in attitudes, knowledge and values, fostering a more inclusive educational environment (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015). Although they focused on using student voices for teacher development, their inquiry approach offered a framework for enhancing inclusive education capacity within schools. The framework focused on collaborative idea-sharing, critical reflection, and active experimentation so that a common language emerged, ultimately leading to changes in practices and attitudes (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015). Building relationships is crucial for fostering trust for innovation (Bryk and Schneider,

2002) so teachers feel safe to experiment with alternative methods, bridging the knowledge-practice gap (Hick et al., 2019).

Further research by Messiou and Ainscow (2020) coined the term ‘inclusive inquiry’ that again focused on the importance of teacher PL for developing inclusive education. It reiterated that context-based inquiry could advance inclusive education, especially when evidence (student voice) is involved. However, they strongly noted that such inquiry-based practice required developing more effective collaboration within schools and significant support from school leadership, such as encouraging and modelling enthusiasm for staff experimentation. Similar to Ainscow and Sandill (2010), they reinforced the importance of teacher PL for inclusive education as a social process instead of one where different products or initiatives are being implemented. However, in the Irish context, not every professional is included in this social process, with SNAs often being excluded from school-based PL focused on inclusive education.

2.7.2 SNA PL: The Policy Context

It’s like you’re the ugly sister in the Cinderella story.... We speak of equality and inclusion, but teachers are held in esteem by the Department, while SNAs are just seen as less than. (Linda O’Sullivan, SNA, quoted in Lanigan, 2021).

In recognition of the vital role of non-teaching support staff in developing inclusive education, research both nationally and internationally continues to identify the need to enhance their PL opportunities (Logan, 2001; Daly et al., 2016; Giangreco, 2021; Antinluoma, Ilomäki and Toom, 2022). However, SNAs face significant challenges in accessing adequate PL opportunities due to a policy focus on merely understanding their role (DE, 2017a; DE, 2024). For instance, the GOI (2011) ‘Value for Money Review’ emphasised the need for PL specifically for the care role of SNAs but omitted their broader responsibilities towards inclusive education (NCSE, 2011). Subsequent policies, such as circular DE (30/2014), continued this emphasis on the care role despite evidence of an expanded scope of duties (Logan, 2006; Keating and O’Connor, 2012). Mixed-methods research on TAs in England ($n=13$) and SNAs in Ireland ($n=17$) revealed differences in PL opportunities and working patterns (Rose and O’Neil, 2009). TAs in England collaborated more with teachers and had evolving roles in pedagogy, often taking on active teaching responsibilities alongside support tasks. In contrast, SNAs in Ireland who do not have any

formal teaching role expressed dissatisfaction with their limited PL opportunities, particularly when PL did not align with their duties. Those who engaged in PL felt more confident but were still frustrated by this misalignment (Rose and O’Neil, 2009).

This has led to calls for a clear policy on SNA PL (Kerins et al., 2018). In a study conducted by Kerins et al., (2018) involving SNAs ($n=90$) and principals ($n=19$), there was agreement on the vital role of ongoing SNA PL in benefiting students, enhancing the capacity of SNAs, and fostering a deeper recognition of their contributions within schools (Kerins et al., 2018). However, SNAs encountered barriers, including financial constraints, time limitations, and logistical travel challenges in accessing PL (Kerins et al., 2018), which are still noted today in the recent SNAWDU report (DE, 2024). While it is evident there is now a greater emphasis and momentum towards providing PL opportunities for SNAs, it is still predominantly focused on their isolated care role (DE, 2024). There is also evidence that context-based PL for SNAs has focused on adherence to safety protocols and equipment familiarity rather than fostering the critical dialogue and reflective practices required for developing inclusive education (Kerins et al., 2018). This simplistic approach to PL might undermine their potential to support the hidden curriculum, where unspoken attitudes and values shape school culture. It can also further marginalise SNAs, reinforcing their roles as peripheral by keeping them focused on logistical ‘busy work’ and away from more complex discussions on inclusive education (Antinluoma, Ilomäki and Toom, 2022). Establishing sustained PL opportunities involving SNAs and other key educational stakeholders could be instrumental in addressing these issues. A whole-school community approach can facilitate the development of a shared understanding of inclusive education and harness everyone's collective responsibility for an inclusive school culture (NCSE, 2024). However, if SNAs are to be included in an interprofessional PL community, issues of power would need to be considered.

2.8 Power

Fostering interprofessional collaboration for inclusive education presents challenges intertwined with power dynamics within hierarchical school structures (Hatcher, 2005). Similar to agency within this study, power is not something one has but is developed through interactions with others and so is ‘produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another’ (Foucault, 1978,

p. 93). In this way, power will be present in all interactions and must be acknowledged. The role of the SNA is often regarded as susceptible to power dynamics, with some characterising SNAs as being the 'least powerful staff assigned to the least powerful students' in schools (Logan, 2008, p.9). This lack of power is evident in interactions with policies that position SNAs as 'under the direction of the teacher' (DE, 2014, p.16). As a result, *the National Training Programme for SNAs* emphasises this aspect of the circular so that SNAs can fully understand the boundaries and possibilities of their role (University College Dublin (UCD), 2021). However, the extent of these possibilities can be limited and heavily reliant on teachers' attitudes (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021).

Interestingly, the NCSE review (2018) placed SNAs as 'under the direction of and in *collaboration* with teaching staff' (NCSE, 2018, p.92). The broadening to include 'in collaboration with' emphasises a more democratic culture where inclusive education depends on effective collaboration at all system levels (Ainscow, 2020). The building of more democratic cultures envisaged in NCSE (2018) aligns with Dewey's (1944) democratic principles, emphasising the need for collective decision-making within a group. For this to happen in this research, open participation was prioritised and centred on interaction, engagement, critical discussion, and problem-solving so there is a collective will to develop inclusive education (NCSE, 2024). Encouraging democratic interprofessional collaboration between SNAs and teachers could alleviate hierarchical power dynamics and move the Irish education system towards the capacity building needed to realise the vision outlined in the UNCRPD (UN, 2007).

To alleviate power dynamics, a culture where time is given to developing trust (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) and organisational structures, such as establishing roles and responsibilities (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020) and ensuring all staff have opportunities to contribute and use their expertise, is essential (Miles and Ainscow, 2011). As a result, the literature recommends the importance of values, critical reflection, and inquiry in addressing power imbalances (Brookfield, 2009). Understanding how power dynamics influence professional practice recognises that contextual factors can impact our interactions with other stakeholders (Brookfield, 2009). Through critical reflection, key educational stakeholders can acknowledge the pervasiveness of power and become aware of and challenge oppressive aspects (for example, SNAs performing menial tasks) that once might have been accepted and considered normal (Foucault, 1980). By exploring how

power is always present in interactions (Foucault, 1980) there is an opportunity to move from power-controlling people to being instrumental in collaborating with them (Brookfield, 2009). This way, collaborative approaches focusing on critical reflection can utilise power to unite school communities around a common purpose and build trusting relationships (Pantić and Florian, 2015). School leaders who can break down hierarchical barriers and promote a culture of mutual trust, respect and collaboration can develop shared leadership where all stakeholders are valued and empowered (Nadeem, 2024). However, to do so, leadership must play a fundamental role in setting the conditions and culture to support collaborative efforts for developing inclusive education.

2.9 Leadership

Nurturing a supportive, inclusive environment means creating democratic cultures (Dewey, 1944) that focus aligning values of all key educational stakeholders (NCSE, 2024). A recent qualitative study in Ireland examined the pivotal role of leadership in fostering teacher collaboration among six post-primary school principals (Moynihan and O'Donovan, 2022). These principals facilitated collaboration by providing opportunities for joint work, promoting shared leadership roles, and encouraging team-based learning among teachers (O' Sullivan, 2011). Such practices improved relationships among teachers and instilled confidence in their teaching methods. However, the transition to collaborative practices encountered resistance, particularly when principals tried to introduce classroom observation to stimulate inquiry and critical dialogue (UNESCO, 2021). These barriers highlight the importance of leadership in guiding change patiently and demonstrating openness, passion, and clear communication to promote collaborative practice effectively (Moynihan and O'Donovan, 2022).

Leadership advocacy for collaboration is critical in fostering inclusive and equitable education systems (EASNIE, 2020). Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020) highlight that inclusive leaders create the relational conditions necessary for open and constructive dialogue, which is fundamental to fostering collaboration. Advocacy for collaboration requires leaders to promote democratic values within schools, aligning with the distributed leadership model (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). By modelling inclusive practices and prioritising equity, leaders can ensure that all voices—teachers, SNAs, principals—are valued and elevated in decision-making processes (Pantić and Florian, 2015). Moreover, leadership advocacy must address

power dynamics that often stifle collaboration, ensuring that all participants feel empowered to contribute meaningfully (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). This involves not only promoting joint decision-making but also providing the necessary resources, time, and support for stakeholders to engage in reflective practices and shared inquiry (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). For example, school leaders play a pivotal role in articulating a shared inclusive vision, motivating staff to align their efforts, and sustaining inclusive education through ongoing collaboration (Brennan, King and Travers, 2019). Effective leaders can foster these environments by creating opportunities for staff to access context-based PLCs that emphasise collaborative inquiry and shared learning (EASNIE, 2020). Such collaborative PL is shown to enable teachers to collectively address challenges and co-construct solutions, enhancing teacher agency and improving pedagogical practices (King and Holland, 2022). Leaders also play a pivotal role in bridging gaps between policy and practice, ensuring that collaborative efforts are not only initiated but sustained through continuous support and strategic planning (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Leaders must, therefore, not only build trust and mutual responsibility but also advocate for tailored PL opportunities that align with the school and community needs (King Travers and McGowan, 2021). As Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020) assert, PL is a cornerstone of sustainable, inclusive leadership, ensuring that collaborative practices remain dynamic and responsive.

By embedding collaborative values into school culture and policies, leaders can help overcome barriers to inclusive education (EASNIE, 2020; King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). The importance of pacing change is central to this process because collaboration is complex and can occur along a continuum, starting with basic sharing of planning and gradually evolving into more sophisticated forms of collaboration, such as sharing resources, teaching strategies, observations, evidence of student learning, feedback, and improvements (Figure 2.1) (O' Sullivan, 2011).

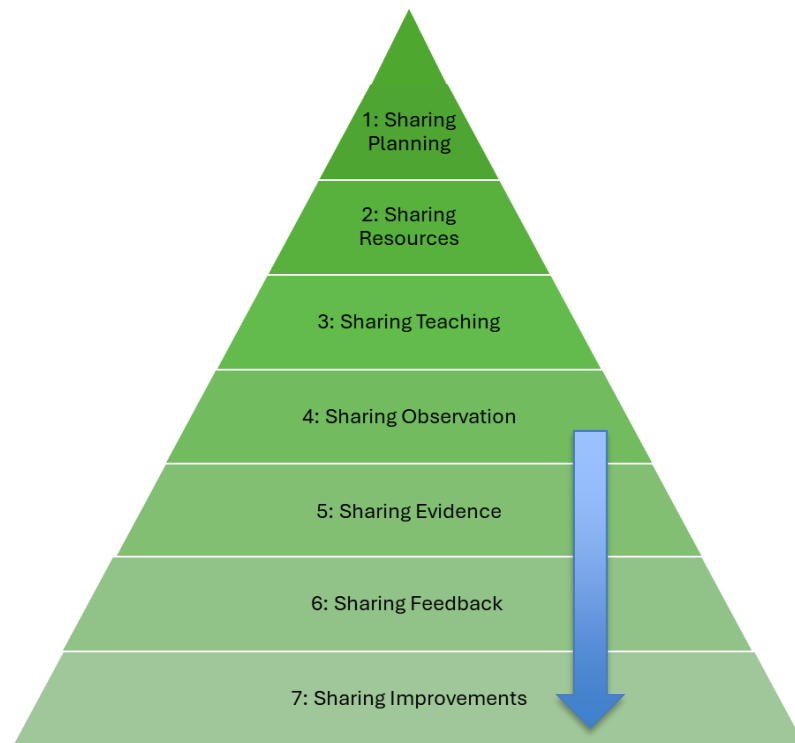


Figure 2.1 Conceptual Model for Learning Collaborative Practice (Source: O' Sullivan, 2011, p.121).

The 'Conceptual Model for Learning Collaborative Practice' suggests that effective collaboration goes beyond basic information sharing, necessitating substantial time and effort to cultivate deeper engagement with teaching and learning practices (O'Sullivan, 2011). Therefore, it acknowledges that schools are complex systems, and any efforts to implement change must consider the diverse challenges at different levels within the school context (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). This process requires a distributed leadership model, emphasising democratic, collaborative relationships over positional authority. Distributed leadership is crucial for fostering a sustainable culture of cooperation within schools (Spillane, 2006; Bush and Glover, 2014).

2.9.1 Distributed Leadership and Agency

Distributed leadership is considered essential for inclusive education because the isolated efforts of individuals cannot effectively develop it alone (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). Schools with 'inclusive cultures' largely operate from a distributed leadership model that includes extensive support of staff collaboration, joint problem-solving and efforts to extend similar values and commitments to students, parents, and other community stakeholders (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). A distributed leadership model fosters the

development of agency among key educational stakeholders by empowering them to take ownership of their roles and actively contribute to the shared goals of inclusive education (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015). This approach aligns closely with the recent NCSE policy advice paper (2024, p. 28), which recognises the need for:

shared understanding, shared responsibility, and shared decision-making processes with all partners that include parents/guardians, school leaders, teachers, SNAs, stakeholders with the voice and needs of the child.....as a paramount consideration

Arguably, this policy advice requires a distributed leadership model, as the success of empowering individuals to participate in cultures of shared decision-making is dependent on democratic values that, in turn, help develop agency (Pantić and Florian, 2015).

However, challenges arise when power dynamics within schools hinder the effective empowerment of others (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). A recent qualitative study conducted in both the Irish and Icelandic contexts sheds light on these challenges, revealing a significant gap between policy promotion and the reality of distributed leadership in schools (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor, 2017). Middle leaders involved in the study expressed limited influence, indicating that distributed leadership was often imposed and akin to licensed leadership (King and Stevenson, 2017) rather than shared (Spillane, 2006). Some refer to this as a negative of collaboration, where power reinforces hierarchical school structures, so it becomes forced and 'contrived collegiality' (Chapman, 2019, p.7). On the other hand, in cultures that offer support and shared decision-making, teachers and support staff can collectively exercise agency to tailor policies to fit their practices (Antinluoma, Ilomäki and Toom, 2022). Therefore, developing the necessary conditions for key educational stakeholder agency is pivotal in fostering collaboration between schools, as it empowers individuals to influence and shape their future actions (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009).

This study adopts a view of agency as context-dependent, evolving through the interaction between individual efforts, available resources, and school conditions (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Burke and Lehane's (2023) systematic review of 211 studies on curriculum integration in Ireland demonstrates that teacher agency is shaped by both personal factors—such as attitudes, knowledge, and values—and broader contextual elements like school culture and resource availability. They identified barriers to agency,

including accountability pressures, policy demands, and limited access to PL and collaboration. In Turkey, Polatcan's (2021) quantitative study of 283 schools highlights the critical role of distributed leadership in fostering teacher agency. The study found that teachers under a distributed leadership are more likely to act with agency, which enhances their engagement in collaborative activities, critical reflection, and innovation of practice (Polatcan, 2021). School principals must create environments that enable stakeholders to exercise agency by involving them in decision-making, ensuring resource access, and promoting collaboration (Burke and Lehane, 2023). Irish policy, such as LAOS (2022), emphasises that empowering others is central to effective school leadership. Therefore, this study's focus on the role of school principals from diverse contexts (disadvantaged, special, and mainstream) is particularly relevant to supporting the development of inclusive education.

2.9.2 Leadership and Context

Research in the Irish context noted a stark contrast between the leadership experiences and challenges principals face in disadvantaged schools compared to those in other mainstream contexts (King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). While all principals in the study aimed to provide a broad and balanced education, their respective school contexts' social and cultural environment significantly influenced their ability to enact social justice leadership. The principals of the schools who did not serve the same level of disadvantaged students tended to receive support from their communities, which facilitated their efforts in providing for their students (King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). In contrast, principals in disadvantaged schools often faced barriers such as teachers not fully understanding their contexts, which hindered their ability to enact meaningful changes despite their intentions and efforts (King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). This reinforces the message that schools cannot remedy societal inequalities (Bernstein, 1970). However, while schools cannot solve society's problems, practices in schools should not reinforce inequalities (Mac Ruairc, 2009). Instead, social justice leadership advocates for a collaborative and proactive approach, urging school leaders to engage in activism within and beyond their schools to foster sustainable social change guided by critical dialogue (Berkovich, 2014). So, PL needs to incorporate 'robust professional discourses' (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015, p. 638) and as a result, further analysis of PLCs was required to support this study's design.

2.10 Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

Professional Learning Communities [PLCs], a widely adopted approach, hold the transformative power to support teacher PL (Kennedy, 2014; King and Feeley, 2014; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). Their international success in supporting school improvement agendas (Harris and Jones, 2010) and national impact on inclusive pedagogical instruction, particularly differentiation by choice (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021), is a testament to their potential. A BES of 97 international studies on teacher PL, including PLCs, conducted by Timperley et al., (2007), revealed that PLCs foster teacher PL through critical dialogue that challenges attitudes and, by utilising external expertise, introduces new perspectives. Stoll et al., (2006) describe PLCs as:

...an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, ...to enquire into their own practice and learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning.

This thesis aligns with this definition, which places students at the centre of the collaborative process and extends participation beyond teachers to include support staff and other key educational stakeholders. This perspective prioritises student learning, ensuring every student is supported and valued within schools (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006; Ainscow, 2024). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that, as Kennedy (2014) highlights, PLCs are malleable. While this adaptability allows PLCs to respond to diverse needs, they can be shaped to serve different purposes—some of which may unintentionally reinforce existing norms or promote compliance rather than innovation (Kennedy, 2014). To ensure that PLCs do not lead to fostering conformity or undermining key educational stakeholder agency, it is essential to maintain a clear focus on the purpose of the PLC and ensure they include certain characteristics (Stoll et al., 2006).

Creating effective PLCs is complex, relying on the commitment and persistence of stakeholders (DuFour, 2004), particularly as PLCs need to evolve to address contextual dilemmas (Bolam et al., 2005). Bolam et al., (2005, p. i), in their review of 26 case studies in the English context, identified eight characteristics of PLCs, including 'shared values and vision', 'collective responsibility for pupils' learning', 'collaboration focused on learning', 'individual and collective PL', 'reflective professional inquiry', 'openness', 'networks and partnerships', 'inclusive membership', and 'mutual trust, respect, and support'. Brennan and Gorman (2023) and Stoll et al., (2006) stress inclusive membership involving diverse

stakeholders beyond teachers. The inclusive membership planned for this study extends across schools and professions, to develop the collective commitment required for inclusive education. Recognising the professionalism and autonomy of SNAs places value on their role and enhances their sense of ownership and commitment to the PLC's goals, ultimately supporting effective inclusive education. Harris and Jones (2010) emphasise systemic collaboration and networking to support change and ensure the adoption of innovative practices. They, along with others, highlight the importance of autonomy and agency within PLCs, where control over the learning focus and shared decision-making and common responsibility are crucial (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017).

O'Sullivan (2011) builds on Bolam et al., (2005) by emphasising supportive conditions and shared leadership for sustainable PLCs. Brennan and Gorman (2023) further expand on O'Sullivan's (2011) work by introducing design principles that support inclusive education, emphasising dialogue, inquiry, a focus on inclusion, and external support. Their research particularly highlights the critical role of external facilitation, such as university-school partnerships, in developing PLCs and Online Learning Communities [OLCs] (Brennan and Gorman, 2023). Consequently, they note the need for critical dialogue that challenges attitudes and carefully balances internal collaboration with external facilitation to bring fresh perspectives (Brennan and Gorman, 2023).

2.10.1 External Facilitation

External facilitation refers to the involvement of individuals—such as university-school partnerships or advisors from support services (for example, Oide or NCSE)—in guiding and supporting the development of PLCs. Effective external facilitators can bring objectivity and fresh perspectives by offering subjective observations and suggesting alternatives that may not be evident to those embedded in the busyness of school life (Gonçalves et al., 2022). Their specialised knowledge and experience, often grounded in research-based practices, can guide key educational stakeholders toward developing inclusive education within schools (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). Additionally, external facilitators can support the building of school capacity and key educational stakeholder agency by creating supportive environments that encourage collaboration, reflective

practice, and inquiry, all of which are essential for effective PL (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017; Gonçalves et al., 2022).

However, while external facilitation (in this case, from a university lecturer) can significantly contribute to developing PLCs and inclusive education, notable challenges arise, particularly within competing policy agendas. The increasing emphasis on performativity and accountability in education, driven by national and international pressures, can undermine the authentic collaboration crucial for effective school-university partnerships (Gorman and Furlong, 2023). As Gorman and Furlong (2023, p.207) highlight, policy needs to take better account and ‘consider how partnership [s] can be meaningfully created’. Schools, for instance, might feel compelled to meet policy standards, which can detract from their engagement in the deeper, more reflective dialogue necessary for true collaboration (Gorman and Furlong, 2023). In the case of ITE, only universities are mandated to engage in these partnerships, and this can lead to inconsistent involvement of schools with university personnel, possibly weakening these partnerships (Gorman and Furlong, 2023). As a result, the role of university partners and, specifically, in this research, the role of the external facilitator becomes increasingly complex. To navigate these challenges, there is a growing recognition that external facilitators—whether from universities or support services like Oide or the NCSE—may need to adopt a coaching approach (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017).

2.10.2 A Coaching Approach

A coaching approach involves a structured relationship where a coach assists in addressing challenges specific to an individual's context (Creasy and Paterson, 2005). Van Nieuwerburgh (2017, p. 5) defines coaching as a ‘conversation between two people...[that aims]...to support sustainable change’. Therefore, it is an approach that empowers others to take control of their learning and act with agency (Andrews and Munro, 2018). To achieve this, the coach encourages reflective practices, fostering an environment where critical dialogue and learning are prioritised (Creasy and Paterson, 2005). Butler (2024), in recent research in Irish schools, highlights the importance of the coach's role in fostering a supportive environment where strong relationships can be built. He notes that for a coaching culture to be effective, the coach must be attuned to the needs and contexts of the individuals they are supporting, ensuring that the coaching process is meaningful and

relevant (Butler, 2024). Andrews and Munro (2018) emphasise that adopting a coaching perspective involves a crucial shift from traditional expert-led solutions to a model that facilitates the development of agency. This shift is vital, especially where fostering agency can counterbalance the pressures of performativity and compliance (Andrews and Munroe, 2018). To extend this empowerment to all key educational stakeholders, the Interprofessional PLC should be designed to foster collaboration and support agency across diverse school contexts.

2.10.3 Design of the Interprofessional PLC

While research in PLCs offers common design characteristics, these, like the characteristics of school-to-school collaboration, must still be tailored to the specific conditions of each unique context (Bolam et al., 2005). Factors such as the phase of development, the size of the group, and the location are crucial in shaping the approach. For example, in interprofessional settings, it is essential to consider power dynamics and the roles of the individuals involved (Stoll et al., 2006). Addressing these power relationships and conflicts is critical to the collaboration's effectiveness, making it crucial to recognise and value these dynamics. Therefore, supporting the development of agency within the PLC will require emphasis on the interactions among key educational stakeholders, where establishing a supportive environment within the specific context will be crucial (Stoll et al., 2006). It will also be essential to provide time for discussions on past experiences (critical reflection), current conditions (practices), and future aspirations (inquiry) for inclusive education (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

The design of the PLC therefore considered (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015):

- Past Experiences: Harnessing key educational stakeholders' knowledge and experiences from previous PL and school practices.
- Present Considerations: Providing the necessary resources, time, and support structures to enable key educational stakeholders to engage effectively in PL and implement new practices.
- Future Aspirations: Encouraging key educational stakeholders to envision and work towards future goals for themselves and their school communities.

Adopting an ecological approach to key educational stakeholders' agency within the PLC better supported them as change agents (Pantić and Florian, 2015). This involved recognising the complexity of the contexts in which key educational stakeholders operated in and actively fostering an environment that empowers them to shape their attitudes, knowledge, and values for inclusive education. Doing so required attention to the meaningful activities participants would engage with (Desimone, 2009) and their content focus (Desimone, 2009; Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). A BES that involved systematically collecting and analysing data from multiple studies to draw comprehensive conclusions has called for greater content focus in PL models, including a focus on frameworks (Timperley et al., 2007). The framework used in this study espouses conditions for developing inclusive education explored in this chapter, particularly references to agency, collaboration, social justice, power, and critical reflection for developing inclusive education. For this reason, the framework chosen is the Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Action (MATAIPPA) Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), which will be explored next.

2.11 Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Action (MATAIPPA) Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015).

The MATAIPPA framework evolved from Pantić's (2015) Model of Teacher Agency for Social Justice to incorporate Florian and Black-Hawkins's (2011) Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action [IPPA] as a core expertise within teacher competence. The conceptual model for studying teacher agency for social justice (Pantić, 2015) was crafted by bringing together theories of agency (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 2000; Biesta and Tedder, 2007) and then applied to inclusive teaching pedagogy (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). While pedagogy might separate the work of teachers from SNAs who do not have a pedagogical role in schools (DE, 2014), in this framework, inclusive pedagogy challenges the idea of teaching being an isolated classroom activity (Pantić and Florian, 2015). It positions pedagogy as the need to develop the capacity of teachers to work with other professionals (for example, SNAs, principals, parents, students, HEI lecturers). Therefore, the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), much like the NCSE (2024) advice paper, advocates for increased collaboration and decision-making among stakeholders so that there is shared responsibility for developing inclusive education.

The PLC in this research study was underpinned by a slightly adapted version of Pantić and Florian's (2015) MATAIPPA Framework (Table 2.5). The adaptations add the key educational stakeholders involved and a focus on inclusive education to better reflect the Irish context (represented by yellow text). The next section will outline the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and justify its inclusion in this study, focusing on key educational stakeholders collaborating across school contexts for inclusive education.

Table 2.5 Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Action (MATAIPPA) Framework. (Adapted from Source: Pantić and Florian, 2015, p.344)

Aspect of Agency	Inclusive Practice
Purpose	Teachers', SNAs and principals' perceptions of their moral roles, sense of identity and motivation as agents of social justice and inclusive education. Teachers', SNAs and principals' understanding of social justice and inclusive education.
Competence	Teachers', SNAs and principals' understanding of broader social forces that influence, schooling and (micro-)political competence Teachers' practice of inclusive pedagogy, including: 1. Replacing deterministic views of ability with a concept of 'transformability'. 2. Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students. 3. Modelling new creative ways of working with and through others.
Autonomy	Teachers, SNAs and principals' beliefs about individual and collective efficacy 1. levels of confidence, control and resilience. 2. collaboration and collective agency for social justice and inclusive education. 3. levels of power and trust in teachers' SNA'S and principal relationships. 4. perceptions of school cultures and the principal's Leadership. 5. perceptions of Teachers', SNAs and principals' roles as school and system developers and participation in decision-making. 6. broader education policy and socio-cultural contexts.
Reflexivity	Teachers', SNAs and principals' capacity to articulate practical professional knowledge and justify actions. Teachers', SNAs and principals' meaning-making of the structures and cultures in their schools as sites for social transformation critical and open reflection on their assumptions, practices and exploration of alternatives.

In the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), a sense of purpose is defined as a 'commitment to and understanding of the principles of social justice, considered a necessary precondition for acting as agents of change' (Pantić and Florian, 2015, p.343). Social justice, deeply intertwined with values such as equity, justice, fairness, and equality (Brown, 2006; Berkovich, 2014; King and Travers, 2017), prompts individuals to examine their collective role in preventing actions and attitudes from further disadvantaging their school communities (King, Travers and McGowan, 2021). This study,

employing the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), offered a structured approach to exploring the attitudes, knowledge, and values of social justice, inclusive education and equity, particularly in assessing how societal factors can impact student participation (Ainscow et al., 2012; Grudnoff et al., 2017). Encouraging individuals to acknowledge barriers families face and adapt their actions accordingly may lead to positive implications for equitable outcomes (Grudnoff et al., 2017), aligning with the notion of 'thinking about actions' as pivotal for transforming practices (Bubb and Earley, 2010). Utilising the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) to contemplate the sense of purpose among key educational stakeholders could enhance their inclination to act with agency towards desired change and address societal inequalities (Brown, 2006), influencing perceptions of autonomy and collective efficacy within and between the school contexts (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009).

The competence aspect of the MATAIPPA Framework, as defined by Pantić and Florian (2015, p.343), emphasises the necessity for a 'deeper understanding of inclusive practices in various contexts', positioning the IPPA (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011) as a core competence for developing teachers as agents of change for social justice (Pantić and Florian, 2015). In the IPPA (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011), the expectation of differences among students, the capability and responsibility of all teachers to teach every student, and embracing collaboration as essential are all necessary assumptions that have significant implications for efficacy and collective agency (EASNIE, 2021). Low teacher efficacy, as evidenced, may hinder attitudes regarding one's ability to teach all students, collaborate effectively, or experiment with new practices (Sharma, Loreman and Forlin, 2012; Woodcock, Hitches and Manning, 2023). However, critical reflection, collaboration, and inquiry into IPPA (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011) can support the development of efficacy and agency for inclusive education (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021), influencing confidence, collaboration and resilience among key educational stakeholders. Contrary to fears of diminishing autonomy, meaningful collaborative opportunities can enhance and develop agency so key educational stakeholders are more confident in their ability to act autonomously and negotiate policy into practice (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015).

Additionally, reflexivity is an essential aspect of developing and influencing agency, as it involves considering and monitoring past and present individual practices and social contexts to creatively envisage alternatives and collaborating with others to bring about

transformation (Giddens, 1984). For SNAs, teachers, and principals, reflexivity enhances their capacity to articulate practical professional knowledge and justify their actions. This shift from merely implementing policies designed by others to critically examining and understanding the systematic conditions that shape practices enables key educational stakeholders to consider how their actions can develop more inclusive schools (Pantić and Florian, 2015). Reflexivity requires key educational stakeholders to critically reflect on their assumptions, practices, and the structures and cultures within their schools as sites for social transformation (Schön, 1983). Thus, the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) provides a structured approach to enhancing collective efficacy and leadership, fostering reflexivity, and developing agency within the diverse key educational stakeholders and their contexts.

2.12 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is essential for identifying and exploring themes in research (Berman, 2013). Developing a conceptual framework was an anchor, guiding the fundamental principles throughout the research process. This development relied heavily on a thorough literature review. My understanding of the conceptual framework evolved throughout the research process, serving as a tool for refining the research direction at various stages (Berman, 2013). The conceptual framework underpinning this study is informed by several key sources discussed in this chapter. Figure 2.2 outlines the key elements from this literature review that underpin this study (with associated references in Appendix C), visually representing the conceptual framework, its components, and the connections between them.

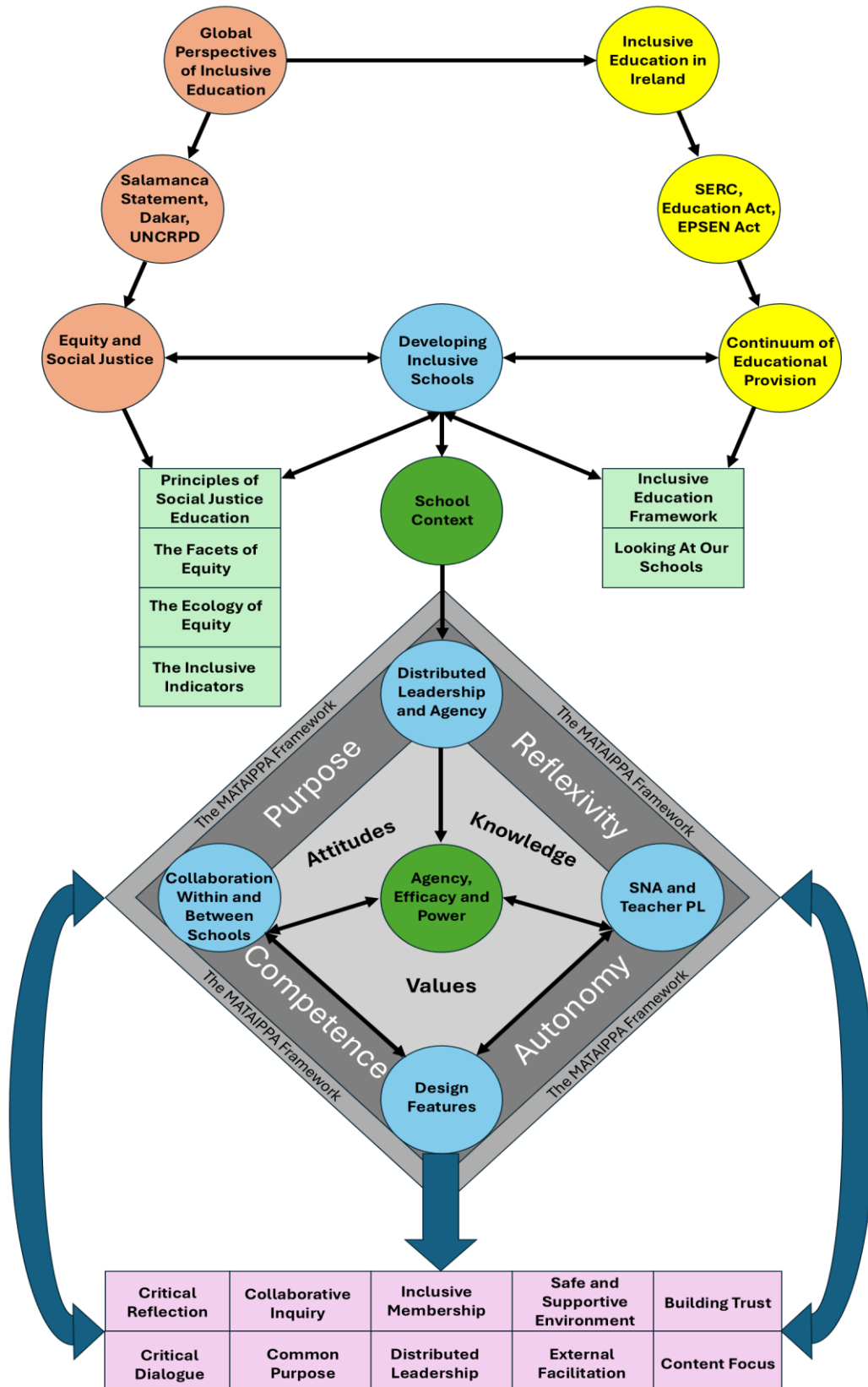


Figure 2.2 Conceptual Framework

2.13 Conclusion

In this literature review, a detailed analysis of research in inclusive education is provided to the reader. The relationship between inclusive education, equity, and social justice was outlined. Key considerations regarding characteristics supporting their development were provided, particularly using the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) to harness critical reflection and evidence for their progress. Explicit attention was drawn to collaboration between key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) and schools from diverse contexts (mainstream, special and disadvantaged). The importance of context in influencing inclusive education and PL was highlighted. A PLC model of PL (Kennedy, 2014) was proposed, and design features were examined to explore key educational experiences for developing inclusive education. Finally, The MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) was offered as a framework for the content focus of the PLC. Overall, the literature review shows the need for interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration in the context of Irish policy. It has also informed the research design, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research explored the experiences of collaboration between key educational stakeholders across different school contexts within a PLC focusing on developing inclusive education. The research design and methodology are outlined in this chapter, beginning first with the research aims and questions. The philosophical assumptions that influenced my theoretical position and their impact on the research design are discussed. The choice of a qualitative multi-site case-study approach and the need for purposeful sampling of the research participants in their educational contexts are justified. The multiple data generation methods are defined and their use in exploring the research questions are accounted for. Additionally, ethical considerations and measures to ensure the study's trustworthiness are detailed. Finally, the rationale for the data analysis method is explained, and the process of data handling is explored, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the methodological framework used in this research

3.2 Aims of the Research

A qualitative multi-site case-study approach was used to investigate whether collaboration between schools and key educational stakeholders within a PLC could lead to the development of inclusive education. The key educational stakeholders included SNAs, teachers, and principals. Each selected key educational stakeholder has a specific role in Irish schools towards supporting inclusive education. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were considered:

RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge and values toward inclusive education?

RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

3.3 Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are 'ways of looking at the world' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018, p.8). They are deeply rooted in a researcher's professional training and the scholarly communities they interact with. Making my beliefs visible involves explicitly acknowledging how I view the world, the philosophical assumptions I attend to, and the theoretical position underpinning my research problem (Creswell, 2008). By explicitly stating my philosophical beliefs, I establish a clear foundation for reflecting upon and defining how the research problem was framed, executed, and the results interpreted (Kuhn, 1962). This approach ensures a coherent alignment between my theoretical orientation and the practical aspects of the research process. As an 'insider researcher', it is particularly relevant that I disclose my philosophical stance as others may approach the same research problem differently, particularly if they espouse a different 'worldview' or theoretical paradigm (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Philosophical assumptions or worldviews (Creswell, 2008), or, as Kuhn (1962) suggested, 'paradigms,' can be viewed as a framework that a researcher may work within (Sobh and Perry, 2006). There is no agreed-upon definition of a paradigm, but it is generally accepted as the 'basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator' (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). These worldviews bring with them questions of ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), axiology (inherent values researchers bring to their work) and methodology (the methods involved in the process) (Crotty, 1998). When selecting a research paradigm for this investigation, careful consideration was given to matching my theoretical perspective to the purpose of the study (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018). To support me in mapping and informing the research design, I adopted Crotty's (1998, p.4) four elements of Design Framework to visually depict the relationship between the chosen epistemological stance (constructionism), the theoretical perspective or ontological stance (interpretivism), the methodology chosen (qualitative multi-site case study) and the data generation methods selected (PLC Meeting Transcriptions (PLC-T), Researcher Reflective Journal (PLC-RRJ), Participant Photographs, Participant Reflections (PLC-PR) and 13 post-PLC Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI) (Figure 3.1).

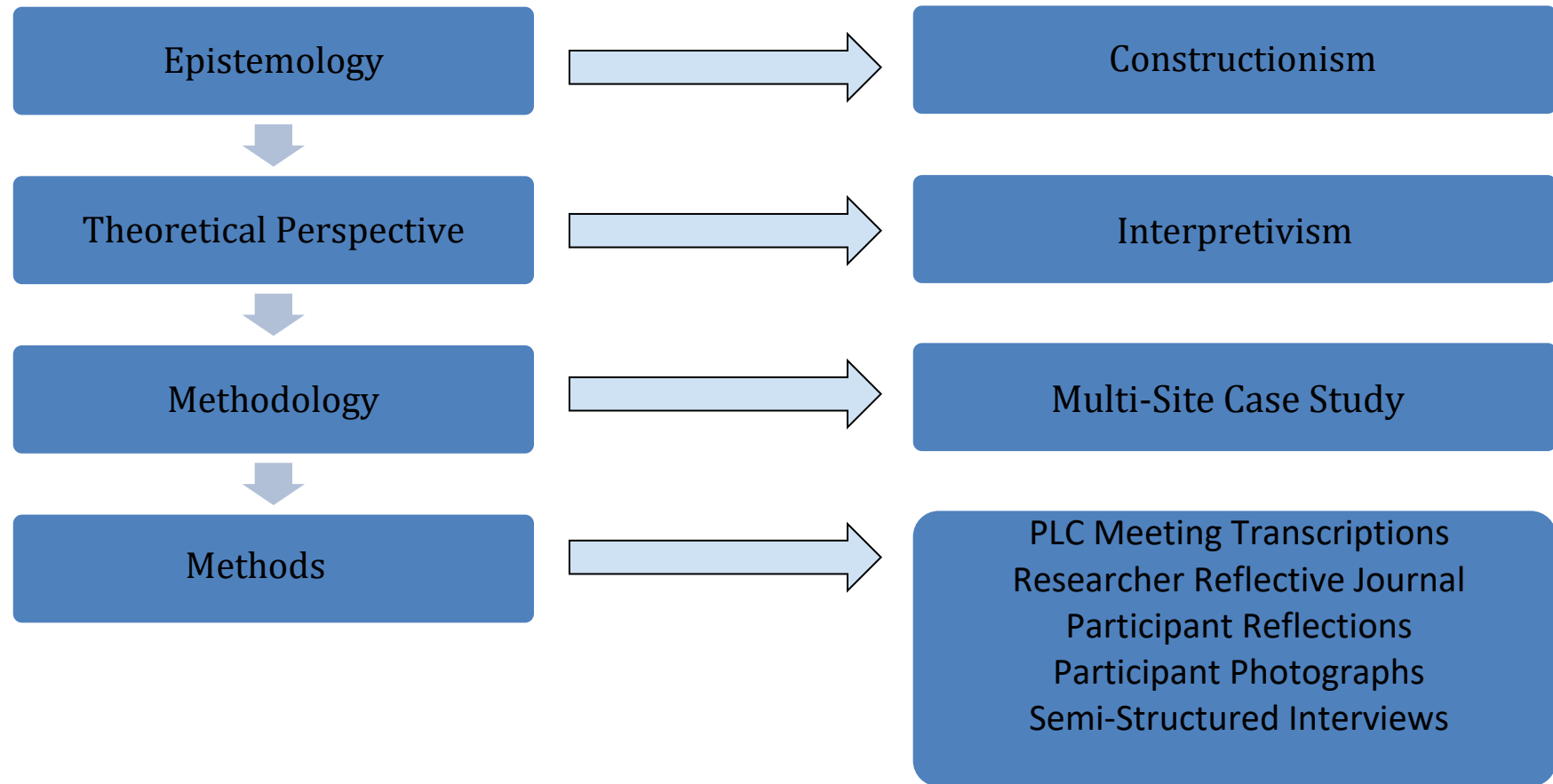


Figure 3.1 Four Elements of the Research Design Framework (Source: Crotty, 1998)

3.3.1 Epistemology

Epistemology governs 'the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis' (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Overall, epistemology focuses on how knowledge is acquired, shared and constituted (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018). Constructionism was deemed the theoretical perspective most relevant for this research as it aligns with my beliefs that every individual (key educational stakeholder) has a way of 'making sense of the world' and all forms are 'valid and respect-worthy as any other' (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). From a constructionist perspective, knowledge is not simply discovered but constructed through social interactions, ideas and events (Crotty, 1998). While constructionism and constructivism are similar in that both believe knowledge is constructed through interaction, slight differences exist (Crotty, 1998; Robson, 2011). Constructionism centres on how a collective group constructs knowledge, whereas constructivism focuses on the individual (Robson, 2011). This study was interested in ascertaining how key educational stakeholders described their experience of collaborating for inclusive education. Therefore, attention was placed on the collective construction of knowledge. The value of the group's co-construction of knowledge is linked with Ainscow's (2020, p. 14) views on the need to develop a 'collective responsibility' towards advancing inclusive education. It also aligns with my axiological beliefs on human agency, where individuals are more likely to develop collective efficacy if they have opportunities to discuss and develop shared beliefs (Bandura, 2001). Overall, I acknowledge that participants may alter their view of reality by being part of this research (Mertens, 2014).

The next section will discuss my view of reality (interpretivism). It will detail how my epistemological stance influenced my ontological views and informed my methodological approach.

3.3.2 Theoretical Perspectives

A theoretical or ontological perspective is the stance behind a methodological approach (Crotty, 1998). This study is rooted in the interpretive stance. The central underpinning of an interpretive paradigm is that there is more than one reality. Exploring multiple realities involves 'understanding the subjective world of human experience' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018, p.21). The purpose of investigating these shared human experiences is to search for 'culturally derived and historically situated

interpretations of the social lifeworld' (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). The interpretive paradigm aligns with my professional identity, where I do not view 'reality' as being 'out there' or 'isolated,' but as constructed through 'shared human experiences' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018, p.21). Therefore, I aimed to explore 'reality' by capturing the key educational stakeholders' descriptions and experiences of school-to-school collaboration for developing inclusive education. To represent the interpretations (multiple realities) and diversity of perspectives, I listened to 'the complex world of lived experience from participants' point of view' (Mertens, 2014, p. 16).

Much like the interpretive paradigm, my views are forward-looking, where 'behaviour with meaning' or 'new knowledge' can occur through social interaction (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, p.21). Indeed, selecting a PLC was purposeful as it is seen as a transformative model of PL (Kennedy, 2014), where the construction of knowledge can lead to 'effective action for change' (Crotty, 1998, p.157). This ideology reflects that of Archer (2000, p.17), who states that 'human interaction with the world constitutes the transcendental conditions of human development'. It also reinforces Fullan's (2003) thinking on educational change and increasing purposeful interactions between school staff. While this study is not concerned with generalisations, it acknowledges that additional learning and understanding can happen through the planned collaboration of key educational stakeholders in different contexts (Morgan, 2007). Therefore, a qualitative paradigm was selected to capture the lived experiences of key educational stakeholders whilst collaborating. A qualitative paradigm ensured a meaningful and deep exploration of the open-ended research questions (Morgan, 2007).

The next section will discuss the qualitative multi-site case study design chosen for the study and justifies its selection.

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is based on the idea that reality is not a single, objective truth but consists of various interpretations (Merriam, 1998, p.22). According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research views reality as something individuals create through interactions within their social environments. This perspective aligns with the epistemological and

theoretical framework of this study. The qualitative research sought a comprehensive view of key educational stakeholder experiences of interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration for developing inclusive education. It prioritises descriptive data over numerical data in data generation and analysis (Bryman, 2015). Therefore, a flexible methodological approach, like case study was required that would enable careful examination of the different key educational stakeholders and their diverse school contexts.

3.4.2 Case Study

A case study is an established research design used frequently in qualitative research methodologies (Robson, 2011; Yazan, 2015). Merriam's (1998, p.27) views a case as 'a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries'. Her approach encompasses a flexible research design that attends to qualitative data generation methods and has roots in the constructionism perspective. I attend to this broader flexible view of the case study approach where as long as I can 'fence in' my inquiry, I can name it a case (Merriam, 1998). The fence or boundaries around this study surround the three school sites (a disadvantaged school with a special class, a special and a mainstream school) within a single geographical region over a set time frame (see sections 1.3, 3.4.3, 3.5.1). Since this qualitative case study 'involves collecting and analysing data from several cases' (Merriam, 1998, p. 40), it is recognised as a multi-site case study. Multi-site qualitative case studies facilitate data analysis 'within' specific characteristics (schools and key educational stakeholders) whilst enabling a comparison of them (Jenkins et al., 2018). Therefore, attention is placed on this study's context and the possible variance of opinion among the interprofessional, and school contexts involved. Ensuring subjectivity was central to my decision-making within the PLC. It required ongoing reflection and making known the values I brought to the research (axiological beliefs). Indeed, constructionism emphasises the need for researchers to reflect on their influence on practices and perspectives in constructing meaning (Chamaz, 2008). This reflection meant developing awareness of my position as an inside researcher and subsequent influence on research participants.

3.4.3 Insider/Outsider Perspective

In this study, the teachers may have viewed me as an 'insider' because I was a teacher and had supported them and their schools with curriculum development with the

PDST (now Óide). In this role, I delivered PL to the teachers and principals of the school, focusing mostly on traditional transmissive models of PL such as workshops, courses, and seminars. Consequently, teachers might have expected a similar transmission-based style of delivery. Given these previous relationships and potential perceptions, I had to remain reflexive and avoid imposing my views on others (Mercer, 2007) (see section 1.3).

Mercer (2007), citing Merton (1972, p.28), notes that insider/outsider researcher status exists along a continuum where 'as situations involving different values arise, various statuses are activated, and the lines of separation shift'. Therefore, as SNAs were not involved previously in my work with the schools, I may have been seen as an outsider. However, due to my role as a teacher and HEI lecturer, they may have made assumptions about common inclusive values, and so may have seen me as an insider. To avoid being perceived as an expert or leader of the PLC, which could prevent others from acting with agency, I focused on the key features and literature on PLCs and PL (Figure 2.2). One key feature of a PLC that supports the creation of safe and supportive environments conducive to PL is the establishment of explicit roles and protocols that enable collective leadership and decision-making (Stoll et al., 2006) (Appendix U). The roles within the PLC included a facilitator, timekeeper, reflection leader and task leader. The facilitator chaired the meeting and ensured that turn-taking occurred. The timekeeper ensured specific time frames were adhered to for certain tasks. The reflection leader read reflections from the previous PLC, outlined further thoughts, and pointed everyone towards the reflection template to support them in the current PLC. The task leader reminded everyone of their task focus for the next day and the expectations for returning the task and articulated the process for feedback (Appendix I). These roles rotated so everyone got an opportunity to lead various aspects of the PLC. Additionally, I focused on coaching aspects, such as being a good listener, rephrasing questions, and picking up on nuances within PLC discussions (Creasy and Paterson, 2005). These coaching characteristics helped cultivate an environment where others were empowered to lead and act with agency, so meaningful dialogues could occur (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017). For example, the role of the SNA in Ireland is defined by policy as being 'under the direction of the teacher' (DE, 2014, p. 16). As a result, SNAs might have felt they were under the scrutiny of principals and teachers, responding to this perceived disciplinary power by providing agreeable answers (Foucault, 1980). However, to build efficacy, stakeholders need to feel they hold

power in a social context like the PLC (Pantić and Florian, 2015). Therefore, the PLC design and implementation were based on Pantić and Florian's (2015) MATAIPPA Framework (Appendix B), which emphasises the levels of power and trust in relationships and their impact on stakeholders' ability to act purposefully in developing inclusive education. Additionally, to mitigate possible power dynamics, principals were asked not to attend PLC2. This allowed SNAs and teachers to become more comfortable working together while still being supported to attend and participate by school leadership. Next, the study's participants and the sampling approach will be discussed.

3.5 Research Participants and Sampling

3.5.1 Sampling

As mentioned previously, this multi-site qualitative study sought specific schools and professions. Purposeful sampling was employed to seek specific characteristics (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018), such as the specific selection of schools (Table 3.1). The schools involved are those labelled by the DE as disadvantaged (DE, 2005; 2017) with a special class (NCSE, 2019), a mainstream school, and a designated special school (NCSE, 2019).

Table 3.1 Key Educational Stakeholders Employed in Each School Context

School One	School Two	School Three
Disadvantaged School (DEIS) with one special class	Mainstream School	Special School
11 SNAs	3 SNAs	24 SNAs
36 Teachers	20 Teachers	12 Teachers
1 Administrative Principal	1 Administrative Principal	1 Administrative Principal

The selection of schools was significant and purposeful as the schools were known to me through curriculum support in her role as a PDST advisor (now Oide) (see sections 1.3 and 3.4.3). The diversity of schools chosen was intentional, as it is advocated that special schools should have increased opportunities to share their expertise with others (Tilstone, Florian, and Rose, 1998; Day and Prunty, 2010; NCSE, 2011; EASNIE, 2022; NCSE, 2024), and that challenges associated with disadvantage should be considered when developing inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, it was hoped that schools

from different contexts would provide alternative perspectives on inclusive education (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Logistically, the schools selected were in close geographical proximity to take into consideration local contextual needs (Greany and Armstrong, 2022; Ainscow et al., 2023). Accessibility through geographical location was necessary as the PLC participants were required to travel to each other's schools for the PLCs. Overall, this makes the research a multi-site study with a non-probability convenience sample. The non-probability sampling ensured access to key educational stakeholders (employed in the schools). The key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) all have a role (with varying responsibilities) in supporting inclusive education in the Irish context.

A volunteer sample was sought from across the key educational stakeholders. Volunteer sampling was important as research in Irish and international contexts suggests that volunteering for PL can contribute to a safe and authentic learning environment (Stoll et al., 2006; Timperley et al., 2007; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). Additionally, the volunteer sample alleviates possible issues with certain professions being 'subjected to power' or pressured to join the PLC. A target number of ($n=15$) research participants was set. The research required representation from at least one profession within each school.

During the phone recruitment call with the schools I had previously worked with as a PDST advisor (now Oide), I outlined the nature of the PLC to the school principal. All three principals expressed interest in involvement and agreed to facilitate travel time for teachers and SNAs- a key factor in empowering teachers to engage with PL (King 2011, Poekert and King, 2023). The principals also committed to acknowledging the PLC as part of the teacher and SNA Croke Park hours. These hours were negotiated as part of public sector reform and consisted of 36 hours for teachers (DE, 2011a; DE, 2016c) and 72 hours for SNAs (DE, 2011). Every Irish school has some autonomy in how the hours are utilised, but PL is promoted (DE, 2011a; 2016c). Within the multi-site case study, each school had a system where staff were not required to complete these hours together but could identify areas in their practice for development. This flexibility benefitted this study, meaning staff felt free to self-select their involvement.

3.5.2 Procedure

The schools' principals circulated a short blurb detailing my professional role and the main aims of the research via email. Interested key educational stakeholders were

invited to attend a research overview during Croke Park Hours (DE, 2011a; 2016c). The presentation described the study (and the key responsibilities of involvement were shared (See Table 3.2 and Appendix D).

Table 3.2 Key Responsibilities of Participation in the Study

Responsibility	Description
Attendance	Engage in approximately 6 PLC (90 minutes) meetings over 4 months (January 2023-April 2023). The PLCs are to be recorded and transcribed. The PLCs will cater to approximately 15 people with a mix of SNAs, teachers, and principals across three schools.
Participation	Discuss professional and personal attitudes, knowledge and values regarding inclusive education. Take photographs (identifying no persons) that reflect these discussions in practice. Record some written reflections.
Experimentation	Engage in inquiry and trialling ideas following suggestions at the PLC meetings.
Feedback to Peers	Provide ongoing feedback and sharing of work in the PLC both within and between schools.
Exit Interviews	Engage in an approximately 30-minute SSI, upon the conclusion of the formal PLC meetings—the SSI will be recorded and transcribed.

After each staff meeting, I shared a SurveyMonkey link with interested participants. Following this, several interested parties made contact. All were invited to meet with me to discuss further information. A total of ($n=21$) participants from the three schools expressed interest in involvement. The SNA profession was oversubscribed in all schools, as were teachers in two schools, so a lottery system was required. The lottery system involved names being pulled from a hat by a HEI colleague. A cohort of ($n=15$) research participants were voluntarily recruited.

Once the meeting schedule was agreed upon, two participants (one SNA from the mainstream school and one teacher from the disadvantaged school) withdrew from the study. As a result, a final ($n=13$) key educational stakeholders across three schools engaged in this research. The data from these 13 research participants are presented and discussed using a key. The key was chosen purposefully to support the reader in accessing the nuances between contexts and professions (Table 3.3). The key for each participant included the following information: Role- Context-Number.

Table 3.3 Key for Schools Contexts and Key Educational Stakeholders

School Code	Disadvantaged School (DS)	Mainstream School (MS)	Special School (SS)
SNA Code	SNADS1	SNAMS1	SNASS1
SNA Code	SNADS2		SNASS2
Teacher Code	TeacherDS1	TeacherMS1	TeacherSS1
Teacher Code		TeacherMS2	TeacherSS2
Principal Code	PrincipalDS	PrincipalMS	PrincipalSS
Total: (n=13)	(n=4)	(n=4)	(n=5)

Table 3.4 details further demographic information for each key educational stakeholder and distinguishable characteristics, including role, years of experience, school category and curriculum level. The curriculum level is identified to demonstrate the variety of age groups the SNAs, teachers, and principals support daily. However, it is acknowledged that the SNAs do not have a curriculum role within the school (DE, 2014).

Table 3.4 Key Educational Stakeholders Demographic Information

Key	Role	Experience in role	Context	Curriculum Level
PrincipalDS	Principal	<2 years experience	DS	Primary (4yrs -13yrs)
TeacherDS1	Teacher	10-15 years	DS	Primary-Senior Infants (5yrs-6yrs)
SNADS1	SNA	15 years + experience	DS	Primary- Special Class (4yrs -13yrs)
SNADS2	SNA	5-7 years	DS	Primary (4yrs -13yrs)
PrincipalMS	Principal	<2 years experience	MS	Primary (4yrs-13yrs)
TeacherMS1	Teacher	15 years + experience	MS	Primary-Fifth Class (11 yrs)
TeacherMS2	Teacher	5-7 years	MS	Primary- Sixth Class (13yrs)
SNAMS	SNA	15 years + experience	MS	Primary(4yrs-13yrs)
PrincipalSS	Principal	15 years + experience	SS	Primary and Post-Primary (4yrs-18yrs)
TeacherSS1	Teacher	10-15 years	SS	Post-Primary- Junior Cycle (13yrs-16yrs)
TeacherSS2	Teacher	10-15 years	SS	Post-Primary- Junior Cycle (13yrs-16yrs)
SNASS1	SNA	15 years + experience	SS	Post-Primary (13yrs-18yrs)
SNASS2	SNA	5-7 years	SS	Primary (4yrs-18yrs)

3.6 Data Generation Methods

Unlike experimental research, a case study approach does not insist on specific data generation methods; instead, various ways are deemed appropriate, from surveys to interviews (Merriam, 1998). The constructionism stance further allowed flexibility in data generation methods and encouraged innovation (Charmaz, 2008). This flexibility was particularly relevant for this study as the structure of a PLC should support participants to take the lead and create new understandings (Stoll et al., 2006). As a result, when participants guided the PLC towards new data sources, the research design was adapted accordingly (Merriam, 1998). This adaptation was driven by the focus on Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and the investigation of inclusive education within the PLC. For instance, one school decided to capture student perspectives by having them draw pictures and write sentences (Indicator 2, Appendix E). Another school organised a coffee morning with parents to collect their opinions (Indicator 5, Appendix F). Both schools then shared these data sets with the PLCs for discussion and feedback. Engaging with parents and students in this way is a key part of the SSE process in Ireland, consistent with the expectations for schools (DE, 2022). Therefore, these data generation methods were not outside the scope of what schools should be doing but were essential to the 'process of making meaning' (Merriam, 1998, p.178).

Five forms of data generation were considered most appropriate from the initial study design. These included PLC Meeting Transcriptions (PLC-T), Participant Reflections (PLC-PR), a Researcher-Reflective Journal (PLC-RRJ), Participant Photographs, and Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs). Data was generated from January 2023 to June 2023. By using multiple data generation methods, the findings are not the result of a single method or data source, enhancing the credibility of the findings (Tracy, 2010). Next, Table 3.5 shows the link between the research questions, the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) (Appendix B), the Inclusive Indicators (2021) (Appendix A), themes from the conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) and the data generation methods. Table 3.5 helps visualise the approach taken to analyse the experiences of key educational stakeholders when collaborating within and between schools to develop inclusive education.

Table 3.5 Link Between the Research Questions, the Literature Themes and the Data Generation Methods

Research Questions	Literature Themes	MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015)	Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021)	Data Generation Methods	
RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?	Inclusive Education	Autonomy - collaboration and collective agency for social justice and inclusive education	Indicator 1: Everyone is made to feel safe and welcome Indicator 2: Students are equally valued Indicator 3: There are high expectations for all students Indicator 4: Staff and students treat one another with respect Indicator 5: There is a partnership between staff and families Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn Indicator 8: The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students	PLC-T SSI PLC-RRJ PLC-PR Participant Photographs	
	Equity			PLC-PR PLC-RRJ Participant Photographs	
	Social Justice				
	Developing Inclusive Schools	Reflexivity - meaning-making of the structures and cultures in their schools as sites for social transformation, open reflection on own assumptions and inquiry into alternatives			
	Critical Reflection				PLC-PR PLC-RRJ Participant Photographs
	Inquiry				
Agency					
Collaboration (Between and Within Schools)	Autonomy - levels of confidence, control, and resilience	PLC-T SSI PLC-RRJ			
Collaborative PL (SNAs, teachers and principals)	Competence-reaching out to learn with others, working with others to try new ideas	SSI PLC-T			
Power					

RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education?	Efficacy	Purpose - sense of identity and motivation as agents of social justice and inclusive education	Indicator 1: Everyone is made to feel safe and welcome Indicator 2: Students are equally valued Indicator 3: There are high expectations for all students	Participant Photographs PLC-T PLC-PR
	Agency			
	Commitment to Inclusive Education, Equity and Social Justice	Purpose - understanding of social justice and inclusive education	Indicator 4: Staff and students treat one another with respect Indicator 5: There is a partnership between staff and families Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students	PLC-T PLC-RRJ PLC-PR Participant Photographs
	Attitudes, Knowledge and Values towards Inclusive Education	Competence - teachers' practice of inclusive pedagogy (including collaboration with others)	Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn Indicator 8: The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students	PLC-PR PLC-RRJ SSI
RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?	Inquiry	Autonomy - collaboration and collective agency for social justice and inclusive education	Indicator 1: Everyone is made to feel safe and welcome Indicator 2: Students are equally valued Indicator 3: There are high expectations for all students	PLC-PR PLC-T Participant Photographs
	Distributed Leadership	Reflexivity - meaning-making of the structures and cultures in their schools as sites for social transformation, open reflection on own assumptions and inquiry into alternatives	Indicator 4: Staff and students treat one another with respect Indicator 5: There is a partnership between staff and families Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students	PLC-T SSI PLC-PR PLC-RRJ
	Critical Reflection		Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn Indicator 8: The school monitors the presence, participation, and achievement of all students	
	Inquiry			
	Agency			

The data generation methods will be discussed in the next section in the order in which they occurred during the research study.

3.6.1 PLC Meeting Transcriptions

Recording and transcribing the PLC meetings as an additional data source offers several advantages, particularly in researching inclusive education and collaboration amongst key educational stakeholders from diverse school contexts. The meetings were recorded and, following each PLC, were transcribed through repeated reviews before the next PLC. The transcriptions provided unique insights into real-time discussions, capturing the natural flow of conversation (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018). They also allowed for exploring more challenging conversations that might require a further stimulus or planned activity to support critical reflection and inquiry in subsequent PLCs (Stoll et al., 2006). This allowed me to continuously respond to the group inquiries and develop the PLC frameworks (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017) (Appendix I). This depth and richness of data, with concrete examples of collaborative practice or inclusive education from multiple perspectives within a single PLC setting, offers a viewpoint of the discussed challenges and inquiries. The PLC transcriptions also served as a powerful tool for verification and triangulation when compared alongside other data generation methods, such as participant reflections and SSIs, significantly enhancing the sincerity and credibility of the research findings and instilling confidence in the robustness of the research process (Tracy, 2010).

Every PLC occurred every two weeks except the last, which was five weeks apart due to school holidays and other school-related events. Each PLC meeting was 90 minutes long and as guided by the participants, flexibly rotated across the three schools and the local education centre (ESCI) (Table 3.6). The move to the local education centre was to support teachers who were involved in mandatory curriculum development in the education centre for two days. As a result, to support travel, it was best to move the PLC to this venue. While I feared this might detract from context-based learning, it allowed the education centre's director an opportunity to speak with the group. It also proved particularly beneficial for the SNAs, who had seen the centre as a place for teachers instead of supporting learning for all.

Table 3.6 PLC Locations

PLC Number	Location
PLC1	Mainstream School
PLC2	Disadvantaged School
PLC3	Education Centre
PLC4	Special School
PLC5	Mainstream School
PLC6	Education Centre

Each PLC meeting had a booklet (Appendix G) that shaped the discussion and facilitated note-taking. Throughout the PLC meetings, participants had access to a shared drive with the booklets, further reading resources, and folders where they could place their tasks (for example, photographs). The Key educational stakeholders could investigate each other's folders to understand how the work was progressing at the school level. At regular junctures, the PLC compiled a general overview of what we had focused on (Appendix H) and how it aligned with the chosen Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) or Pantić and Florian's (2015) framework. The summary of their journey helped focus on goal setting for moving forward.

Table 3.7 offers an overview of attendance at each PLC meeting. Overall, three SNAs and one teacher across the schools attended all the PLC meetings ($n=4$), some attended five PLCs ($n=5$), and ($n=4$) attended three or more PLCs. The ongoing presence of COVID-19 in schools was a factor in attendance, and it is important to note that those SNAs and teachers who missed PLCs were also absent from school on those days. As previously mentioned, to support relationship building between SNAs and teachers, principals were asked not to attend PLC2.

Table 3.7 Attendance at the PLCs

Pseudonym	PLC 1	PLC2	PLC3	PLC4	PLC5	PLC6	Total PLCs	Interviewed
SNAMS	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	6	YES
TeacherSS1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	6	YES
SNASS1	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	6	YES
SNASS2	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	6	YES
TeacherMS2	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	5	YES
SNADS1	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	5	YES
TeacherDS1	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	5	YES
SNADS2	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	5	YES
PrincipalSS	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	5	YES
TeacherSS2	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	4	YES
PrincipalDS	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	3	YES
TeacherMS1	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	3	YES
PrincipalMS	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	3	YES
Total	PLC 1 (<i>n</i> =13)	PLC 2 (<i>n</i> =9)	PLC 3 (<i>n</i> =10)	PLC 4 (<i>n</i> =11)	PLC 5 (<i>n</i> =9)	PLC 6 (<i>n</i> =11)		SSI (<i>n</i> =13)

I followed a flexible framework to guide and support the PLC meetings (Appendix I). PLC1 was planned with more significant researcher input to support the initial setup. However, the participants needed opportunities to take ownership of the PLC's structure and framework (Stoll et al., 2006). So, at the end of each PLC, the participants were invited for feedback on a focus for the next meeting. As a result, all the PLCs followed a similar pattern of reviewing the previous meeting and sharing learning from the agreed tasks. The agreed tasks largely centred on a school-selected focus from the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). After sharing their school's progress, time was spent facilitating feedback and questions. Furthermore, a focused activity such as a Ted Talk or a video (for example, a learning walk⁹) was shown at junctures to further stimulate an area of interest. Finally, the PLCs all started or ended with a tour of the school context or the education centre, depending on who led the PLC.

3.6.2 Researcher Reflective Journal

Reflective journals are essential in qualitative research as they enable researchers to engage in ongoing reflexivity, allowing them to critically assess their own subjectivity, assumptions, and ethical dilemmas that arise during the research process (Reid et al., 2018). Reflective journals also provide a space for documenting ethically important moments, supporting a more nuanced and transparent research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). The PLC-RRJ served as a personal space to document my experiences, insights, challenges, and beliefs related to the research. Reflective journaling helps researchers gain deeper insights into their thought processes, biases, and assumptions, enhancing the quality of their research and contributing to reflexivity (Cohen, Mannion and Morrisson, 2018). My reflections were invaluable for considering what happened, its significance, and future directions (Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001). At times, my field notes were detailed and descriptive. For example, following each PLC, I aligned some of my spontaneous reflections with the transcriptions of the PLC meetings and connected them to Table 3.5 (Appendix J). These reflections helped me understand the knowledge and reality being constructed within the PLC. Other times, I made inductive, quick, informal observations in a written notebook (Appendix K). These informal reflections were not

⁹ Learning walks involve brief, structured classroom visits by teachers to observe and reflect on various teaching practices, promoting PL through collaborative inquiry reflection and critical dialogue (Edutopia, 2018).

focused on any one aspect but on a number of actions that made me reflect. In the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), reflexivity (involving critical reflection, inquiry and action) is key to PL and developing agency. Therefore, it was crucial that my reflections became a habit and that I valued 'monitor[ing] closely and continually...[my] own reactions with participants, roles, biases, and other matters that affect the research' (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018, p. 172). Modelling how the MATAIPPA framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) guided my work was important, as participants are likely to engage in behaviours they observe in others. My reflections and processes connected various experiences and observations, guiding insights and decisions crucial for steering the PLC's direction. I later cross-referenced these informal notes with the formal notes, a process that further supported accuracy in data analysis (Merriam, 1998).

3.6.3 Participant Reflections

The participants were provided with a reflection template at the start of every PLC meeting. This was introduced by the reflection leader. Having access to the template throughout the PLC meant participants could consider their thoughts throughout, so reflection became embedded in the PLC and not an 'add-on' at the end of a meeting. The last 5-minutes were allocated each week to finalising their thoughts on the template. Sometimes, participants only answered some of the questions in the reflection (Appendix L). This was particularly evident in the first iteration of the reflection template (PLC1-3), which included 6 questions. While some indicated time was a factor in this, some expressed dissatisfaction with the layout. As a result, after feedback from PLC participants (Chapter 4 -Engaging in Critical Reflection), the template was reduced to three broader statements and there was evidence of greater engagement in all the statements from participants (PLC 4-6). The fewer prompts and the broader statements appeared to facilitate the participants to better reflect on practice directions (Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper, 2001). To support the PLC development, I transcribed the individual reflections into a collated document (Appendix L). Transcribing the reflections helped me to critically reflect on their views and shape planning for the subsequent PLC. All participants had access to the collated reflections and could consider their peers' reflections as a stimulus for future inquiry. Therefore, the PLC- PR's provided valuable insights into the participants' attitudes, knowledge and values for collaborative practice and supporting inclusive education.

3.6.4 Participant Photographs

Using photographs as a data generation source, known as photo-elicitation, is an established methodology that stimulates dialogue by providing participants with a visual prompt to reflect on their practices (Harper, 2002; Thomas, 2009). While traditionally used in interviews, this method was applied within PLC discussions to ‘bring another dimension’ (Glaw et al., 2017, p. 2) to the exploration of inclusive education. Photographs were used to help participants tangibly discuss what inclusion looks like in their contexts, guided by selected Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). This approach addresses a common barrier in the development of inclusive education by enabling participants to articulate and visualise practice (Travers et al., 2010) and so could support bridging the knowledge-practice gap (Hick et al., 2019).

The use of photographs in this study followed a set of agreed protocols to ensure ethical and practical application. These protocols prioritised participant autonomy, aligned with the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021), and fostered a supportive environment for critical reflection and dialogue. The protocols are detailed below in Table 3.8:

Table 3.8 Photograph Protocols for the PLC

Agreed Protocols	Description
Align photographs with Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021)	Use UNESCO’s (2021) Inclusive Indicators to guide participants in identifying inclusive practices. The photograph will represent an Inclusive Indicator and are explained through the words of the participants
Ensure no persons are identifiable	Photographs must not include identifiable individuals to maintain confidentiality.
Seek permission for sharing	Permission must be obtained before sharing photographs within the PLC.
Share photographs at the start of PLC sessions	Begin PLC meetings by using photographs to stimulate critical dialogue, reflection and feedback (O’Sullivan, 2011; Parker, Patton and O’Sullivan, 2016).
Encourage openness	Create a space where everyone is encouraged to critically examine and expand their understanding of inclusive education by describing their photographs and why they align with a practice. Questions from others to support clarity are welcomed.

This collective task aligned with the principles of transformative PL (Kennedy, 2014), promoting collaboration, critical dialogue, and the public sharing of work (Parker, Patton and O’Sullivan, 2016). Participants took photographs illustrating their chosen Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) in action and provided brief explanations, which were submitted

for printing and preparation for the PLC meeting. As a result, the taking of photographs was not cumbersome as they were of practices already in place (King and Logan, 2022). The photographs facilitated participants' comfort and engagement in subsequent PLC sessions, knowing that their photographs would be the initial discussion focus (Glaw et al., 2017). During the PLC, participants presented their photographs and rationales, facilitating discussions that allowed for the sharing of diverse perspectives and practices. This method mirrors the informal and formal public sharing of work reported by Parker, Patton and O'Sullivan (2016), enhancing PL and development. The familiarity of discussing photographs provided comfort and confidence, encouraging active participation and deeper engagement in PLC sessions (Glaw et al., 2017).

3.6.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

The SSIs are a common qualitative research method because they balance guided questions and flexibility (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). They were chosen because they allow for deeper insights into how participants understand and experience their social world. The SSIs took place after the six PLC sessions to gain deeper insights into how the participants experienced the PLC in developing inclusive education. The participants had access to the interview questions for 10 working days before the SSI occurred (Appendix M). This was to make the 'unknown' visible and help the participants to come to the SSI more relaxed. All SSIs were conducted in the key educational stakeholder's school contexts during the summer term of 2023–2024 and were scheduled to last approximately 30 minutes. Every effort was made to ensure SSIs were free from interruptions. I ensured that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and that their contributions were valued and respected. This involved creating a comfortable atmosphere by clarifying my expectations and being mindful of theirs. Given the warm weather, I provided water and encouraged movement breaks. I was also mindful of my body language, striving to be open and encouraging, as nonverbal communication is crucial for setting the right tone (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The initial conversations focused on confidentiality, anonymity, and the publication of research findings. Consent to record the SSIs was obtained, and the recordings' purpose, storage, and disposal after transcription was outlined. Participants were informed they could request the recorder be turned off at any time and withdraw from the SSI at any

stage, with their data not being used. All participants were also invited to view the transcript of their SSI to ensure it accurately represented their descriptions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, no research participants engaged in this process. The SSIs included open-ended questions based on themes identified earlier in the research. The goal was to collect relevant information, avoid unnecessary questions, and enhance subjectivity (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Some questions were omitted if inappropriate (Stake, 1995) and others were added to explore new areas, making the SSIs flexible and adaptable. The guiding questions are also placed in (Appendix M) and denoted in yellow. The goal was to understand what the interviewees found important and allow respondents to express their thoughts in detail while keeping the conversation focused. This method allowed me to explore interesting topics that emerged naturally during the discussion. It also helped participants to share their perspectives and experiences openly.

3.6.6 Ethical Considerations

The proposed study was approved in accordance with Dublin City University's (DCU) Code of Good Research Practice (DCU, 2021). As a result, the approved ethical procedures were followed carefully throughout the research process. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without penalty. Ethical risks were managed through anonymisation, informed consent, and data confidentiality (Silverman, 2005). For example, plain language statements and consent forms were provided to the Board of Management (BOM) and key educational stakeholders to ensure participant understanding and voluntary participation (Appendix N). Participants were made aware that while no personal details were recorded in the findings, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed, especially given that other school staff were aware of their involvement. However, every effort was made to maintain their confidentiality, and the research participants gave input into their anonymised codes (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2018). This was important as I did not want the participants to misconceive their label as reducing them to 'no name', particularly given their time and commitment to the research. As a result, participants were made aware that they could only be identified by their profession or the context of their schools. To further protect the anonymity of participants, 'they/them' pronouns are used throughout the reporting of findings in Chapter 4 instead of gender-specific pronouns like 'he/she' or 'him/her'. I retained data ownership and

offered dissemination of findings to participants upon request, ensuring ethical integrity throughout the study. All data storage practices adhered to the guidelines set by DCU.

3.6.7 Piloting

Before the research, a small-scale pilot study was conducted to maximise the rigor of one of the data generation methods chosen (Tracy, 2010). The SSIs were piloted with two primary school teachers (from schools not approached in the study). The piloting process allowed me to confirm the time required to conduct the SSIs and gather feedback on the design of the interview questions. In both pilot SSIs, the participants (n=2) felt that seeing the questions beforehand would have put them more at ease. Additionally, they stressed the need for more 'wait time' before offering a prompt or a clarifying question. Both these suggestions were taken on board to enhance the depth and richness of the data collected, as providing participants with adequate time to reflect and articulate their thoughts contributes to the credibility and rigor of the qualitative research process (Tracy, 2010).

3.7 Conducting High-Quality Qualitative Research

The quality of the research is paramount in qualitative studies (Tracy, 2010). Ensuring high-quality qualitative research involves adhering to several key criteria, such as credibility, sincerity, rigor, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). These criteria are essential for supporting trustworthy and impactful research findings. In the following sections, each of these criteria will be explained in relation to this study, illustrating how they were applied to enhance the overall quality and trustworthiness of the research.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research refers to confidence in the truth of the findings, often enhanced through triangulation and member-checking (Tracy, 2010). To enhance the credibility of this study, I employed triangulation by using multiple data generation methods, including SSIs, reflective journals, participant reflections and transcriptions of the PLCs. This approach increased the trustworthiness of the findings by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomena (Robson, 2011). Furthermore, during interviews and PLC sessions, and member-checking by summarising and checking participants' statements with phrases like 'Am I hearing that...?' and 'Are you saying...?'. This member-checking

ensured that the interpretations accurately represented the participants' perspectives, enhancing the study's credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.7.2 Sincerity

Sincerity in qualitative research involves being transparent about my biases and reflections, achieved through reflexivity (Tracy, 2010). This study emphasised reflexivity by maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research process and regularly consulting with supervisors. This process of self-examination ensured that I remained aware of my subjective influence on the research (Braun and Clarke, 2022). For example, I documented my preconceptions about inclusive education in their RRJ and how these might impact their interpretations, thus contributing to the study's sincerity and overall trustworthiness (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

3.7.3 Rigor

Rigor in qualitative research is demonstrated through the thoroughness and appropriateness of the study's data generation and analysis processes (Tracy, 2010). In this study, rigor was achieved by providing a detailed chain of evidence that made every research step transparent (Yin, 2018). These included descriptions of the PLC frameworks used, reflections on the data generation period and location, and the context of data generation. The clear and systematic coding approach used in 'Reflexive Thematic Analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2022) further supported the study's rigor (see section 3.9 Approach to Data Analysis).

3.7.4 Meaningful Coherence

Meaningful coherence refers to the extent to which the study achieves its intended purpose and integrates all aspects of the research process (Tracy, 2010). This study demonstrated meaningful coherence by aligning the research questions, the literature themes and the data generation methods (Table 3.5) to ensure that the study was coherent and that the data and literature supported the conclusions.

3.8 Approach to Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2022, p.4) Reflexive Thematic Analysis was utilised for 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset'. Data analysis

was inductive, where the codes and themes were grounded in the data and shaped by my views of reality and how knowledge is constructed (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Reflexive Thematic Analysis is a flexible and systematic method that helps construct deep themes in qualitative data. The six phases include familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. These processes are shown in Table 3.9, emphasising how they were adopted within this study. The different stages of this process are outlined in (Appendices O-T).

Table 3.9 Six-Phase Cycle of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Adapted from Source: Braun and Clarke, 2022, pp. 35-36)

Process	Description
Familiarising myself with the Dataset	This involved listening to the audio recordings of the PLCs (540 minutes) and the SSIs (390 minutes), which were completed at different time junctures. I listened and transcribed into Microsoft Word. The PLC transcriptions occurred intermittently after each PLC and the SSI transcription was completed after all 13 SSIs. This was a slow and gradual process. Once the recordings were transcribed, the transcripts were read multiple times to facilitate familiarisation. Small notes were made on the transcriptions and in my RRJ to support analysis and place value on researcher subjectivity (Appendix O).
Coding	When familiar with the data, I began to code the data set. This was conducted by hand and in Microsoft Word. First, I coded the PLC transcriptions, followed by the RRJ and the participant reflections, and finally, the SSIs. Throughout this process, I frequently revisited earlier codes in light of new insights from subsequent data sets. For example, initial codes from the PLC transcriptions were re-evaluated after coding the SSIs, leading to the refinement and merging of codes where patterns of meaning became more apparent. This iterative process allowed a better understanding of the data (Appendix P).
Generating Initial Themes	Next, the initial codes were organised so broader themes were constructed, which were descriptive. This involved paper copies of the data sources and the initial codes, which I clustered into groups, with each group contributing to the development of broader themes, which were visually distinguished by different colours. I also moved between participant responses and drew comparisons between and across the data sets and the participants. In my first iteration of themes, some codes were promoted to themes, such as 'Inquiry'. I then returned to other codes such as 'Turn-Taking-Norms and Protocols' and tidied them up to 'Norms and Protocols', dropping part or all of some codes and better-refining themes so they told a story of patterned meaning across my data set (Braun and Clarke, 2022). (Appendix Q).
Developing and Reviewing Themes and Subthemes	The themes I generated were the bigger picture of the data set, and as they had many layers, I assigned sub-themes. During this iterative process of refining subthemes, I encountered challenges distinguishing between overlapping sub-themes such as 'Safe and Supportive Environment' and 'Norms and Protocols.' Initially, these were treated as separate, but upon further reflection and re-engagement with the data, it became clear that they were interdependent aspects of a larger subtheme of 'Power and Empowerment.'

	This back-and-forth process was crucial in ensuring that the final themes accurately reflected the complexity of the data. (Appendix R).
Refining, Defining and Naming Themes	Defining and naming themes and subthemes proved a helpful step in the process. It allowed me to consider an 'abstract' for my themes and subthemes, outlining their 'scope, boundaries and core concept of the [sub] theme' (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.108). This process also involved moving back and forth between steps three, four and five, detailed in (Appendix S)
Writing Up	Reflexivity and deep engagement with the data are essential for successfully aligning themes with research questions in Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Aligning themes to research questions involves a theme development and refinement process. Keeping a clear focus on the research questions throughout the analysis ensured that the themes provided meaningful insights directly relevant to the study's aims. From this, the thematic map was finalised and aligned with the research questions (Appendix T).

This approach allowed for a thorough and reflective examination of the data, capturing the nuances of participants' experiences. Additionally, when analysing Theme (3) Exploring Collaborative Practice, many of the participant's responses had connotations of 'Within, Between and Beyond' collaboration and the literature from Ainscow et al.'s (2012) 'Ecology of Equity'. For this reason, when discussing Theme (3) Exploring Collaborative Practice, the 'Ecology of Equity' Framework supports the detailed results. Furthermore, while Braun and Clarke (2022, p.133) recommend that findings and discussions are best presented in a combined approach, they also acknowledge that with Reflexive Thematic Analysis, there is no 'inherently right or wrong' way. They note two separate chapters (findings and discussion) working particularly well when one of the key aims is to make accessible recommendations for policy and practice. As this thesis aimed to explore the development of inclusive education through the experiences of key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) in the Irish context, separate findings and discussion chapters were warranted to identify tangible and clear recommendations for future inclusive policy and practice (Braun and Clarke, 2022). For these reasons, The Findings are presented in Chapter 4, the Discussion in Chapter 5 and Recommendations in Chapter 6. This data is presented in Chapter 4 as descriptive (qualitative) and under each research question using themes identified from participant responses.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research design, detailing the voluntary participant sampling process. It also outlined the data generation methods employed and provided a thorough explanation of the PLC design. The chapter highlighted the ethical considerations and the steps taken to address these. The chapter ended with a description of the data analysis process utilised in constructing themes for the findings of this qualitative multi-site case study. The next chapter presents the study's findings, showcasing the rich, detailed experiences of the key educational stakeholders constructed within the data analysis to address the three research questions.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This research explored the collaboration experiences of key educational stakeholders across diverse school contexts within a PLC on developing inclusive education. The PLC was underpinned by the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) (Appendix B) and utilised the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) (Appendix A) to stimulate critical reflection, discussion, and inquiry. Both frameworks were presented to the key educational stakeholders at the start of and throughout each of the PLCs. This chapter analyses the data generated and includes PLC Meeting Transcriptions (PLC-T), Participant Reflections (PLC-PR), Participant Photographs, Researcher Reflective Journal (PLC-RRJ), and 13 post-PLC semi-structured Interviews (SSI) to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education?

RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

4.2 Reporting of Findings

It is important to note that numbers such as ($n=5$) are used throughout the results chapter to demonstrate frequency in the data. The numbers support the reader with differences and similarities across the school contexts and professions. While a key such as 'occasionally' (meaning 1-2 participants) or 'many' (meaning 5-10 participants) would work for some research studies (Terry, 2010), with mixed professions and schools, 'many SNAs' and 'many participants' would have different connotations. For these reasons, numbers are employed to demonstrate the frequency of findings, but care is taken to accompany numbers with descriptive detail (Sandelowsk, 2001). It is not an effort to 'quantitize' the data which would be inappropriate in a qualitative study such as this. Instead, it aims to offer important context to allow for a better understanding of the reported data.

4.3 RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

The data analysis process constructed three themes to address this research question: Drivers of Engagement, Foundations of Inclusive Participation and Exploring Collaborative Practice. Subthemes were present in each (Figure 4.1). The following section will outline and present these themes using selected responses from the participants.

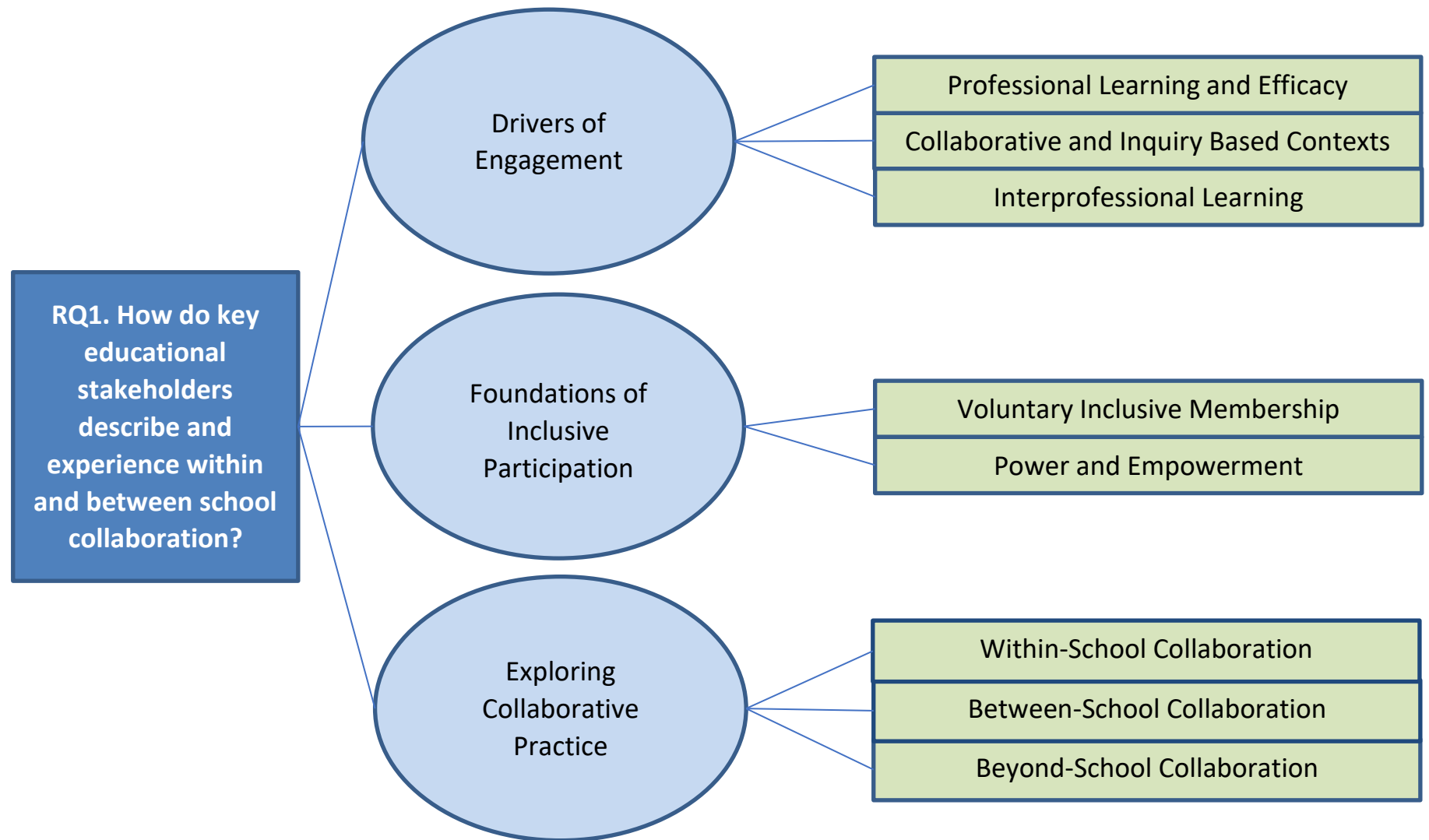


Figure 4.1 RQ1. Thematic Map

4.3.1 Drivers of Engagement

The first theme, Drivers of Engagement, reflects the driving force for key educational stakeholders to become involved in the school-to-school collaboration. While there were variations in reasons for engagement factors, three key sub-themes were constructed; Professional Learning and Efficacy, Collaborative and Inquiry-Based Contexts, and Interprofessional Learning.

4.3.1.1 Professional Learning and Efficacy

The principals of all three contexts highlighted their driving force for engagement was valuing PL for inclusive education. PrincipalMS noted the need to *'provide time and space for my staff to focus and collaborate on inclusive education'* (SSI). At the same time, PrincipalSS cited the importance of *'enabling dialogue and collaboration'* (SSI). Both school leaders focused on the PLC's collaborative process and not solely on a product. Interestingly, PrincipalMS and PrincipalSS, who have experience facilitating PL with SNAs and or teachers, cite their interest because of *'previous experience facilitating PLCs'* (PrincipalMS-SSI), where they saw *'the benefits of sharing good practice amongst others'*, specifically *'research-based practice'* (PrincipalSS-SSI) where *'the schools [are] driving the agenda'* (PrincipalMS-SSI). This is important because change is more likely to occur if school leaders understand the impact effective PL can offer. Others ($n=4$ -SSI) were driven by the desire to benefit the whole school community, such as SNAMS1, who stated:

I just thought it would benefit the school...and it would help me...
to see what ideas there might be that I could use... and, you know,
to share new ideas back with my school. (SNAMS1-SSI)

Across the data for SNAs and teachers ($n=10$ -SSI), a driver of engagement based on efficacy, which is the belief in an individual's capacity to change practice, was constructed. Most participants ($n=9$) intimated high efficacy resulting from engaging in PL. For example, one teacher reflected on their¹⁰ growth, saying they had *'a few questions about myself and my practice'* and wondered, *'were there ideas I wasn't thinking of? Of course, there is because we can't know everything'* (TeacherMS2-SSI). By acknowledging that there may be ideas they haven't considered, TeacherMS2 demonstrates an openness to learning and growth. Similarly, the SNAs ($n=5$) displayed a positive attitude toward the process of

¹⁰ To further protect the anonymity of participants, 'they/them' pronouns are used throughout instead of gender-specific pronouns like 'he/she' or 'him/her'.

learning, with some noting that *'I'm always doing my best with what I know at that time'* (SNADS1-SSI). Additionally, SNASS2 (SSI) further states:

Look, I think, are you ever fully inclusive? It's always going to be a journey. It's always going to be learning, so if you embrace it that way, you leave room for improvement. That's what we're looking for. Yes, you want to be the best for the children, but I see it as a journey; you make improvements, and maybe you need to change gear, switch gear, change direction along the way, yeah, relook at things.

This emphasises the need for flexibility and that inclusive education is not a one-size-fits-all approach. What is evident is also a willingness and commitment to doing so for the betterment of the child.

However, while other teacher colleagues ($n=1$ -SSI) also expressed the need to learn and bring about change they were somewhat more self-critical of their capacity to support inclusive education - and hence their belief in their ability to make changes. Teacher DS1 stated several times that there was a *'lack of belief in myself'* (PLC2-T) and that they were not *'doing enough'* (PLC2-T). Furthermore, the PrincipalDS expressed surprise at TeacherDS1's involvement in the PLC as *'it's not usually [their] thing'* (PrincipalDS-SSI). Interestingly, TeachersDS1's perceived lack of efficacy may have motivated others to support them and encourage new thinking, thus advocating for them. For example, within the data, many participants ($n=5$ -SSI) mentioned that TeacherDS1's mindset and efficacy changed to include increased reflexivity and understanding of purpose (PLC 4, 6-RRJ). The PrincipalDS (SSI) complimented TeacherDS1's commitment to the PLC (coming in days they were not scheduled to be in while job-sharing). TeacherDS1 expressed in the SSI:

It felt okay to talk (in the PLC) and say, "Oh, I didn't know that, or ask what that means. I didn't feel stupid or couldn't ask questions, so I learned more... The other schools would nod or add to what I was saying or explain,...encouraging me. So, I just kept getting involved... That's not who I am, or who I was maybe.

This statement suggests a transformation in their identity, indicating an increased sense of efficacy and competence because of their involvement in the PLC. It also indicates an interest in other school contexts, which motivated others to engage in the PLC, which will be explored next.

4.2.1.2 Collaborative and Inquiry-Based Contexts

The SNAs, teachers, and principals were all motivated by the opportunity to collaborate and inquire into practice from diverse school contexts ($n=13$). TeacherMS2 (SSI) noted that the different categories of schools were a major draw:

When you mentioned the other 2 schools. I had experience working in both schools, and I suppose maybe it was nosiness, curiosity, or just inquisitiveness, I wanted to work with both those schools.

The PrincipalMS also acknowledges the learning potential of the different contexts. PrincipalMS appears to view the other schools as compelled to be more inclusive because *'they must change to meet the most complex needs'*, and these changes are required specifically for *'supporting students from disadvantaged areas or those with behaviour needs'* (SSI). This opinion is interesting because, on the one hand, they are acknowledging the need to learn from other contexts. However, PrincipalMS also reveals assumptions about learners within different school categorisations. This perhaps conveys that school context plays a significant role in shaping attitudes about inclusive education. In addition to this, TeacherMS1 appeared to have a deeper appreciation that collaboration with other schools could develop effective school improvement practices (PLC1-RRJ).

Most of the great things I've learned about inclusive practice, I've learned from colleagues in this school or other schools, so I'm always interested to hear what other people say. It's the constructivist nature... You know what you hear from others, and coming to a solution about something with others with different experiences is invaluable. And to be inclusive, you must collaborate; no other way around it. (TeacherMS1-SSI)

The PrincipalDS notes that a key driver of engagement in joining the PLC was inquiring into the inclusion of students from the special class within the MS. PrincipalDS also appears to view the SS context as holding expertise, which they are particularly interested in harnessing (SSI). Similarly, TeacherSS2 indicated they were:

...curious as to what I might learn. What would be going on? What would be talked about? Would I find a better way to do things, maybe?... then I remember your presentation... And I remember you. I remember you being enthusiastic; that was a bit infectious... So, I thought yes, I could work with you... I also liked the capital piece that said that by working together...we could be the ones who made a difference. (TeacherSS2-SSI)

This is particularly interesting because mandatory teacher PL prevents teachers from deciding what PL fits their practice or personality in the Irish context. This sentiment of wanting to make a difference also reinforces that by engaging in the PLC, TeacherSS2 exercised their agency, taking control of their PL and contributing to collaborative practice. TeacherSS2 also appears interested in the PLC's collaborative interprofessional learning, a key driver of engagement for others in the PLC.

4.2.1.3 Interprofessional Learning

Including the SNAs in the interprofessional learning was a driving force for engagement in the PLC for all the participants ($n=13$). The PrincipalSS noted in the SSI that this PLC was answering a need as '*I am always trying to think of new ways of supporting their development [SNAs].*' Additionally, the PrincipalDS (SSI) mentioned that:

SNAs don't have a say here, so I wanted to explore that more... They know the students so well, but we rarely discuss. They probably had loads of ideas. We just never asked. Also, I was new to the role, and I think collaboration, in general... is something we need to work on.

All the participants in the DS ($n=4$) noted that this was the first time key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) were brought together to engage in collaborative PL. SNADS2 (SSI) stated:

We wouldn't have had any collaboration...I liked the idea that it was principals, teachers, and SNAs. You said something in your presentation that we needed to think about our common role for inclusion; we always hear we have different roles, so that was nice. It felt like you wanted us and saw we had something to offer.

Other SNA voices noted their desire to join the PLC as a sense of '*wanting to be part of something, you know, part of the action*' (SNADS1-SSI) or '*wanting to do more*' (SNASS2-SSI), reflecting recent policy advice where SNAs should have increased opportunities for PL. Consequently, there appeared to be an alignment across the key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) regarding a desire to collaborate interprofessionally to support inclusive education. Finally, there was also some pressure to become involved in the PLC, as SNASS2 was looking for a job and noted '*I like learning. But I knew I'd have a direct opportunity to work with the principal on this*' (SNASS2-SSI).

These varying insights demonstrate the vast drivers of engagement for key educational stakeholders becoming involved in a PLC for school-to-school collaboration.

These included opportunities to be involved and lead a collaborative process, the interprofessional dynamic and the contextual mix of schools that all created a sense of curiosity and inquiry within the group. Participants expressed interest in learning together to build confidence (efficacy), exchange ideas, and learn from one another. Some were also driven by a desire to effect change in their schools towards inclusive education and to reshape their collaborative practices. However, in acknowledging what was within the data, it is important to recognise what was omitted- a silent driver of engagement. No teacher or SNA mentioned supporting a specific student as a factor for joining the PLC (PLC-RRJ). This omission is significant as inclusive education in the Irish policy context can be synonymous with SEN (NCSE, 2011). The silence on being driven by a particular cohort of students aligns with the group's initial conception of inclusive education that involves 'everyone' (PLC1-RRJ). It may also signify that, at the coalface of practice, key educational stakeholders are moving beyond Irish policy and advice (NCSE, 2024) and towards broader internationally favoured concepts of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021).

While it was important to probe what influenced key educational stakeholders to become involved in the school-to-school collaboration, it was also necessary to inquire into what facilitated their active participation (inclusion) in the PLC. These responses refer to what helped them to be included and participate effectively in the PLC. The second theme constructed, Foundations of Inclusive Participation, will be discussed next.

4.3.2 Foundations of Inclusive Participation

The second theme, Foundations of Inclusive Participation, reflects how key educational stakeholders describe the school-to-school collaboration design. It includes specific parts of the PLC design that participants identified as helping positively influence their PL and support school-to-school collaboration. The subthemes constructed included Voluntary Inclusive Membership and Power and Empowerment.

4.3.2.1 Voluntary Inclusive Membership

The first sub-theme, Voluntary Inclusive Membership, reflects the elective and interprofessional nature of the PLC that encouraged inclusive participation. Some participants ($n=5$ -SSI) expressed satisfaction in having the autonomy to decide how to invest their time. SNADS1 (SSI) was similar to others ($n=3$ -SSI) who expressed nervousness and said, *'Maybe I was a little bit vulnerable, but very quickly, I remembered we all chose*

to be here so everything would be okay.' The involvement of non-teaching stakeholders (SNAs) represented the inclusive membership element. This was highlighted by many participants ($n=7$) who reported surprise at how the SNAs contributed to interprofessional learning within the PLC (PLC 1,2,3,4,5,6- PR). In PLC-PR data (Appendix L), participants emphasised inclusivity regardless of role or experience and the importance of role diversity for effective collaboration in schools. Comments such as *'Every week I forget we are not all teachers'* (PLC6-PR) demonstrates the value participants placed on the interprofessional learning experiences. PrincipalMS (SSI) stressed the untapped potential for mutual learning when all stakeholders are actively engaged:

PLC4 stood out when the SNAs spoke about their hands-on experiences; those were compelling moments...Their detailed description of changing tiny things that made huge impacts was enlightening... Everybody sat up and paid attention, and I got the sense anyway ...that there was a realisation around the room of how much of an impact they can have and do have...This reminded us, well me anyway, of all they have to offer and...how much mutual learning we are missing out on when they aren't at meetings.

The 'new' appreciation for the knowledge SNAs possess in the DS and MS context was sometimes in contrast to the SS context, which appeared to already recognise their insights as essential. The SS participants ($n=5$) noted on different occasions (PLC1-T, PLC3-T and PLC4-T) that interprofessional learning was the norm in their context. Furthermore, PrincipalSS felt the inclusive membership of the PLC modelled how collaboration between interprofessionals can and should work.

It was great for schools to see what working with SNAs should look like—not sending them into separate rooms but having them lead the room. In the PLC, our SNAs were strong and could talk and disagree. The other principals were surprised at how the SNAs were so involved in the PLC discussions. (PrincipalSS-SSI)

The PrincipalSS's observation starts to draw attention to how effective collaboration might involve empowering all stakeholders, especially SNAs, to contribute to school discussions and decision-making processes.

The next subtheme, Power and Empowerment, captures how establishing norms and protocols and creating a safe and supportive environment contribute to managing power dynamics and developing empowerment within the PLC. It reflects how participants felt empowered to speak up, share ideas, and communicate openly, leading to inclusive

participation and a democratic group dynamic.

4.3.2.2 Power and Empowerment

Power and Empowerment, captures the power dynamics within interprofessional relationships and the perceived connection between an individual's power and ability to make a difference and inclusively participate. SNADS1 (SSI) noted the significance of volunteering as it *'felt more empowering'*, especially as *'if you want to be part of it, you have to lead it, designed by us for us.'* SNADS2 (SSI) compares the invitation to lead the PLC to previous experiences of being influenced by power and assigned menial tasks.

You know that saying about being invited to dance and not just attending the party?...This was better than that...because instead of a little invitation to dance, I was asked to decide if I wanted to organise it. It sounds funny...but it is different when you are used to being told to be at photocopiers and laminating.

The behind-the-scenes image of SNAs at photocopiers, laminating and hanging displays was recurrent in some SNA ($n=3$) responses. Additionally, SNASS1 expressed frustration at the power dynamics at work in schools:

You want more of us [SNAs] to fix all the problems...and then you have us as photocopiers. (SNASS1-PLC1-T)

SNAMS1 (SSI) expressed 'luck' that they were never *'chained to the photocopier'* but mentioned that because they were the first SNA in the school and had former training as a teacher, perhaps they had a more significant opportunity to define the role. It may also signify that as a former teacher, SNAMS1 felt they held more power than 'regular' SNAs.

For some teacher and principal participants ($n=4$), acknowledging their power within the group was paramount to maintaining an equitable and balanced dynamic within the PLC. In these data responses, some participants ($n=5$) reflected on the power they held and felt a sense of purpose towards empowering others. For these participants, empowering others meant, at times, exercising silence:

What challenged me was thinking about my power and social capital in the group. I did not want to override anybody in talking, so I kept my mouth shut a lot more and listened... That's... a challenge for experienced teachers not to run in with a solution, to move to coaching roles, asking the questions rather than giving the answers, letting them come up with the solution, and then they are more confident; then they come up with more solutions... When we hold power, we can help or hinder others...You can raise a

colleague, or you can keep them down. It's the same with children.
(TeacherMS1-SSI)

TeacherMS1's deliberate actions in asking questions, providing feedback, and allowing space for others to get involved also served to empower their staff further, reinforcing the development of agency. Similarly, PrincipalMS consciously tried to create a space to empower different voices and balance their participation in the PLC because *'when you know you hold power, you have to hold it lightly'* (PrincipalMS-SSI). To alleviate potential power dynamics, PrincipalMS, like TeacherMS1 (SSI), facilitates others to come to solutions *'by listening and asking questions.'* Both feel these actions will provide opportunities for individual growth that will benefit the school overall. This sentiment was echoed by the other principals ($n=2$) who were glad of the opportunity to give space for others to grow:

I think your call [the researcher] not to have principals on the second PLC was important, to let the other roles grow in confidence, you know, use their voice... without the principals there. (PrincipalDS-SSI)

The idea that principals not being present may have helped others to build efficacy and find their voice was noted by in the (PLC2-RRJ) and by the participants ($n=1$ PLC2-PR) who felt they had *'more confidence speaking this week; it was nice to get to know the teachers and SNAs, more familiarity now with the group'*.

This strategy of stepping back by leaders is crucial in nurturing agency, as it encourages all members to engage deeply, express their ideas, and take initiative without the pressure of hierarchical influence. Such an environment is essential for fostering a sense of ownership and problem-solving among key educational stakeholders. Furthermore, the data demonstrates that leadership across all contexts recognises the need to exercise their power judiciously because of its significant influence on interprofessionals to lead within schools. Consequently, the SNAs ($n=3$) appeared to be empowered to continue to forge a common purpose with their colleagues. There was also agreement ($n=4$) that discussions on power can be a source of discomfort (PLC 1, 3 -RRJ) as *'...they are those difficult conversations that we may not have, but yes, these are discussions that need to happen in schools.'* (PrincipalMS-SSI). PrincipalMS elaborated further on this thread by drawing attention to the use of the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) to *'push us into those harder conversations that maybe I would have said "ah no... not today".'*

Furthermore, the structure of the PLC included guiding key educational stakeholders in establishing norms and protocols as clear expectations for communication, collaboration, and decision-making processes within the PLC. Each PLC began with a review of the established norms and protocols (as devised in PLC1 - Appendix U and included in every PLC participant booklet, Appendix G) and a division of roles, including facilitator, timekeeper, reflection leader, and task leader. TeacherMS1 (SSI) emphasised the roles, helping them to consider hidden voices in the group. For example, *'You gave a person the role of watching turn-taking [facilitator], so we all became more aware of it and who was silent'*. Teacher SS1 (SSI) expressed the importance of establishing roles and protocols so that there is a collective responsibility to build a supportive and safe environment.

The roles and protocols in the PLC helped the atmosphere. You know, making sure everyone is called upon... Then you put us in charge of them, reading them at the start of every meeting and saying... you came up with these, so you uphold them. So, the responsibility was on us, not you.

Interestingly, establishing norms and protocols supported TeacherSS2 to understand an inclusive concept (equity). The importance of a safe and supportive environment for asking questions and understanding important key terms cannot be undervalued, particularly for teachers, where pedagogical language and knowledge are required. Interestingly a barrier to inclusive education is teachers not being able to identify inclusive education in their practice, tangibly something that the PLC supported TeacherSS2 (SSI) to do.

On the first day in the PLC, I thought equity was a banking term, like that Ad, what's a tracker mortgage? It was after the discussion on respect and listening... so I thought I'll ask... [TeacherMS1] explained it to me, with examples from [the] classroom, and I thought oh yes, I do believe in equity and fairness, and yes, it's important, and now I am wondering what examples I can give.

Similar sentiments regarding the atmosphere in the PLC helping 'honest talk' so that participants could express gaps in their practice and inquire into alternative ways of working were expressed in the PLC reflections. On many occasions in the PLC-PRs (Appendix L), a variance in being able to be open and honest was evident in the data and attributed to creating a *'very supportive environment so we can move forward'* (PLC6-PR). In these data extracts, it is evident that key educational stakeholders felt valued, heard and secure within the PLC, key tenants for acting with purpose and agency. Significant also is

the responsibility others felt in upholding the norms and cultivating mutually respectful and honest relationships. There was also a sense of collective leadership towards the norms and protocols, arguably the rotation of roles helped create. It appears the norms and protocols created a framework for democratic interactions, enabling interprofessional collaboration towards a common purpose for developing inclusive education. This influence of Foundations of Inclusive Participation can also be seen in how key educational stakeholders framed Exploring Collaborative Practice within the research.

4.3.3 Exploring Collaborative Practice

The third theme, Exploring Collaborative Practice, expresses how key educational stakeholders describe collaboration particularly the actions, thoughts and processes that participants engaged with when involved in the PLC. Within the data sets, collaborative practice aligned with the framework of the *Ecology of Equity* (Ainscow et al., 2012) 'Within, Between and Beyond Schools' (Ainscow et al., 2012). For this reason, the participants' responses reflecting collaboration are detailed using this framework.

4.3.3.1 Within-School Collaboration

All participants noted ($n=13$) that the PLC was a supportive environment that facilitated the challenging of attitudes and the sharing of knowledge and values towards inclusive education. Many participants ($n=7$ -SSI) mentioned that developing practice between schools required fostering within-school collaboration. Collaboration extended beyond the PLC members and included purposeful efforts to gather the opinions of their school communities (students, parents, and other staff). As illustrated in Table 4.1, for each school, this looked slightly different according to the contexts and the Inclusive Indicator (UNESCO, 2021) they were exploring. The majority of the participants ($n=9$) noted the importance of scheduled meetings within the school (with their colleagues on the PLC) to drive change in the PLC (SSI).

Table 4.1 An Overview of Within-School Collaboration

School Context	Gathered opinions of	Planned Meetings	Incidental Meetings	Gathered opinions
DS	Teachers SNAs Principal Students	YES	YES	WhatsApp Staff Survey Student Photographs Staff Photographs
MS	Students Teachers SNAs Principal	YES	YES	WhatsApp Staff Meeting Flipcharts Student Meetings Student Photographs Staff Photographs
SS	Parents Teachers SNAs Bus Escorts Principal	YES	YES	WhatsApp Phonecalls Flipcharts Emails Parental Photographs Staff Photographs Coffee Morning

Responses to SSI questions highlighted that scheduled meetings were organised in two contexts by formulating a WhatsApp group (SS and MS) where participants would suggest meeting times. What was evident across the three contexts was the person who volunteered at the end of the PLC (to be the task leader) would usually lead in organising the scheduled meeting within schools (PLC 2, 5-RJ). TeacherMS1 (SSI) expressed how the agreed PLC roles helped develop collective leadership in their school meetings and also improve relationships between colleagues:

My relationships with the people from this school who are in the PLC have improved between us. We all contributed to it...There was a lot of volunteerism. And there wasn't one leader. There wasn't one stronger voice than another, which was great, even though the principal was involved. Sometimes, it was the SNA, and I think what helped was that you asked different people to take on the feedback role of bringing it back... we were equal partners.

This emphasises the value of establishing norms and protocols with PLC participants to support collaboration between PLCs. It also identifies how working together can foster better connections between staff. SNAMS1 (PLC5-T) articulated that meeting in the morning navigated the barrier that a busy school presented and was often the recipe for success. Others ($n=10$) also called for short formal meetings focused on the selected indicator that allowed action setting (talking with others) to occur. For them, the small

group meeting helped participants to consider contextual factors; *'I think it's important for the small group to think about the indicator... It made us apply it to our daily life; it was our story to write'* (TeacherSS1-SSI). The DS context noted that due to some barriers (time, school busyness, staff illness), the within school meetings lacked structure at the start. However, SNADS1 (SSI) expressed that it did evolve over the journey of the PLC partially because they observed from others that *'it doesn't have to be an hour'*.

The talking with others within school but outside the PLC was evidenced as supporting momentum and detailed as having a 'Ripple Effect':

I feel that we had our small meeting, and then kind of the ripple effect of each of us going to one or two people after and then feeding back was a process that I found very beneficial because it spurred us on. The small meeting. It's important for the next stage because I don't feel like it would have moved on in the same way without those small meetings in school. (TeacherMS2-SSI)

This collaborative process involved individuals from the PLC seeking alternative perspectives in discussions with one or two colleagues outside of the formal meeting setting, gaining new ideas and feedback. Overall, all the participants in the MS ($n=4$) and SS ($n=5$) expressed value on the importance of these small meetings, suggesting that without them, progress within the PLC would not have been as significant.

4.3.3.2 Between-School Collaboration

The between-school collaboration occurred in the PLC meetings. At each PLC meeting, the participants presented the progress on their Inclusive Indicator (UNESCO, 2021) and invited questions and feedback. For many participants ($n=6$), the feedback in the PLC meetings between schools supported change and critical reflection within school on their indicator. TeacherSS1 opined in the SSI:

I suppose you'd be questioning even before the PLC... I wonder what they will say or think when we share how we have worked since the last day, so you'd think more about what you should do. Then after... it was in your head because you'd think why they saw it like that and how come we haven't tried that, or I wonder if it would work for here.

In this response, TeacherSS1 expressed how publicly sharing the school's progress motivated them to consider their indicator more. TeacherMS2 similarly felt the feedback between schools was motivating but also mentioned how the other schools were sharing

in their improvement; a more critical level of collaborative practice:

When you heard the feedback from the other schools, that was great. That's what we discussed in our small meeting: how the other schools might say something... creating new ideas or ways of looking at it. Also, I appreciated how genuinely enthusiastic they were about our student voice journey. They wanted us to improve and were very interested in our students' words... It might have made me more interested. (TeacherMS2-SSI)

However, there was also a slight feeling of competition between the DS and MS settings. While this could be attributed to both taking similar inquiries, there were times in the SSI when a few participants ($n=3$) thought sometimes there was *'only talk about...all they do'* (TeacherMS1-SSI). In contrast, others felt *'now don't expect as much progress from us'* (TeacherDS1-PLC4-T) and *'we are always behind you playing catch up'* (SNADS2-PLC5-T). As reflected in research, a sense of rivalry or comparison between schools can lead to a lack of collaboration and shared purpose. However, as these schools 'compete' for 'enrolment of students', it is not surprising that elements of competition are present. It also may signify the importance of special schools being involved in clusters as it removes elements of competition and moves all the schools towards cooperation. This was evident in the data where the SS continuously reinforced the need to try harder for the children and their families, reminding each school of their 'common purpose' and collective responsibility to everyone (PLC 1,3,5,6-T). Overall, it emphasises the value of this research in promoting dialogue and fostering partnerships between diverse school contexts to work towards the collective responsibility required for developing inclusive education. As articulated by TeacherMS1 in the SSI:

In time, I felt I knew their purpose... so their purpose became my purpose.

TeacherSS2 said the between-school collaboration created a sense of accountability and responsibility towards progressing their indicators. As a result, competition in the guise of external pressure was a motivating factor for developing inclusive education.

I suppose because you knew it was a few PLCs, it made me more focused in our small meetings, and it was more in-depth and ongoing. I know I missed one of the PLCs, but I went looking to the others to arrange a meeting to find out what I missed, and I got filled in on everything that happened. I felt a responsibility to the group...I knew I couldn't walk in the next day and say Oh, I wasn't here; I'm going to sit back...No, you knew in the public forum you had to speak, so you did your homework. (TeacherSS2-SSI)

The teacher's sense of responsibility extends to ensuring that all members are prepared and actively contribute to the PLC discussions. TeacherSS2 recognised the importance of their role within the group and took the initiative to stay informed about the topics under discussion. This accountability reflects a commitment to personal learning and contributes to the PLC's overall effectiveness by ensuring that all members are actively engaged and contributing to the dialogue. An interesting nuance also emerges here, in the SSI, TeacherSS2 described '*sitting back*' during previous mandatory curriculum PL as they had '*no clue why we were all there.*' TeacherSS2 also mentioned being motivated to engage in the PLC as it aligned with individual interests [RQ1. Theme 1 Drivers of Engagement]. The contrast between their responsibility to the group in the PLC and taking an active role to the juxtaposition of sitting back in mandatory PL. This could highlight the importance of clarity of purpose, ownership of learning and a sense of community in fostering agency and a collective will towards PL. Perhaps, indicating the importance of beyond-school collaboration being explicit with participants from the outset.

4.3.3.3 Beyond-School collaboration

Beyond-school collaboration encompasses the interaction between the external facilitator and the participating schools. Participants mentioned how the university partners role in the PLC made them consider lecturers from an alternative perspective as '*an approachable contact*' who can be considered part of the crew (TeacherSS2-SSI). TeacherMS2 elaborated that they never thought of lecturers as '*critical friends*' that brought '*a fresh perspective*' and a person to '*question our stories*' (TeacherMS2-SSI). TeacherMS2 acknowledged that they no longer saw lecturers simply as individuals who would impart knowledge, but as helpful contacts who understood the complexities of school life. This response was like that of other participants ($n=3$) who felt universities were sometimes disconnected from schools, but this PLC had shown them in a different light and offered potential for collaboration. TeacherMS1 (SSI) appeared to reflect the mutually beneficial knowledge-sharing that can be fostered between universities and schools.

We get very stuck in the lane. And our children are the only children, and no one's met anything like them. Nobody knows the troubles we face. We need somebody to say well...there are 15 schools in a five-mile radius. Why don't you talk to them? They face similar experiences, and you might learn together... but universities get stuck in their lanes too, so you [universities] need schools and

their stories to share with your students.

This reflection resonates with literature that emphasises the importance of building reciprocal partnerships where external facilitators act as brokers of knowledge, enabling collective inquiry and reflection. By acting as bridges between theory and practice, universities may help schools overcome insular thinking but mutually benefit from the insights and contextual expertise schools provide. Interestingly, SNADS2 (SSI) said that they didn't think it should be the end of the collaboration, particularly because of where the school was with progress on their Inclusive Indicator (Appendix V). The school were building on their inquiry into a learning walk and were starting to problem-solve the barriers it might pose but also the opportunities it may offer for observation of practice.

[To the researcher]...we can do it but...we need guidance and help to keep it going. (SNADS2-SSI)

This response highlights how schools may require sustained beyond-school support from a university partner to build the confidence and capacity needed to lead PLCs independently. It also demonstrates how SNADS2 reflected on what their school needed to progress, demonstrating a sense of agency and professional responsibility in their interactions with the university partner. These findings place emphasis on external facilitation from university partners as a means to empower schools to take ownership of their PL journeys while maintaining critical support from external collaborators.

Further data reinforced the critical role of external facilitation in empowering participants through coaching, communication, and creating reflective spaces. Some participants ($n=4$) noted that the researcher's external facilitation during the SSIs empowered them through clear communication and a coaching culture that facilitated a coherent learning experience. It was also noted that the external facilitators emails developed 'within school' collaboration, prompting participants to 'regroup' and explore alternative pathways. TeacherSS2 remarked that the researcher's combination of PLC emails and video stimulus proved helpful in building momentum and empowering participants to clarify their thinking.

The email would include your summary and the added videos to help our thinking... That kept us focused, too, because the next thing somebody would put it in the WhatsApp... great picture or video in the email. (TeacherSS2-SSI)

Additionally, SNASS2 (PLC2-T) referenced this clear communication as helping to *'keep it in your head'* potentially signalling involvement in 'active reflection'. These findings highlight the importance of university partners fostering conditions for critical dialogue where reflective thinking becomes a driver of sustained professional growth. A key feature of this external facilitation highlighted across the PLC reflections was the importance of creating space for participants to lead conversations and critically reflect on practice. This was evidenced in remarks such as *'The silence you leave is very powerful'* (PLC2-PR), with participants noting the facilitator's deliberate decision to remain quiet yet present. SNADS2 (SSI) expanded on this concept:

I felt your presence was nearly quiet but present, and that helped...
From my standpoint, you'd let a whole conversation roll and then...
quietly redirect us back and say I'd like us all to think XY or Z... then
that question would make us think.

These reflections align with research that cautions external facilitators to balance active guidance with opportunities for participants to take ownership of the learning process. The researcher's reflective journal (PLC 1, 2, 3 - RRJ) revealed purposeful decisions to *'stay quiet, allow the silence,'* further demonstrating how facilitation can create the conditions for deep, sustained learning. Additionally, participants valued the facilitator's ability to connect ideas and encourage critical thinking, as one noted: *'You always bring it back to something somebody said, even from weeks back; you help us to join the dots'* (PLC3-PR). This ability to synthesise and reconnect ideas across PLC meetings aligns with the broader principles of distributed leadership and collaborative inquiry advocated for in literature. By linking individual reflections to group progress, the facilitator fostered a culture of trust, shared accountability, and collective growth.

The data demonstrated that external facilitation was crucial in developing beyond school collaboration so key educational stakeholders could engage and interact in interprofessional PLCs. Through active listening, clear communication, and purposeful silence, the facilitator helped create spaces where participants could critically reflect on their practice and collaboratively explore alternative pathways forward. As highlighted in the data, such partnerships must be grounded in trust and mutual learning, with external facilitators helping participants build the capacity to sustain these PL opportunities independently. These findings underline that beyond-school collaboration is not only about

immediate support but also about building the foundations for long-term, equitable, and inclusive educational practices.

4.3.4 RQ1: Summary of Findings

Key educational stakeholders were motivated to engage in the PLC for interprofessional learning, curiosity about diverse school contexts, and dedicated time to focus on inclusive education. These drivers supported their participation in the PLC, where they aimed to learn about and promote inclusive education. Additionally helping them to get involved in the PLC was the adherence to particular structures. The foundations of inclusive participation within the PLC included inclusive voluntary membership, established norms and protocols, and external facilitation. These practices empowered participants to participate actively and collaborate across different school contexts. This structure fostered a safe environment where stakeholders could act with agency and exchange perspectives, enhancing their approaches to inclusive education. Collaborative practice, guided by within, between, and beyond collaboration, proved beneficial as schools shared expertise and insights. Therefore, the collaborative efforts within, between, and beyond the interprofessional PLC have played a pivotal role in reshaping attitudes, knowledge, and values regarding inclusive education. The shaping of these will be explored below under RQ2.

4.4 RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge and values toward inclusive education?

The PLC focused on collaboration between key educational stakeholders and between three school contexts for supporting inclusive education. Data generated constructed two themes: Conceptualising Inclusive Education and Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education. Given the breadth and depth of data gathered, a judicious approach to reporting the findings is required. Consequently, when exploring these two themes, two activities conducted at the start and end of the PLC were considered in detail to identify how participants' attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education changed.

4.4.1 Conceptualising Inclusive Education

The first theme that addresses the second research question consider how inclusive education was conceptualised. This theme represents how key educational stakeholders

described their attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education. To support dialogue and stimulate critical reflection, five anonymous policy/research definitions of inclusive education were provided in PLC1 (Appendix W). The participants discussed the definitions and generated a word cloud detailing their initial conceptions of inclusive education, detailed below in (Figure 4.2). Finally, In PLC6, participants revisited a similar discussion on what they felt were conceptualising inclusive education and articulated these on a word cloud (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.2 Initial Conceptions of Inclusive Education



Figure 4.3 Final Conceptions of Inclusive Education

In PLC 6, no definitions were provided and participants' familiarity with the language from their PLC journey was evident in how comfortable individuals were to engage with the important activity (PLC6-RJJ). This confidence was further highlighted through their contributions to the word cloud (Figure 4.3), where they readily named tangible practices, such as giving non-judgemental feedback, active listening, and fostering empathy. After careful examination of Figures 4.3 and 4.4, it was apparent that belonging, justice, equity, and removing barriers were consistently constructed as key concepts of inclusive education. Consequently, these essential aspects will now be explored in further detail. Additionally, some of the newly highlighted contextual factors (school community and collective responsibility), as depicted in Figure 4.3, will serve as a connecting thread throughout the discussion on 'Conceptualising Inclusive Education' and 'Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education'. These elements will be examined in conjunction with belonging, justice, equity, and removing barriers to provide an understanding of how the participants describe their attitudes, knowledge and values toward inclusive education. It is important to note that newly highlighted interpersonal factors, such as leadership and dispositional factors, like inquiry, also outlined in Figure 4.3 are specifically situated under (RQ3). This distinction is because of their significance within the data for contributing to the development of inclusive education (RQ3).

Initial conversations relating to Conceptualising Inclusive Education indicated agreement across participants ($n=13$) that it *'boils down to belonging and being made to feel you belong'* (SNASS1-PLC1-T). Group 1 particularly drew attention to the NCSE (2011) definition and intimated that by *'removing barriers,' everyone can 'reach their full potential' and 'everyone belongs'* (PLC1-T). When probed further, SNADS2 noted that *'everyone means everyone'* and *'not only students with disabilities but different cultures, ethnicity and backgrounds'* (PLC1-T). While the majority of participants ($n=10$) aligned with the definition of inclusion in the Irish context that is synonymous with SEN, they purposefully broadened their perception of inclusion to recognise 'all students'.

Through the process of collaboration and discourse, it was evident that different groups began to adjust how they defined inclusive education and who was responsible for it. As participants engaged in these discussions, they exercised their agency by redefining their understanding of inclusive education. For example, PrincipalMS said it is *'about the environment in every classroom; every class teacher has responsibility for that'* (PLC1-T).

However, PrincipalDS disagreed, stating, *'It's bigger than the class teacher, and if everybody isn't involved, then it's not consistent'* (PLC1-T). Elaborating further, PrincipalDS expressed:

There's no point in the classroom teacher welcoming the child who is late if the school secretary has reprimanded or tutted at them, so it's everyone's job, it's every teacher, the secretary, the caretaker, the SNA, the bus driver saying hello to the children to the parents and welcoming them in. (PrincipalDS-PLC1-T)

While the PrincipalDS highlights for the group the 'collective responsibility' required to develop belonging for effective inclusive education, an interesting dynamic also emerges in the nuances between DS and MS schools. The PrincipalDS, in their response, sees an inclusive (belonging) environment as being created by the whole school community and beyond the classroom doors. The PrincipalDS places responsibility on everyone and perhaps speaks to their commitment to working in partnership with others. This attitude differs from the PrincipalMS, who initially saw the environment being created in the classroom. Furthermore, while the groups debated and eventually agreed with PrincipalDS that inclusion is *'everyone's responsibility'*, nobody at the initial stages of the PLCs or in Figure 4.2 mentioned the principal's vital role in advocating for this conception of inclusive education.

As illustrated in Figures 4.3 and 4.4 and in discussions throughout the PLC, the majority of participants ($n=10$ PLC 1, 3, 4, 6-T) outlined justice and rights as important for inclusive education. For them, upholding rights involves advocating and elevating the voices of others. TeacherMS1 mentions that it involves being a *'social justice advocate and the voice that speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves'* (PLC3-T). TeacherDS1 suggested that giving voice was *'not judging'* but *'knowing them [children], their challenges and listening'* (PLC1-T). This quote gives us insight into TeacherDS1's awareness that schools are responsible for getting to know students, so they feel accepted and valued. TeacherDS1's quote is representative of others ($n=9$) who felt elevating students' voices meant developing empathy and going beyond surface-level interactions so that *'every learner feels they matter'* (TeacherMS2-PLC1-T). When prompted by to describe what this looked like, in practice, some ($n=3$) mentioned daily everyday actions such as *'hear(ing) their name positively straight away'* (PrincipalDS-PLC1-T) and *'knowing kids' likes and dislikes and planning for those'* (TeacherMS1-PLC1-T). These examples represent the forging of a collective responsibility among the participants to create an environment

where the voices of all students are advocated for (seen, heard, and valued). Interestingly, parent and student voice were added to Figure 4.3. Their inclusion may signify how critical dialogue on the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) has influenced attitudes and values regarding whose voice should be heard and acted on. It may also signify how, in particular, the MS's inquiry into student voice (Figure 4.4 and Appendix E) has impacted views on inclusive education and what it means to 'belong'.

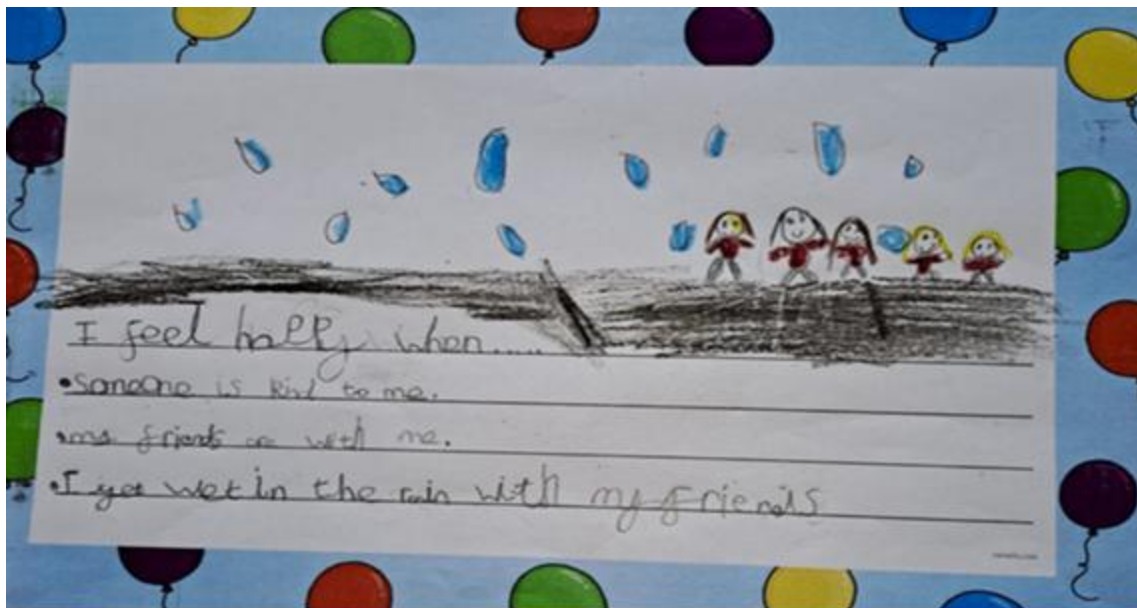


Figure 4.4 Sample Voice of the Student (MS context)

In Figure 4.4, the student's desire for recognition, whether through being helped or praised for their work, highlights the importance of validating students' efforts and achievements within inclusive education. Interestingly, while the students did place an emphasis on the responsibility of the class teacher, they also noted other spaces and connections such as 'assembly', 'yard' and 'visiting other teachers' as making them feel 'happy' or 'noticed' (Appendix E). For the PLC participants ($n=11$ PLC4-T), this reinforced their discussions that inclusive education was a 'collective responsibility' and not one person's sole job. Additionally, the emphasis placed by students and parents (Appendix E and F) on kindness, fun, safety, and being listened to resonated strongly with most PLC participants ($n=6$ PLC4-RJ).

It is so important we listen to them [parents and students]...we are shaping young people... it's a huge job we have to get it right and to do that we must listen to them, they want kindness... they want more fun... we need to do more of it. (SNASS1-PLC4-T)

It was not only school staff that helped students feel that they were valued or belonged; *'being with their friends'* and *'with my class'* also fostered their sense of security. Indeed, the MS context reported that the student's voice expressed a preference and a desire to be creative and work in groups with their friends (PLC4-T). This reflects literature where shared experiences and achievements can foster a sense of community in the classroom- particularly when these opportunities also celebrate diversity.

Some of the more senior student voices expressed a desire to be more involved and have more responsibility, as articulated on their behalf by TeacherMS2, *'as we have a lot to offer'* (PLC3-T). Interestingly, they noted that schools needed to consider their peers' younger, quieter and hidden voices to ensure everyone belonged as otherwise it was *'unfair'* (PLC3-T).

It's a school whole ethos... That involves them. It's the simple but big values, they (the students) are saying that... inclusivity is kindness...participation, it's being involved, it's being recognised by everyone. (PrincipalSS-PLC4-T)

As highlighted by these vignettes, the importance of belonging being constructed beyond school staff and throughout the school community was deemed important for developing inclusive education. However, participants identified significant barriers to inclusive education despite the forging of this common purpose.

4.4.2 Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education

The second theme, Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education, explores how attitudes, values and resulting knowledge-practice gaps can act as barriers to developing equity in schools. Throughout the data, the identification of barriers such as class size limitations, attitudes towards certain students and their capabilities, feelings of exclusion among special school staff, and negative perceptions among teachers regarding students' placements highlights the interplay between stakeholders' attitudes, knowledge, and values as barriers for overcoming inclusive education. Across all schools, identifying barriers to inclusive education seemed to be influenced by key policies relevant to their specific contexts. For example, some of the MS participants ($n=3$) identified challenges resulting from larger class sizes, the DS context ($n=4$) stated the need to advocate for marginalised communities and the SS context ($n=5$) expressed confusion regarding their place in systems of full inclusion. Across all settings, the changing of attitudes and effective

collaboration were noted by all participants ($n=13$) as essential to removing barriers to inclusive education.

Class size was a barrier that was only mentioned in the MS context, highlighting the lower-class sizes in the DS and SS contexts (DE, 2017; NCSE, 2019). Of significance, though, is that the MS and the DS schools are less than 3km apart and share families from similar addresses and socio-economic status. However, despite sharing similar communities, the participants learned that the MS setting had double the number of students in some classes (PLC 1, 2, 5-T).

Class sizes are a barrier to equity as it's challenging to see every student and make them feel seen and nurtured and belonging when there's so many of them. (TeacherMS1-PLC1-T)

This quote gives us insight into TeacherMS1's awareness of the importance of fostering a sense of belonging. However, TeacherMS1 does not believe they individually possess the necessary resources, support, or capacity to effectively meet these needs within the constraints of a large class size. This is interesting, especially considering the PrincipalMS previous assertion that ensuring students 'belong' was the role of the class teacher. This disconnect in the principals' attitude and that of the class teacher could highlight the need for a collaborative approach involving teachers, principals, and SNAs to ensure inclusive education does not become overwhelming for some. SNAMS1 (SSI) noted the belief that SNAs have a significant role in supporting teachers in overcoming the barriers that class sizes can create:

because there's a lot of stuff that we would hear and see with pupils that teachers would not always hear. We are there hearing the little conversations going on... whereas the teachers are concentrating on getting a lesson across to so many of them (students)... so, we might be able to... give feedback on how a child is reacting... You know that that's where we can kind of shine a bit.

This extract is representative of others ($n=12$) who believed that SNAs not being at the table in discussions on student progress was a considerable barrier to inclusive education. All SNAs ($n=5$) knew they could better use their voice to advocate for the students and better help the teacher plan for their engagement.

While the majority of participants ($n=10$) expressed awareness that schools needed to be flexible when working with marginalised communities such as Travellers (an Irish

ethnic minority group), it was identified as crucial within the DS setting. One example mentioned by SNADS2 (PLC3-T) was an interaction with an Irish Traveller parent during COVID-19; SNADS2 stated:

A teacher asked me to ring a Traveller parent to get them to use the SeeSaw (online learning space) for their child's homework. Weeks had gone by, and the teacher said nothing was uploaded. When the mammy picked up the phone, she said she didn't even know how to set up an email address, never mind uploading homework.

This example highlights inequities in access to technology and digital literacy knowledge or skills, particularly for marginalised communities such as Travellers. It also highlights teachers' assumptions and attitudes that 'everyone' would have access and be able to complete this task. This means that the school is missing opportunities to support students by not considering the barriers they may face to engagement. The parents' inability to set up an email address demonstrates a lack of access to resources and support that the school had taken for granted. It also highlights how difficult it is for parents to communicate these barriers to schools *'as there can be a huge stigma to saying, I can't do that for my child'* (PrincipalSS-PLC3-T). SNADS1 (PLC3-T) reflected on this situation and noted the need for increased flexibility of school protocols.

For so many [Traveller] parents, it must be intimidating to come into schools, where you might not have fond memories of the place, so yes, you need flexibility and support... It's thinking about it and asking why, what prevented the engagement?

This quote reflects others ($n=8$) who suggested that developing empathy, being non-judgemental, and working in partnership with school communities were required to overcome barriers to equity (PLC 3, 4, 5, 6-T, Figure 4.3). Fundamentally, participants placed responsibility on school staff to actively work towards understanding the reasons behind any lack of engagement from parents and take steps to address/remove these barriers (flexibility in meetings, providing parental education, changing communication modes PLC3-T). By discussing broader values (equity, Figure 4.2), there is also evidence of them starting to name practices (flexibility around meetings) that demonstrate how broad values (equity) can be better realised in practice.

The SS key educational stakeholders feeling as if they did not belong within the education system was identified as a barrier to inclusive education by all SS school staff within the PLC1-T data and SSIs ($n=5$). All SS participants ($n=5$) felt that this feeling of

exclusion resulted from the recent discourse surrounding full inclusion. PrincipalSS expressed '*confusion and sadness*' regarding whether '*the DE values us, we sometimes feel alone, isolated and excluded, so when you think about children belonging, I wonder do we belong?*'. Here, we can see a 'dichotomy' between whether you're considered 'in' or 'out' of inclusive education, with all SS ($n=5$) staff feeling that they are often 'out'.

A practical example is substituting teachers. I rang a substitute teacher yesterday, and they went quiet when I mentioned a [special school]—followed by...their response... oh, I wouldn't know how to teach in a SS. My response is it's six 6-year-olds and you'll have two amazing SNAs with you. So, I persuaded them... that's my job. I must sell my school at 7.30 am. So, when we talk about barriers, there it is every morning I need a substitute. It is their attitude of not even believing they should try. (PrincipalSS-PLC1-T)

These sentiments drew outward reactions (gasps, sighs, shaking heads) from participants (PLC1-RRJ). Many in their PLC1-PRs ($n=3$) noted that it 'grabbed their attention' that special schools felt '*we want to shut them down*' (Appendix L). Some articulated their surprise verbally during the PLC1 discussion, particularly TeacherDS1, who felt '*shocked to hear this*' as they were '*amazing*', '*did such a good job*' and '*I wouldn't be able to do your job*' (PLC1-T). While the comments were intended to support the special school principal, they reinforced the principal's assertion that they are 'othered' in the Irish education system. TeacherDS1 demonstrated an 'othering' of special schools by intimating that it's not a place for all teachers. In the end, TeacherSS1 (SSI) expressed frustration at mainstream attitudes:

To hear other teachers' perceptions of themselves and what they would be capable of taking on. So many say... I could never do that... I didn't know if I could do it... But I gave it a go. They would immediately be like; I won't even try. And that would get to me, because kids deserve us all to try, the families deserve us all to try.

These interactions reflect literature where teacher attitudes contribute to reluctance among mainstream teachers to engage with or teach in special education settings. However, many participants felt in the SSIs ($n=5$) that these attitudes were understandable because the system (for example, Initial Teacher Education [ITE]) supports teachers not trying in certain settings, which further 'others' them. SNASS1 (PLC1-T) builds on 'othering' experiences by ITE colleges in which they send students to 'observe' in a SS but not teach.

I know it's important to learn from seeing. I learn daily by looking, but I forget it if I don't try what I see... Why would you send somebody training to be a teacher, not to teach and only in this one type of school...teach everywhere else but here put your feet up

and watch? (SNASS1-PLC1-T)

Others ($n=2$ PLC1-T) built on this contribution and acknowledged that when teachers are not expected or encouraged to teach in SS contexts, it can perpetuate deficit attitudes and limit opportunities for inclusive education. There was also agreement across the participants ($n=13$ PLC1-T) that if teachers leave ITE with certain attitudes towards certain children (particularly with disabilities), it further contributes to the separation of mainstream and special education.

Throughout the PLCs (PLC 1-6-T), it was suggested that changing attitudes is essential to overcome Overcoming Barriers to Inclusive Education, as reflected by SNASS1 (PLC6-T), who noted, *'you need your staff on board as they are the ones that can lead the change'*. However, some participants ($n=4$) acknowledged that attitudes are hard to change and, as a result, are the real barrier when developing equitable practice. In the SSI and (PLC1-T) TeacherSS2 shared their experience with mainstream teachers on a PL course:

The [Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-handicapped Children] TEACCH course is a 5-day highly sought-after course; ...I was thrilled to get on it...I knew it would help my boys. They [mainstream classroom teachers attending] were all so negative...They were feeding off each other... They were all attending under duress because of this one child who they claimed had ...rocked up and ruined everything for them. They were saying I didn't know what to do. How am I supposed to include them? ...I was shocked that they'd talk about children this way. They looked at me, saying they should be with you in a SS. I sat and thought, but we went to the same colleges...I've done no more ...or no less than you. (TeacherSS2-SSI)

The above extract reflects literature where deficit attitudes can result in a preference by some for segregating students. There is also a sense of helplessness and being 'ill-equipped' emerging from mainstream teachers' attitudes, where they are less likely to lead change. However, TeacherSS2 identified in their SSI that while they initially saw it as a *'mainstream teacher off on a rant'*, they now wonder if *'they were... probably looking for help... why didn't I reach out and say let's stay in touch'*. This gives us insight into the possibility of TeacherSS2's commitment to inclusive education broadening to include supporting teachers in mainstream settings. It also identifies the need for people within the system (SNAs, teachers, and principals) to change the system by collaborating for equity and supporting those who may feel a lack of efficacy in their capacity to lead inclusive education

for all.

All participants recognised collaboration with diverse school contexts to overcoming barriers to inclusive education as invaluable ($n=13$) as it allowed for the evolution of attitudes and a deeper understanding of the varied needs of students. For instance, participants from different contexts brought unique perspectives to the table; those from the DS context were very attuned to the socio-economic backgrounds of their students, those from MS were focused on the academic needs, and participants from SS contexts stressed the holistic needs of their learners (PLC 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 -T). As a result, this diversity of perspectives has helped some teachers ($n=3$) identify gaps in their teaching practices and consider improvements to address their students' needs better. For example, TeacherSS1 (PLC 1, 6-T) highlighted the importance of considering factors like sleep and diet in ensuring students' readiness to learn. This critical dialogue prompted TeacherDS1 to question in (PLC6-T) if they needed to '*think more like the SS*' and be more attuned to the holistic needs (sleep and diet) of the autistic students transitioning to the classroom during the day. SNADS2 similarly noted that using visual schedules in all MS classrooms made them consider how inclusion was supported throughout the school (PLC3-T). Overall, including participants from different school contexts and diverse perspectives has contributed to a richer understanding of overcoming barriers to inclusive education.

4.4.3 RQ2: Summary of Findings

The interprofessional PLC has been instrumental in transforming the theoretical concepts of inclusive education into tangible knowledge and practice, while fostering collective responsibility and values for overcoming barriers to inclusive education. Through critical dialogue and collaboration, stakeholders have developed a shared 'language of practice,' challenging existing attitudes while fostering new ideas and knowledge. This collaborative effort has empowered stakeholders to conceptualise inclusive education and identify strategies for equitable practices, emphasising the role of school community dynamics and the importance of listening to parental and student voices. The achievement of this understanding was attributed to various factors explored under (RQ3).

4.5 RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

The key educational stakeholders identified several factors that contributed to developing inclusive education. Again, a judicious approach to articulating the data is utilised, focusing on three critical themes: Leadership, Critical Reflection, and Inquiry. The rationale for focusing on these themes includes the significance participants placed on leadership and the importance of critical reflection and inquiry-based approaches in supporting the development of inclusive education.

4.5.1 Leadership

The first theme, 'Leadership', outlines the leadership practices and actions necessary to develop and influence inclusive education. When comparing both word clouds (Figure 4.2 and 4.3), it is noteworthy that leadership is a prominent feature in the second but notably absent from the first. This emergence of leadership reflects the significance participants placed on leadership contributing to inclusive education. It also appears from the data that leadership is seen as being both a formal role and a shared practice where others are given the space to develop agency and lead. For example, SNAs engaging in leading practices within the PLC were identified by all principals and teachers ($n=8$) in the data. The principals and teachers noted that the SNAs took responsibility for organising meetings, reminding groups of their tasks and generally ensuring, as TeacherDS1 noted in the SSI, that '*momentum*' was maintained. Interestingly, SNAMS1 indicated in their SSI that adopting a leadership role within the PLC was intentional. By deliberately taking on a leadership position, SNAMS1 hoped to influence other staff members to adopt, or at least become more aware of, inclusive education, particularly to overcome the pressure their colleagues are under.

Teachers are up to their neck(s)... So that's why I ended up doing more...looking back...I was freer at the time. And it made sense for me to take it up (SNAMS1-SSI)

Based on observations within the PLC and the subsequent SSIs, much of the SNA leadership was based on ensuring everyone had access to relevant information. For example, colleagues in the MS setting ($n=3$) later expressed awareness that SNAMS1 was instrumental in sharing knowledge regarding the PLC with other colleagues in the school. This leadership included developing briefing documents discussed in a staff meeting (PLC5-

RRJ). By engaging in leadership practices within the PLC, SNAs exercised agency, demonstrating ownership over their PL and contributing to the group's common purpose and towards inclusive education. This empowerment was crucial in fostering a culture where all members felt confident to effect change within and between their schools.

The leadership role of SNAs was consistent across the schools, where they were commended for initiating meetings and reminding others of the group's focus. SNASS2 adopted a facilitator and mediator role, moving on from a more logistical role. This included seeking collective agreement and active collaboration across the group during discussions and negotiating different opinions ($n=4$), (PLC4-RRJ). These behaviours reflect a deep commitment towards inclusive education. The extract below gives us an insight into SNASS2s motivations and commitment to the SNA profession, where a moral purpose towards inclusive education was constructed.

Everyone needs to take a leadership role on it, because everyone needs to own it...an inclusive environment, it's not just left to one person, not just left to management. And I think as we went through our journey, that's something that we definitely learned as well...inclusion is everyone's role. (SNASS2-SSI)

Overall, these findings demonstrate the essential role that SNAs played in leading inclusive education. Additionally, leadership modelling specific behaviours were noted across the majority of SNA and teacher participants SSIs ($n=7$). For example, SNADS2 (SSI) describes a valuable reflective process that the PrincipalDS engaged with.

[PrincipalDS] would say we're not doing that well enough, as in we need to work on that because I'm not doing that, and I need to be doing this better; [PrincipalDS] admits something that [they]...think is [not] working to its full ability. [PrincipalDS] has got no problem in saying what we must work on... [PrincipalDS] is not like, we're great, we're fabulous. That's refreshing because it makes you think about your practice.

The willingness of the principal to cultivate a culture of growth and development by being open and honest in their dialogue was acknowledged across all the settings. For all SNA and teacher participants ($n=10$), leadership actions were purposeful and transparent, particularly actions such as asking questions, giving feedback and celebrating others. The SNAs and teachers expressed a development of trust because they could see that the principal's actions were for the betterment of a common purpose. By fostering an environment where growth and reflection are prioritised, the principals created the

conditions necessary for agency to be developed. Their openness and honesty in acknowledging areas for improvement not only modelled the value of sustained PL but also encouraged others to lead. This approach highlights how distributed leadership facilitates agency by providing the time, space, and support needed for individuals to explore new ideas, take risks, and engage in leadership from the bottom-up. Hence, others are more willing to act and engage in similar processes.

In addition to modelling critically reflective and collaborative processes, principals were recognised for helping to develop a language for practice and changing knowledge. For example, Teacher SS2 (SSI) mentioned that leadership's key role was to help them understand more complex concepts.:

...even with the framework and there were, I suppose, more complicated words on it...we'd chat through it. [PrincipalSS] is great for that as [they'd] be into research, so we'd chat through what I'd have seen as jargon before and nearly resented...I came to appreciate it.

It was also evident in the data that all SNA and teacher participants ($n=10$) felt no reluctance to act with agency by suggesting ideas or making contributions to lead practices within the PLC. Indeed, it appears that there were conscious efforts on behalf of the principals to operate from a distributed leadership perspective so other leaders would emerge. Arguably, this reflects trust and confidence in their staff to lead the school's vision for inclusive education. As PrincipalSS noted in their SSI *'People get on with it themselves so you can be their sounding board, but they'll move with it themselves if you let them.'* Additionally, PrincipalMS, in their SSI, reflected a relief that there was a mutual acceptance that everybody has the potential and responsibility to lead inclusive education:

And the nice thing about it was it worked well for me in one way, not having to lead it. And I purposefully wanted to not lead it, or not be seen to lead it. And it was really interesting to see how somebody was taking a different lead almost every week and we'd all take turns... It was really good to share that responsibility, the leadership of it. (PrincipalMS-SSI)

The principal's decision not to take on a dominant role arguably reflects an understanding of the benefits of distributed leadership and supporting others to develop agency and lead together. By supporting different individuals to 'take the lead' on various aspects of the inquiry and the PLC, the responsibility was shared among the key educational stakeholders. As a result, agency is developed through collaboration and collective ownership of inclusive

education. A distributed leadership model also ensures that diverse voices are elevated and valued in decision-making- a democratic principle of PLCs. Having a diversity of perspectives involved and sharing leadership enriches discussions so that more critical reflection can occur that offers alternative paths forward.

4.5.2 Critical Reflection

The second theme, 'Critical Reflection', captures the 'meaning-making' that contributed to the development of inclusive education. Participants were invited to engage with the participant reflection template throughout the PLC (Appendix L). There was evidence from some participants that the initial layout of the reflection template was overwhelming ($n=5$). After PLC3, participants suggested changing the reflection template to include fewer but broader questions to support their thoughts, as with so many prompts, *'it felt daunting'* (PLC3-RRJ). The participants identified that the broader questions helped to *'clarify my understanding...it didn't feel that I had to give certain answers'* (SNASS2-PLC4-T). The preference for broader question statements within the group's 'participant reflections' may also align with the group's satisfaction using broad statements of practice encompassed within the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). It also indicates that participants have ownership and are acting with agency in the PLC and are demonstrating this by leading changes to how they 'do business' within the PLC. Interestingly, some participants ($n=5$) expressed uncertainty with the purpose of the 'participant reflection' template and commented, *'What do you want us to write on these?'* (TeacherSS2-PLC1-T) and *'Don't mention reflection sheets because I never know what to write'* (TeacherDS1-PLC2-T). These insights offer evidence of the need for 'participant reflections' to move beyond written templates and be supported by a process of reflection for interprofessional learning within PLCs. It also demonstrates that through critical reflection, participants identified areas for improvement and took ownership of the process by suggesting and implementing changes. This critical reflective practice is instrumental in developing agency, as it encouraged the key educational stakeholders to problem-solve in their own practice.

At the start of their PL journey, the schools were invited to critically reflect on an Inclusive Indicator (UNESCO, 2021) that worked well in their context and show evidence by photographing where this was demonstrated in their practice. Each school selected a different indicator and approached the process in various ways, as highlighted in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 The Chosen Inclusive Indicators for Critical Reflection

School	Chosen Indicator	Approach to the Process
DS	(3) There are high expectations for all students	The group chose one practice and represented it with four photographs (stages of the process).
MS	(2) Students are equally valued	Each participant discussed with others and took a picture of the practice in agreement with one other person (4 photographs).
SS	(6) The school is accessible to all students	Each participant discussed with others in their school (outside the PLC) taking five different photographs and gathering them together in a document.

(Source: UNESCO, 2021, p.16)

A critical conversation regarding the school's choices of indicators and how they reflected was explored in PLC2. The MS context expressed how they initially had chosen indicator 1 (everyone is made to feel safe and welcome). However, after meeting and discussing the minor indicator prompts, they felt many gaps still existed. TeacherMS2 (PLC2-T) explained to the group:

Well, we thought we did indicator 1 well, but when we talked about accessible information, we gave examples of where we didn't do that, so we couldn't consider it the one we were achieving well.

This established a success criterion for their reflection (PLC2-RRJ). Interestingly, the group identified having to be able to state an example in practice before being satisfied that it was being achieved. They also shared how reflecting on the indicator challenged the group to reach a consensus, and disagreement over it had proved lively (PLC2-T). SNAMS1 (SSI) and TeacherMS2 (SSI) mentioned that collaboration in the school '*was newer*', so they were keen to use the indicators to guide them. Contrastingly, the DS context in explaining the picture for their indicator also acknowledged:

As soon as we heard the task, we clicked our fingers and said, that's what we will choose. Straight away, we didn't need to think about it; we knew we could assign the indicator to this. (SNADS1-PLC2-T)

The DS context's response demonstrates that they moved straight to the action (taking the photograph) and missed the critical reflection on why they chose the indicator.

Interestingly, they stated in their discussion when the process identified in the picture was introduced, many teachers felt '*Oh no, not another thing to do*' and '*teachers are tired of things*' (PLC2-T)—perhaps indicating initiative fatigue due to cycles of continuous action.

maybe our school takes on too many initiatives and they are fantastic initiatives... it's just too overloaded that you feel like you're always trying to do something, but you are doing nothing (TeacherDS1-SSI).

This is an interesting dynamic to emerge from the DS context as they are mandated to set continuous actions for DEIS planning (DE, 2005; 2017). Hence, in efforts to meet policy demands (the plan, the product), the process (collaboration and reflection) may have been lost to accountability. However, as acknowledged, the DS context reflected on their colleagues' stories and did conclude that they needed to:

Ensure we are giving this adequate time as a school group. The other schools spent more time thinking about the indicators. (SNADS1-PLC2-T)

Participants also reflected on the use of photographs to support critical reflection. Firstly, the data demonstrates that the participants found the photographs made them feel at ease coming to PLC2 because '*I thought if all else failed...they could look at my picture.*' (SNASS1-PLC2-T). They also stated how the photographs helped to build connections and de-privatise practice as '*you could see in their classrooms, see their practice*' (TeacherSS1-PLC2-T). What was evident across the data ($n=5$) was how the process of taking the photographs facilitated critical reflection:

We met twice to discuss the indicators and what photographs to take among ourselves... Then, to reach out to others, we left a flipchart outside the staff room door so others would give ideas and suggestions for photographs, which they did. Some words people left on the flipchart were visuals, sensory approaches and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. So, our photographs reflect the various approaches that supported learners in participating and learning. (TeacherSS1-PLC2-T)

When prompted by in PLC2-T to discuss the process involved in taking the photographs, SNASS1 indicated that this approach '*stayed in my [their] head; it took up headspace... it was quick, but God, it made me think.*' (SNASS1-PLC2-T)

The MS context also spoke to the critical reflection and collaborative process they engaged in to decide on their photographs:

We each allocated one person we had to talk to check what they thought of the picture and indicator we had chosen. ..So we picked a staff member across different demographics (senior, junior SNAS and teachers) and contacted them to see whether they thought of the photographs and if they felt it showed that indicator. (SNAMS1-PLC2-T).

This response demonstrates the critical reflection in selecting who the PLC members should speak with, ensuring a mixture of staff voices. This interaction also demonstrates that SNAMS1 is living their purpose for involvement within the PLC where they mentioned being motivated to help the whole school. Additionally, as the external facilitator prompted and coached participants to describe the process, creating space for critical reflection on collaboration. For example, TeacherDS1 (PLC2-T) interjected that they noticed:

We didn't do anything like that; what's standing out for me is you both involved the rest of your staff about the photographs. You have got great ideas from others.

However, the size of their school was offered on some occasions (PLC2-T, PLC3-T, PLC4-T) as a barrier to reaching out by SNADS1. Interestingly, SNAMS1 (PLC4-T) clarified, *'But it's only one person we spoke with, not the whole school, so that can be helpful'*. This response plausibly challenges the assumption that collaboration is impossible in some contexts and identifies the need to start small but to start.

Further reflection on the photographs allowed participants to consider whether practices in their schools supported inclusive education. In PLC2 this entailed reflecting on photographs that depicted accessibility (SS), equal value (MS) and achievement (DS). The PLC2-PRs ($n=4$) identified that participants saw this practice as positive, as *'When we saw the photographs from other schools, it opened up new ideas'*. Others noted in the semi-structured SSI that:

The photographs made it real; inclusion wasn't a module in college to be learned off. It was something you could touch. (SNADS1-SSI)

TeacherMS2 offered in (PLC2-T):

Our different interpretations of an indicator are amazing. When I saw that indicator, I saw it to do with academic achievement, but your photograph shows rewarding kindness as having high expectations. My mind went straight to academics, and I think when we saw that indicator in our school group, we all thought of academics.

TeacherMS2 engaged in critical and open reflection on how they operate within the classroom (a focus on achievement) that may not consider the broader self-actualisation of the learner. TeacherMS2 further elaborated that it made them more curious *‘to get to know a student I kind of had in my head that academics might not be their interest area’* (SSI). Hence, TeacherMS2 is interested in inquiring further into their practice due to critical reflection on the photographs. This attitude highlights the connection between reflective practice and cycles of inquiry.

4.5.3 Inquiry

The third theme of inquiry captures the curiosity, questioning and exploration of existing practices that schools engaged in and attributed to developing inclusive education. Inquiry was a key element of the PLC as all schools’ contexts had to investigate and inquire into an area of practice, using the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) for development. While initially, the MS context picked Indicator 7, their critical reflection on Indicator 2 (Students are equally valued) continued to gain momentum. Therefore, Indicator 2 remained a focus while intertwining Indicator 7 (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3 The Chosen Inclusive Indicators for Inquiry (Source: UNESCO, 2021, p.16)

School	Chosen Indicator	Hidden Voices	Gathered opinions by
DS	(7) Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn	Staff	WhatsApp Staff Survey Student Photographs Staff Photographs
MS	(2) Students are equally valued (7) Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn	Students Staff	WhatsApp Staff Meeting Flipcharts Student Meetings Student Photographs Staff Photographs
SS	(5) There is a partnership between staff and families	Parents	WhatsApp Phonecalls Flipcharts Emails Parental Photographs Staff Photographs Coffee Morning

As a result, over the course of the PLC, the SS and DS schools reflected and inquired into two indicators, and the MS into three. Combining an additional indicator allowed the

MS school to take a holistic approach to inclusive education, acknowledging it as a process requiring attention to various partnerships (UNESCO, 2021). The different approaches taken by the schools highlight the autonomy and agency developed in the PLC's safe and supportive environment. Key educational stakeholders all expressed similar views ($n=13$) that the 'breadth' of the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) helped to support inquiry ($n=5$). Their experiences using the indicators provide a rationale for how the MS context could align two indicators, as they allow for flexibility in addressing different dimensions of inclusive education. As a result, key educational stakeholders bought into the framework as they started to value how the statements were interconnected, adaptable to context, and aligned with their common purpose.

The broad tasks provided structure, but we could make our own of them. We all went in different directions, which was interesting.
(PrincipalSS-SSI)

Interestingly, this aligns with what the principal noted as a reason for getting involved in the PLC - the opportunity for staff to lead the agenda. In PLC2-PR ($n=1$), it was evidenced that:

I loved seeing the different...ways each of the schools approach their indicators. I felt that all groups had such valuable information about inclusion – much of which I had never even considered to be 'inclusion' before.

The MS context was influenced by their student voice and led an inquiry into student-led lessons. This involved a selection of students devising and delivering the content of a curricular area (Physical Education) to their peers. TeacherMS2 articulated in the SSI the impact of the inquiry-led lesson on the culture in the classroom:

Like a child came up to me wanting to run a lesson in the class, you know, the student-led lessons... He showed an interest in talking to me about it. That's massive for that child to initiate a conversation about learning... It's opened up kids...I think it's massive that he was interested in doing it because he saw his peers doing it. It inspired others, a bit like the PLC, where we all gave each other confidence and the space to speak...It's the culture. It's a culture of their (student) voice being included; they all want to be part of it, which is new for me. They are shocked. [TeacherMS2] is asking us!, and I'm shocked because children I didn't think would respond are enthusiastic.

The impact of the inquiry into student voice was not isolated to their classroom and a 'ripple effect' was evident. The PrincipalMS opined how the inquiry-led lesson has made

the school consider *‘how effectively we use student voice and how it can influence our learning [Indicator 7]?’* (PLC4-T). To get a better indication, PrincipalMS described asking others to reflect on student voice and some great ideas have come back via *‘email, voice note and ...post-its to my office’* (PLC5-T). These ideas included using picture books on diversity topics to gather student feedback and inform future school planning (PLC5-T). Additionally, the SS context was particularly buoyed by the efforts of the MS context, prompting consideration of how their chosen inquiry (Indicator 5- partnership between staff and parents) could enhance connections for students who communicate without words. TeacherSS1 (PLC6-T) noted the purpose of their investigation:

To help us bring their two worlds together, which is so important for autistic children. Sometimes, those two worlds can be separate.

To support them in achieving their purpose, the SS context developed an accessible communication system where parents could communicate efficiently using their phones via photographs, voice notes and emojis (Figure 4.5).

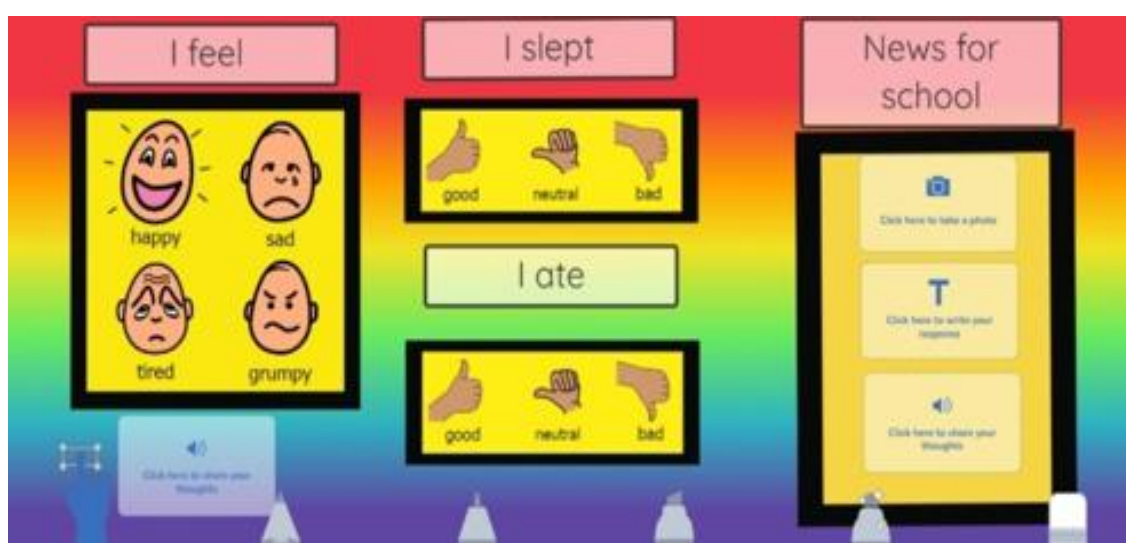


Figure 4.5 Sample of the Communication APP (SS Context)

The system was developed as a prototype, and parents in some classes would trial it and provide feedback before utilising it with the whole school. The goal was to overcome barriers identified by parents, like not having a pen or losing the communication book and language barriers to written communication (PLC3, 4 -T). However, somewhat influenced by the MS context, the SS context broadened its inquiry to explore student voice.

The inquiry approach taken with parental voice in the SS context positively impacted students in the classroom by allowing TeacherSS1 (SSI) to better understand a

student's interests. As parents sent more photographs of students in their home settings, the SS staff got to know the students' likes and dislikes better.

It was his curiosity that... got me, he was sitting on the couch eating his toast and he looked at the picture and he stopped and he started moving his hands up and down and then he looked back at me and back at the picture and I could hear him thinking... that's a picture of me how'd you get that picture of me... he was curious about how I had it and then he was excited. (TeacherSS1-SSI)

The teacher's recognition of the students' behaviour in communicating satisfaction reveals 'open-mindedness' and a genuine commitment to getting to know their students at a deeper level. The inquiring stance on overcoming communication barriers could be significant for bringing 'worlds' together. This inquiry process demonstrates a strong sense of agency, particularly amongst TeacherSS1, where they were encouraged through interactions in the PLC to take the initiative in exploring solutions to overcome barriers to communication. As a result of this inquiry, others in PLC6 noted *'that language shouldn't be a barrier to listening to student's voice'* (TeacherMS2-PLC6-T) and ($n=2$ DS-PLC6-T) expressed interest in using the communication system for students transitioning from the special class. These sentiments demonstrate how inquiry using evidence (Parental data) can make space for new thinking, thus advancing inclusive education for everyone.

The majority of participants ($n=8$) acknowledged the data sources (evidence) as supporting inquiry for inclusive education. PrincipalSS (SSI) mentioned:

Yeah, it's hard to make data exciting and I found it was hard to push data in this school, but now in the PLC they see pictures as data, they've got it, and they love it. Just helped that little bit of inquiry.

To further build on data use, the participants in PLC5 ranked possible data sources to support further inquiry into their Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). All professional groups mentioned observation of practice as a key data source for improving inclusive education (PLC5-T). PrincipalMS1 (PLC5-T) expressed:

There is untapped potential in our staff, and we could learn so much from observing each other, but it needs to start small, be a pilot, and be done correctly so others follow. It does need to start, but the relationship-building needs to happen first, and maybe that's where we go next.

The MS and SS context note the insights from DS inquiry (Appendix V) as helping them critically reflect on why teachers feel such judgement from observation of practice (PLC5-

RJJ). PrincipalSS (PLC5-T) (who has experience facilitating workshops for Newly Qualified Teachers [NQTs]), feels that historic practices where:

Teachers were inspected, even that word, the critiquing of them so many have survival experiences whereas if we moved to more supportive models, I think teachers would view observation differently.

Contrastingly, the SNAs express no hesitation to observe for inquiry and express confusion that teachers would view it as judgement '*as the only reason to observe somebody is to learn, is it not?*' (SNASS1-PLC3-T). There is an interesting dynamic emerging here between SNAs and teachers. During SNA undergraduate PL, none of the SNAs present had any experience of formal observation carried out by the inspectorate.

Staff reluctance to observe each other may have hindered the development of inquiry and inclusive education within the PLC. However, rather than move to 'push' staff into the practices, time and care were taken to tease out the reluctance.

Is it my experience of college observations that makes me so fearful of observation? I could imagine being up all night worrying about a colleague coming into my class. I asked others in school, and they said no, no way, I don't want somebody coming in critiquing me. (TeacherDS1-PLC6-T)

This was important as many staff ($n=7$) emphasised the need to build trust in their colleagues and senior management regarding the purposes of such practices (PLC 5, 6-T). Consequently, this study did not include practice observation, but some ($n=2$ PLC5-PR) participants have noted the potential for future development.

It struck me that it could easily be the starting point/pilot project for broader observation and should create lesson creation among all staff. (PLC5-PR)

This vignette highlights the inquiring stance required for using observation as a stimulus for improving school practice. It also demonstrates how I ensured that PLC participants led actions, ultimately developing agency and fostering ownership of the process by challenging attitudes and deepening knowledge and values regarding observation.

4.5.4 RQ3: Summary of Findings

SNAs, teachers, and principals played a pivotal role in leadership to develop inclusive education. In this sense, the principals modelled behaviours such as not having all the answers, being reflective of their practice, and providing time and space for collaboration within and between school contexts. Others noticed these behaviours and were more motivated to engage and take ownership of the inquiry process. The PLC participants leveraged data in various forms (photographs and feedback from students, parents and staff) to inquire into developing inclusive education in their diverse contexts. Ultimately, using data and evidence for critical reflection and inquiry in this PLC supported the key educational stakeholders in considering the changes and learning required to contribute to supporting inclusive education.

4.6 Conclusion

Overall, this research sought to explore the experiences of collaboration between key educational stakeholders across different school contexts within a PLC regarding the development of inclusive education.

Schools are little islands; they are isolated, so it is good to bring schools together, learn together, and try harder together.
(TeacherSS2-SSI)

This quote encompasses the transformative experience this interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC had on the attitudes, knowledge and values of the participants involved. As described in the quote, the interprofessional PLC across different school contexts has united 'islands' and forged a collective responsibility towards developing inclusive education. The next chapter will discuss how these findings might be used to guide key educational stakeholders' interprofessional learning across diverse school contexts.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This research explored the experiences of key educational stakeholders collaborating across different schools within a PLC to develop inclusive education. The key educational stakeholders in the PLC included SNAs, teachers, and principals. The critical literature analysis in Chapter 2 resulted in the conceptual framework (Figure 2.2), which informed the interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC for developing inclusive education. The Conceptual Framework (Figure 2.2) incorporated the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) (Appendix B) and the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) (Appendix A) to foster critical reflection, discussion, and inquiry. Both frameworks were presented to the key educational stakeholders at the start and throughout each of the PLCs. This chapter summarises and contextualises the major contributions of this thesis in the context of previous research and literature (Chapter 2).

The major contribution of this research's findings was the development of an Inclusive Development in Education for All (IDEA) Framework, outlined on the next page (Figure 5.1). The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) builds upon the initial conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) by providing a more focused approach to PL and collaboration. It takes the broad principles of the MATAIPPA Framework and the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021), translating them into tangible practices designed to enhance interprofessional learning and leadership across school contexts. This stronger emphasis on PL within the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) ensures that the PLC's collaborative efforts are theoretical and practically grounded, leading to sustainable change for developing inclusive education. As a result, it is a collaborative blueprint that provides practical guidance and structure for SNAs, teachers, and principals to collaborate across various school contexts to promote effective collaboration and interprofessional learning for inclusive education.

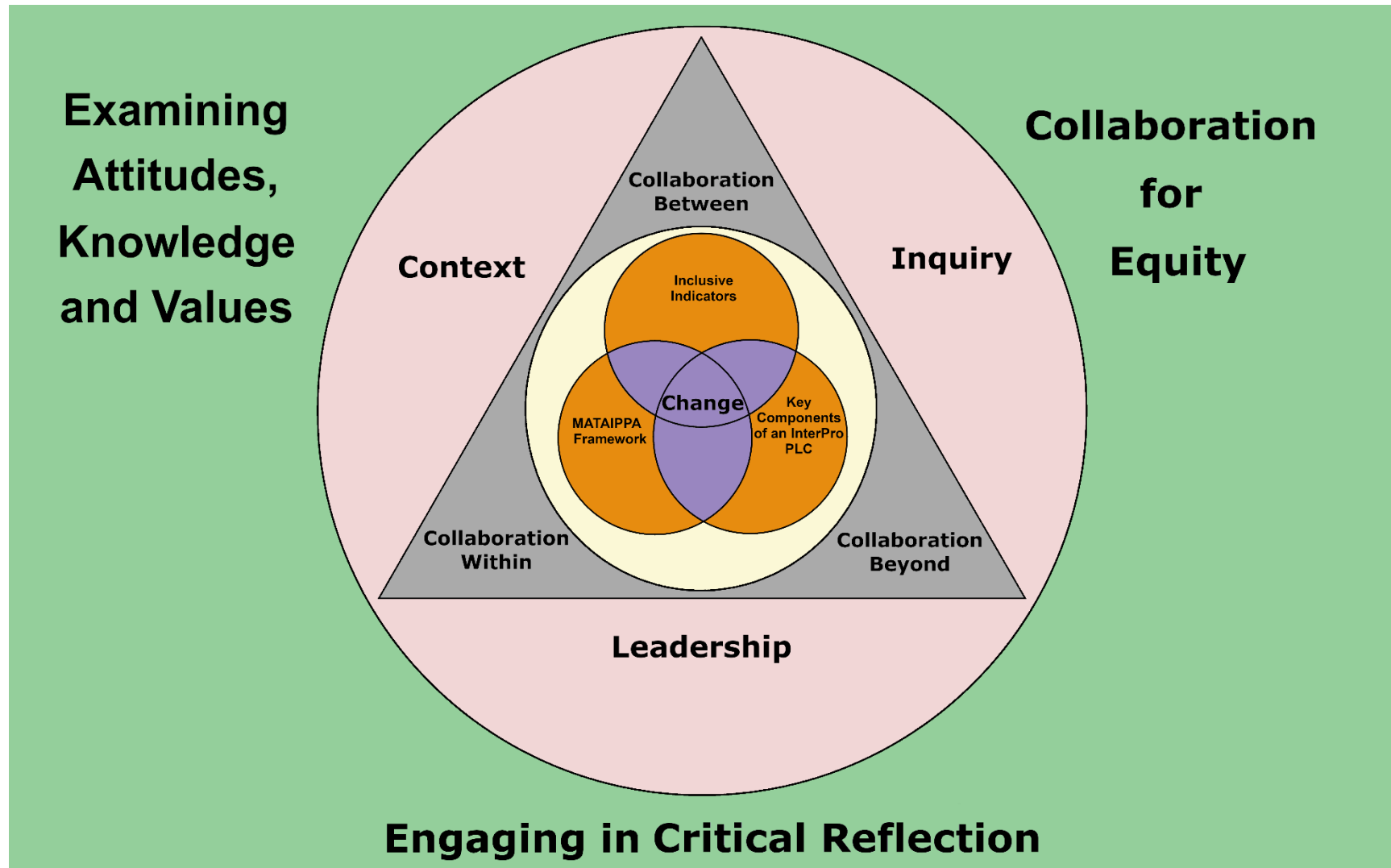


Figure 5.1 Inclusive Development in Education for All (IDEA) Framework

5.2 Inclusive Development in Education for All (IDEA) Framework

The findings of this research provide valuable insights into how 'collective responsibility' for inclusive education can be fostered among key educational stakeholders. Furthermore, it underlines the importance of effective collaboration (Pantić and Florian, 2015; Florian, 2017; UNESCO, 2021) and shared purpose, in this instance, inclusive education (Pantić and Florian, 2015; EASNIE, 2020; NCSE, 2024). The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) comprises three distinct but interconnected layers, each contributing to the development of inclusive education. At its core is 'change,' which focuses on the key educational stakeholders, indicating shifts in their attitudes, knowledge, and values regarding inclusive education. This transformative aspect of the framework was evident in the findings, where stakeholders detailed changes by acting with increased agency and efficacy through inquiry and critical reflection when collaborating for equity. The IDEA Framework provides guiding principles to support inclusive education and collaboration. It encourages critical reflection, professional growth, and collective agency, helping schools adapt to their unique contexts while promoting equity and social justice. These key terms are outlined next in Table (5.1) to guide and support those interested in developing and sustaining school-to-school interprofessional collaboration.

Table 5.1 Key Terminology within the IDEA Framework

Term	Description
Change	Central to the IDEA framework, focusing on shifting attitudes, knowledge, and values through critical reflection, inquiry and collaboration.
MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015)	A framework that supports developing agency and inclusive pedagogical practices by focusing on four key aspects: Purpose (commitment to social justice and motivation), Competence (inclusive pedagogy expertise), Autonomy (efficacy, collaboration, and contextual factors), and Reflexivity (critical reflection and justification of professional actions).
Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021)	A supportive framework to evaluate current inclusive education and identify areas for improvement through structured prompts.
Key Components of an Interprofessional PLC	These are the core principles that foster collaboration within PLCs. Particular attention is drawn to the need for diverse interprofessional collaboration, external facilitation adopting a coaching perspective and attention to power-dynamics.
Collaboration Within	Collaboration efforts directed at improving equity and inclusivity within a single school context and community.
Collaboration Between	Collaboration between schools to share knowledge, challenge practices, and foster mutual growth.

Collaboration Beyond	Extends collaboration to partnerships beyond schools, including universities and external organisations.
Leadership	A pivotal factor in supporting and sustaining collaboration efforts across all levels of the framework and the education system.
Context	Recognises the unique circumstances influencing practices and collaboration in each context.
Inquiry	Encourages critically reflective practices to drive problem-solving and professional growth.
Engaging in Critical Reflection	Embedded throughout the framework to evaluate and refine practices in pursuit of equity.
Collaboration for Equity	A guiding principle ensuring collaboration is intentional and equity-focused.
Examining Attitudes, Knowledge, and Values	A practice that involves assessing and fostering attitudes (predispositions influencing responses and decisions), knowledge (understanding of pedagogy, diversity, and inclusive education), and values (commitment to equity, social justice, and the rights of all learners).

The central idea of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) is that all the layers combine to develop practices in the outer layer, as outlined next. Three interlocking circles work outwards from change in the inner layer and include: The MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and key components of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC (Figure 2.2). Together, these interlocking circles served as guiding principles of this research, supporting collaboration for equity and informing key educational stakeholders' attitudes, knowledge and values. Next is the central layer: a triangle that aligns with the structure of the 'Ecology of Equity' (Ainscow et al., 2012) and collaboration at different levels—within, between, and beyond school contexts. Surrounding this triangle is a circle representing the factors of context, inquiry, and leadership. The discussion on context and inquiry is interwoven throughout all layers due to their influence on mindset change. However, leadership requires explicit examination because of its pivotal role in fostering and supporting collaboration and the development of agency between school contexts and key educational stakeholders for inclusive education. At the outer layer of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1), the focus of the framework extends to practices, including examining attitudes, knowledge and values as well as engaging in critical reflection and collaboration for equity.

Each layer of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) will now be explored for its significant contributions to key educational stakeholder collaboration and the development of

inclusive education in the hope that it can be used as a scaffold for developing collaborative and inclusive education across diverse contexts. The discussion of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) will commence with its interlocking circles (Figure 5.2).

5.3 The IDEA Framework: The Inner Layer

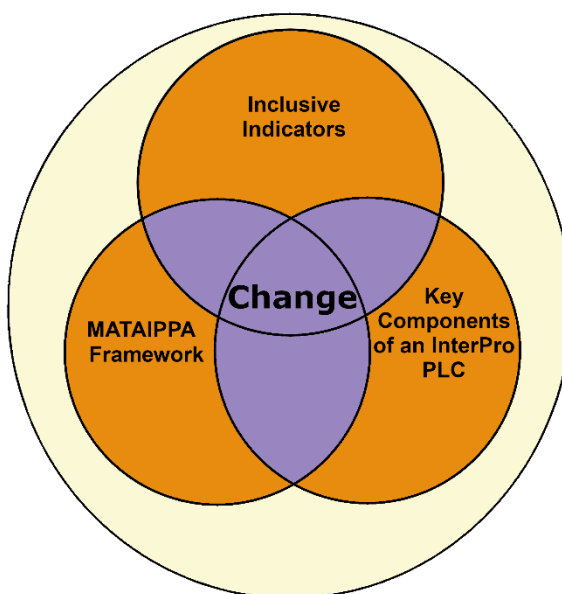


Figure 5.2 The IDEA Framework: The Inner Layer

The interlocking circles of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.2) include the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and the key components of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC (Figure 2.2). These resources offered a structure for developing inclusive education, fostering collaboration, and promoting equity within, between and beyond schools. The coming together of these three elements represented a significant step forward in the Irish context for building the collective capacity required for developing inclusive education. Firstly, the MATIPPA framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) provided a theoretical structure that, as articulated in the data, pushed participants out of their comfort zones and challenged their perspectives and knowledge of inclusive education. It made them unpack the language of inclusive education and consider alternative ways of working with others that involved figuring out what social justice and equity meant in practice. A shared language of practice emerged because of the frameworks, and it was notably supported by the principals where staff inquired of them what more complex words meant. This study stressed the importance of interprofessional learning and taking time to inquire into language. Hence,

everyone had a common framework for reflecting on inclusive education where more informed decisions were made in practice. By addressing aspects such as purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity, the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) facilitated a clearer understanding amongst key educational stakeholders of the attitudes, knowledge, and values required to collaborate for equity (Grudnoff et al., 2017).

However, the theoretical structure of the MATIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) alone was insufficient to support practical implementation across the key educational stakeholders and the school contexts. Thus, the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) were utilised. Offering specific prompts and statements, the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) enabled the different schools to assess their current practices for inclusive education and identify further areas for inquiry. This study promotes and recommends using the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) for interprofessional learning. The statements were slightly amended (Appendix A- denoted by yellow colour) to reference SNAs, additional student voice and interprofessional observation of practice and reflection. This approach was adopted to ensure that it better suited the Irish context and the current policy advice priorities (NCSE, 2024). As a result, the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and the subsequent prompts gave scope to enable SNAs, teachers, and principals to engage in meaningful discussions and collaborative inquiry. The Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) focus on aspects of inclusion that were within the remit of schools and include valuing diversity, elevating voices, flexible approaches, and the use of data. These led to critical reflection within the PLC. This study's use of broad indicators pushed key educational stakeholders across diverse contexts to act with agency and consider their attitudes, knowledge, and values about inclusive education (EASNIE, 2021).

5.3.1 Key components of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC

The next part of the interlocking circles is the key components of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC (Figure 2.2), which are essential for fostering collaboration across special mainstream and disadvantaged schools to develop inclusive education. A unique element of the design of this PLC was the bringing together of key educational stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) across diverse contexts to engage in reflexivity that combined inquiry, critical reflection and action (see central and outer layer Figure 5.3 and 5.4) In the design of the PLC, various essential features such as a

common purpose, distributed leadership, critical dialogue, inquiry and critical reflection were considered fundamental in the initial conceptual framework (Figure 2.2). The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) acknowledges these commonly advocated-for design features (Figure 2.2). However, the interprofessional dynamic within the PLC highlighted the importance of focusing on ‘Interprofessional Learning’, ‘Power’, and ‘External Facilitation’. This approach contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by extending an understanding of how interprofessional PLCs can effectively function. The following sections detail how interprofessional learning, power, and external facilitation serve as essential components for fostering collaboration across diverse educational contexts, enabling key educational stakeholders to address barriers to inclusive education and engage in meaningful change in collaborating for equity.

The findings of this study indicated that interprofessional learning can overcome barriers to inclusive education by combining and elevating diverse perspectives and voices. The key educational stakeholders noted the importance of creating an environment where broader perspectives than what is generally considered were welcomed, valued and elevated. This demonstrated the need for more diverse voices to be included. For example, the safe and supportive environment of the PLC (O’ Sullivan 2011; Brennan and Gorman, 2023) allowed key educational stakeholders to critically reflect on their conceptions of inclusive education, namely barriers to equitable practice that may exclude some students from being noticed (Grudnoff et al., 2017). Allocating sufficient time and space for challenging assumptions is crucial, as ample evidence suggests that neglecting this process can result in deficit practices and attitudes about students (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Florian, 2014; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). The use of purposeful activities within the PLC (Desimone, 2009) proved instrumental in fostering a deeper understanding of societal and system barriers that may hinder inclusive education. By creating conditions that support key educational stakeholders to engage in critical reflection, they are better equipped to navigate these issues in a more manageable way (Conn and Davis, 2024). For example, the participants claimed that inclusive education moved from a set of definitions to tangible practices they could inquire into, implement and develop. Moving forward, interprofessional PLCs such as the one conceptualised in this study could provide a collaborative problem-solving and knowledge-sharing platform for key educational stakeholders so inclusion becomes a daily language of practice that addresses barriers to

equity and elevates all voices. However, to elevate all voices, as noted in the findings, it is imperative to have those ‘*difficult conversations*’ (PrincipalMS-SSI) regarding how ‘powerful people greatly influence how an organisation (school, interprofessional PLC) works and what it can become’ (Ainscow and West, 2006, p.137).

Central to interprofessional learning is the need to facilitate discussions on power and the imbalances that can arise from hierarchical school structures due to the mix of key educational stakeholders involved (SNAs, teachers, and principals). This is especially true of SNAs as policy places them ‘under the direction of the teacher’ (DE, 2014, p.6). While certain policies (DE, 2017a) advocate separating duties based on professional roles, this research highlights a growing recognition of the value of incorporating diverse voices through collaboration. The contributions of SNAs emerged as surprising but essential within the PLC. What is significant for collaborative interprofessional learning is the need to elevate and empower all voices by addressing and challenging existing power dynamics (Greany and Armstrong, 2022), especially because ‘teachers committed to social justice and inclusion must be capable of building appropriate professional relations with.... other actors’ (Pantić and Florian, 2015, p.346). This is important as when power exists, it mustn’t be leveraged against those who hold less (Bourdieu, 1989). This was ensured in this study by addressing the different values and attitudes of professions and contexts, such as discussing a common purpose for inclusive education (Figure 4.2). Indeed, it was evident that focusing on a ‘common purpose’ and establishing norms and protocols such as feeling safe and comfortable and speaking honestly (Appendix U) allowed a culture of collaboration and shared responsibilities to be promoted and achieved (O’Sullivan, 2011; Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018). As a result, interprofessional PLCs that address power dynamics might interest those advocating for systems of full inclusion, particularly as they enable ‘shared decision-making processes with all partners’ (NCSE, 2024, p. 14). Addressing issues of power within this PLC has resulted in everybody making meaningful contributions to the critical reflection on and development of inclusive education so that *education for all* includes everyone (UNESCO, 2000). This required engaging in critical reflection, collaboration for equity, and inquiry that led to acting with agency to overcome barriers so all school members felt valued, respected, and heard. To ensure a culture in which all voices were valued and empowered in the interprofessional PLC, it required the external

facilitator to be mindful of her power and alleviate this by espousing coaching behaviours (Creasy and Paterson, 2005).

Fundamentally, participants saw the role of the external facilitator as influencing their capacity to reflect and develop practices, a view that is well-recognised in teacher PL research (Parker, Patton and Tannehill 2012; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2022; Brennan and Gorman, 2023). This study reinforces the significance of the skills and knowledge possessed by PL facilitators (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, 2017), especially within PLCs, which are malleable (Kennedy, 2014). For this research, the external facilitation involved balancing providing guidance and encouraging internal leadership, so the PLC was '*designed by us for us*' (SNADS1-SSI). Throughout the PLC process, participants noted the use of coaching behaviours such as silence, active listening, and questioning, empowering them to lead (Creasy and Paterson, 2005). This sense of empowerment among participants paved the way for the 'harnessing of untapped talents' (Atta, Acheampong and Atta-Asiamah, 2022, p. 11), bringing new knowledge and perspectives of inclusive education to light. Indeed, the purposeful coaching by the facilitator created a democratic culture that involved shared decision-making, mutual trust, respect, and collective responsibility towards elevating and advocating for all voices. A key component of building a democratic culture within the PLC was empowering everyone to progress through participant-led inquiry. Fundamentally, participants saw the coaching role of the external facilitator in this study as focusing on the inquiry process instead of didactic practices. This included intentional actions within the RRJ to refrain from imposing answers or pushing schools towards actions (practice observation) they did not own. These actions indicated awareness of the delicate balance between being an expert and coaching.

In this study, the external facilitator of each PLC was reminded of the 'common goals', which moved schools away from outperforming each other and towards supporting one another (Brown et al., 2020; Ainscow et al., 2023). In this study, when the schools came together, particularly as the DS and MS compete for enrolment, it was essential to focus on inquiry and emphasise collective progress and growth. Arguably, this was achieved in the interprofessional PLC by mixing groups (school and professions) during inquiry tasks so that key educational stakeholders became more aware of each other's purpose. This approach aligns with the concept of 'coopetition', which combines competition and cooperation to

foster mutual support and shared goals (Muijs and Rumyantseva, 2014). Ainscow et al., (2023) emphasise that transforming competition into cooperation requires clear and tangible benefits from collaboration, trust among partners, clear goals and agreements, and skilled leadership to manage tensions. As a result, this study emphasises the need for external facilitators, particularly interprofessional PLCs, to adopt coaching behaviours, build democratic cultures, and encourage mutually beneficial collaboration that harnesses competition (Brown et al., 2020). Support from external facilitation could ultimately lead to more democratic systems (Atta, Acheampong and Atta-Asiamah, 2022).

Furthermore, this study highlighted how external facilitation of interprofessional school-to-school collaboration must support the continuity of learning between PLC meetings. The external facilitators coaching role continued with strategic communication, such as summary emails and access to supplementary materials. This strategic communication aided participant learning and facilitated connections between PLC meetings. It served as an impetus for collaboration development within schools and helped cultivate shared responsibility across the school contexts. Consequently, this research emphasises the importance of external facilitators recognising their commitment to assist key educational stakeholders engaging in school-to-school collaboration in maintaining focus on their 'common purpose'. This study clarifies the significance of external facilitators adopting coaching behaviours and building democratic cultures within PLCs.

5.4 The IDEA Framework: The Central Layer

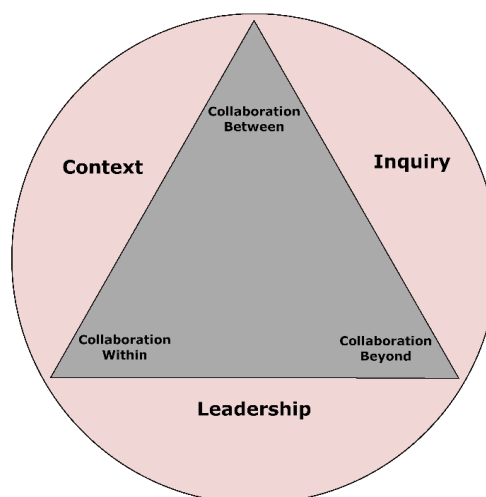


Figure 5.3 The IDEA Framework: The Central Layer

The central layer of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.3) focuses on the interplay between the grey triangle representing the 'Ecology of Equity' (Ainscow et al., 2012) and the pink circle that includes context, inquiry and leadership that was constructed from the findings (Figure 5.3). Leadership is first examined before the Ecology of Equity Framework (Ainscow et al., 2012) due to its pivotal role in facilitating and supporting school-to-school and interprofessional collaboration for inclusive education. Throughout, attention will be placed on inquiry and context influencing leadership and the Ecology of Equity (Within, Between and Beyond Schools) (Ainscow et al., 2012).

5.4.1 Leadership

Leadership dictates the culture; you take your nod from them...if they are open to collaboration and open to listening to people's thoughts...then you will be too. (SNADS1-SSI)

This quote is selected from this study as it served as a timely reminder that school staff are influenced by the actions and behaviours of their leaders, ultimately shaping school culture (Faas, Smith and Darmody, 2018; Pedaste et al., 2021). In this study, all principals prioritised time, resources and funding to ensure key educational stakeholder engagement. This is significant because context-based teacher PL holds the most transformative potential for effective teacher change, 'time is rarely provided for (it) within the school day' (King, Brennan and Gorman, 2023, p.57). Within this study, leadership provided significant support for interprofessional learning and capacity for change (Poekert and King, 2023) through the flexibility of Croke Park hours (DE, 2011a), travel time between schools, conditions for social interaction and staff access to resources for their chosen inquiries. These practices send a powerful message to staff about the importance of life-long PL. Therefore, this study reinforces previous findings from Irish research (King, 2016; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021) that emphasise principals' involvement in designing context-based teacher PL. Principals need to be involved in the design and conception of interprofessional context-based learning because their leadership actions can ultimately elevate and empower the voices of their school community. This study promotes the need for principals to develop the leadership capacity of others (DE, 2022) through the modelling of respect and value on what their school community have to say (EASNIE, 2020). In particular, two principals (DS and MS) acknowledged changing their attitudes regarding who does what for inclusive education, particularly regarding SNAs. In doing so, the

principals created the conditions for empowering others to change their minds (Harris, 2008) and act with agency (Burke and Lehane, 2023). Therefore, as indicated within this study's findings, when leadership created opportunities for learning from diverse perspectives, it challenged preexisting practices in schools and allowed new, more equitable practices to emerge.

Learning from each other's diverse perspectives involved leadership stepping back and allowing the SNAs and teachers from different contexts time to build trusting relationships. In this study, leadership embraced a distributed perspective (Spillane, 2006), trusting others to contribute to the school's vision and innovate for inclusive education. By adopting a distributed leadership model (Spillane, 2006), the principals created the conditions necessary for agentic action among the participants. This approach empowered teachers and SNAs to take control, drive discussions, and actively collaborate within the PLC, knowing they had the support and trust of their leaders. This is consistent with Polatcan's (2021) findings, which indicate that distributed leadership positively influences teacher agency, enhancing PL. This distributed leadership and shared decision-making (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004), encouraged collective ownership of the school's vision for inclusive education and allowed others to step forward and act with agency (Pantić and Florian, 2015). On the ground, empowering others was developed by the principals openly praising the efforts of individuals within their schools; for example, PrincipalDS, in the SSI and PLC6-T, noted TeacherDS1's commitment to the process. The other principals acknowledged in the PLCs the contributions of other schools and professionals in supporting them to think differently and challenge their assumptions. As a result, they modelled flexibility in their attitudes, demonstrating a readiness to change and evolve when they gained new insights through collaboration for equity.

The other key educational stakeholders (SNAs and teachers) noticed these practices and acknowledged that because the principals were willing to reflect and inquire, they were more inclined to do so (Grudnoff et al., 2017). This modelling of desirable practices was crucial in fostering agency among the SNAs and Teachers, as it motivated them to engage more deeply with the process, take ownership of their roles, and feel empowered to initiate change within the PLC. What the data in this research makes clear is that all principals are now promoting an ethos from the top, emphasising that a team effort is necessary to sustain inclusive education in schools (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004)

and asserting that it is everyone's responsibility (Giangreco, 2021). Consequently, the discussions within the PLC have mobilised bottom-up support for everyone to play a role in leading inclusive education. In doing so, leadership has reflected on whether everybody's talents are optimally utilised (Ainscow et al., 2023).

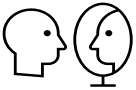
This culture of inquiry and proactive approach taken in the schools was supported with how the school principals across all contexts engaged in the gathering and critical reflection of data (or evidence). From the outset school principals were open to harnessing evidence (photographs) for change and using them as a starting point for inquiry. Their interest in alternative data to standardised test results (MS and DS setting) allowed for assumptions and personal biases of staff to be challenged. For example, as noted in the findings in the MS context, the senior students wanted their younger peers involved in the process of providing feedback on belonging (Appendix E). This challenged the MS staff who felt *'they won't understand to be able to answer'* (TeacherMS2-PLC2T). When the younger students provided clear, concise and informative feedback (Appendix E) this placed a value on how student data can challenge preconceived notions and overcome barriers to inclusive education (Ainscow, 2015; Ainscow, 2024). In this way, the use of photographs as data has been leveraged for positive changes to how all schools view students, parental and staff feedback.

The data discussed, particularly the photographs also proved beneficial for developing collaboration within, between and beyond the schools. The next section will explore the findings of collaborative practice aligned with the Ecology of Equity Framework (Ainscow et al., 2012). In this study, collaboration within involved key educational stakeholders examining whether their schools are inclusive and equitable for the whole school community. Collaboration between involved the coming together of diverse school contexts within the interprofessional PLC to share knowledge and insights for developing inclusive education. The collaboration beyond focused on 'researcher and practitioner knowledge meet[ing] [and]...producing new knowledge about ways in which broad values might be better realised in future practice (Chapman, 2022, p.26). The next sections discuss the findings of collaboration within, between and beyond in detail with reference to context and inquiry throughout.

5.4.2 Collaboration Within

Developing effective collaboration within schools is an aim of some national policies on developing inclusive education within schools (GOI, 2004; DE, 2017; DE, 2017a). In this research, key educational stakeholders were motivated by the interprofessional membership of the PLC's collaborative process to support collaboration within their own school's context. Indeed, to varying degrees, many key educational stakeholders ($n=10$) in this research expressed a desire to make their schools more collaborative, especially regarding interprofessional learning. This motivation demonstrated that key educational stakeholders valued collaborative practice as it developed inclusive education (Florian, 2017). However, they felt they needed more to develop effective collaborative practice, indicating that value does not necessarily equate to action (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). This is hardly surprising, though, as, despite collaboration being forefronted as the panacea of school improvement and change (DE, 2017a; DE, 22; NCSE, 2024), advice is rarely offered (within DE policy documents) on what it should look like in practice. This observation aligns with Campbell's (2020) definition of collaboration (section 2.6) that stresses the importance of a shared focus and critical inquiry as essential to collaborative practices. However, it contributes further by providing tangible, actionable advice for developing collaborative practice within school contexts. This study also aligns with established frameworks such as Ní Bhroin and King's (2020) research, where focusing on key practices to support team building, such as explicit roles (Facilitator), can help more effective professional collaboration to occur. The importance of role clarity and shared responsibility within school-to-school collaboration, as outlined by Poortman and Brown (2018), reinforces this need for intentional design in collaborative efforts. The practices that participants found effective are outlined in Table 5.2, which details the 'Collaborative Inquiry Framework for Schools', which is a key contribution of this study. It includes deciding a common purpose, using a framework, developing norms and protocols, rotating roles, setting a time frame, involving others, deciding actions for reflection and inquiry and establishing mechanisms for communication.

Table 5.2 Within School Collaborative Inquiry Framework

Step in the process	Description	Icon
Decide a Common Purpose	Discuss the shared goal or vision that guides the collaborative efforts.	
Use a Framework	Utilise a structured framework to guide discussion and inquiry.	
Develop Norms and Protocols	Establish clear norms and protocols to support mutual trust and respect in the group. Decide how to agree/disagree and develop ideas for reaching a consensus.	
Distribute Leadership Roles	Develop collective responsibility by sharing roles such as facilitator, timekeeper, reflection leader and task leader.	
Set a Time Frame	Schedule short, focused, structured meetings to maintain purpose and efficiency in a busy school environment.	
Involve Others	Engage others, such as other staff, parents, students and the wider school community, to enhance the collaborative process.	
Engage in Inquiry	Use each other's strengths to assign tasks and strengthen the inquiry. Reflect on practice and share alternative perspectives.	
Reflect on Progress	Reflect on practice and consider alternatives. Use visuals such as photographs and other data sources as evidence to support reflections.	
Mechanism for Communication	Establish ongoing communication channels to facilitate continuous interaction.	

By drawing attention to how these essential practices were operationalised within schools, this study offers tangible guidance on how schools can create more effective collaborative spaces that elevate voices and help move everyone towards a shared vision and development of equity. Incorporating time within the PLC for critically reflective practices to evaluate how collaboration functions within schools was a cultural shift for many key educational stakeholders. Poortman and Brown (2018) note that fostering a culture of reflective inquiry within networks not only enhances PL but also ensures that collaborative practices are sustained over time. In this study as key educational stakeholders became more aware of what collaboration looked and sounded like, their values aligned with their practice. Indeed, the key educational stakeholders' vision for

moving forward with inclusive education involved ensuring that time and space would continue to be invested in collaboration within. This change in perspectives and practices for collaboration could contribute significantly to school change (Fullan, 2003). Particularly as it moves teachers away from mere accountability to policy and towards more democratic models of professionalism where they are more inclined to be creative and innovate (Barron, Gorman and Looney, 2023).

Noteworthy is that the findings of this study indicated a '*ripple effect*' (TeacherMS2-SSI) and involved PLC members developing collaborative practices with other staff, parents and students. As a result, the members of the PLC have forged stronger partnerships with different stakeholders that were not anticipated when joining the PLC. This diversity of voice has ensured the inclusion of more critical dialogue within the PLC as their perspectives (other staff, students, parents) challenged pre-existing practices and ensured collaboration did not lead to 'collusion', where mediocre practices are affirmed (Lima, 2010, p.17). Thus, revisiting Campbell's (2020) definition of collaboration, it is clear that while collaboration holds potential, it must be carefully developed to ensure it leads to meaningful and inclusive outcomes. Indeed, from a leadership perspective, within-school collaboration has resulted in all three principals placing value on harnessing their staff's and communities' expertise to make decisions, act with agency and develop inclusive education (Miles and Ainscow, 2011; UNESCO, 2021). This ultimately changed leadership's value of collaboration with the whole school community. As Poortman and Brown (2018) suggest, leadership plays a critical role in embedding collaborative practices across all levels of the school community, ensuring alignment with shared goals and values. For this study their change of opinion is significant as developing inclusive schools is a social process where capacity building can occur from the sharing of knowledge (Chapman et al., 2011). Harnessing expertise within school communities, as advocated for in this study, may represent the 'inclusive turn' needed to drive the education system towards equitable practices for all (Ainscow, 2007).

5.4.3 Collaboration Between

Effective collaboration between schools is widely recognised in international literature as supporting school development and change (for example, Armstrong and Brown, 2022). However, while 'clusters' of schools working together might slowly evolve in

the Irish context (GOI, 2024), it is not an embedded practice (Morrissey, 2021). Hence, in the Irish context, there remains a need to cultivate a deeper understanding of school-to-school collaboration to ensure it not only affirms but enhances practice. Poortmann and Brown (2018) argue that purposeful network design, such as pairing schools with diverse contexts, is critical to ensuring mutual learning and avoiding insular thinking. One strategy utilised in this study to ensure that schools enhanced practice through 'mutual challenge and critical friendship' (Greany and Armstrong, 2022, p.243) was intentionally pairing schools from diverse contexts (special, disadvantaged and mainstream). This purposeful approach lessens the polarisation that can occur when schools of similar contexts are exclusively paired, especially for mandated curriculum-focused PL which also excludes the voices of SNAs. Bringing schools from diverse contexts was crucial because it highlighted how each school's policy environment shaped decision-making and perceptions of inclusive education among key educational stakeholders. For example, the DEIS context is guided by policy to set continuous actions for improvement (DE, 2023). As a result, they noted on occasions that they moved straight to action. Therefore, they were influenced by the feedback from other schools to 'slow down' and consider their vision before moving to action. This reflects Poortmann and Brown's (2018) observation that the ability of networks to drive change relies on reflective inquiry and ongoing dialogue that crosses diverse contexts and professions. Therefore, as school-to-school collaboration becomes more popular in recent policy guidelines (DE, 2022; GOI, 2024), this study reinforces that the policy context of school matters (Poortmann and Brown, 2018; Greany and Armstrong, 2022) and appears to influence attitudes, knowledge and values of inclusive education. As a result, it needs to be sensitively considered when building school-to-school collaboration (Booth and Ainscow, 2002; Ainscow et al., 2012; Chapman and Muijs, 2014; Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018). While carefully matching schools may demand time and effort, it emerges as a necessary practice (Greany and Armstrong, 2022) because, as highlighted in this research, the diverse contexts of the schools brought diverse perspectives, which ultimately challenged, elevated and advocated for one another.

This advocacy for one another is reflected in how the schools became invested in each other's inquiries. It was evident in the findings that a sense of responsibility and accountability to the group emerged where they wanted each other to succeed (Ainscow et al., 2023). This was evident in how they offered examples to the special school context

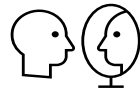
on making the communication app (Figure 4.5) more accessible and efficient for parents. The other school's supportive and inquiring stance buoyed their special school colleagues to delve deeper into better understanding the reasons behind barriers to communication and how to overcome them (Ainscow and West, 2006; Grudnoff et al., 2017). In turn, the participants started to consider the feedback from others as an impetus for change rather than a criticism of current practice. This critical level of collaborative practice has resulted in one particular teacher articulating a heightened sense of efficacy because of the between-school feedback. This openness to constructive dialogue might be partly because feedback involved coaching behaviours (asking questions, giving honest feedback, challenging practices) that created 'interruptions' and facilitated inquiry (Ainscow, 2024). Coaching others towards improvement points towards a more critical level of collaborative practice where collective responsibility for everyone emerges (O'Sullivan, 2011). This is significant as the initial researcher presentation (Appendix D) called upon the schools to embrace the collaborative network and build 'wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own school' (Ainscow, 2020, p.13). In this way, all the PLC members demonstrated a collective will towards innovative practice in all schools, thus forging collective leadership and agency towards social justice (Pantić and Florian, 2015). It may also signify that contextual interprofessional learning in this research has helped participants critically reflect on their moral purpose and empowered them to live it (King, 2019).

Teacher PL research has articulated the value of context-based PL (Borko, 2004; Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). Many key educational stakeholders ($n=9$) had never been in each other's settings. Simple everyday practices such as the buzzer on the front door, classroom set-up, visual timetables and student displays all provided a catalyst for discussion. This allowed for empathy-building (Florian, 2014) and broadening perspectives on the approaches used in different contexts. In Ireland, under a largely centralised system (King and Nihill, 2019), there is little movement of personnel between schools. For this reason, for many years, most PLC participants had only experienced life in one school context. To build a deeper appreciation of issues relating to equity and inclusion, this study found that the movement between contexts enriched the learning experience and contributed to discussion on school change. One of the negatives of context-based PL is that there may be lost opportunities to share knowledge, ideas and expertise across

contexts (Guskey, 1996). However, an interprofessional PLC that is purposefully and carefully designed to move contexts could be the key to overcoming such barriers as it allowed for the pollination of ideas across contexts that otherwise may not have been identified. Therefore, the power of school-based learning was harnessed within this study (Sugrue, 2002). A structured approach is essential to support effective collaboration between schools. Table 5.3 outlines the Between-School Collaborative Inquiry Framework, designed to guide schools in establishing and maintaining productive collaborative practices. This is a key contribution of this research and moves beyond policy rhetoric and towards practical advice on the desirable conditions for effective school-to-school collaboration (DE, 2022). Some of the icons in Tables 5.1 and 5. 2 are purposefully similar, such as *Norms and Protocols*, to emphasise consistency in the underpinning collaborative practices across diverse contexts.

Table 5.3 Between-School Collaborative Inquiry Framework

Step in the process	Description	Icon
Decide a Common Purpose	Schools come together to discuss and agree upon a common goal or vision that guides their collaborative efforts	
Form Diverse School Partnerships	Seek schools from different contexts (special, mainstream, disadvantaged) to foster diverse perspectives.	
Develop Norms and Protocols	Establish clear norms and protocols to support mutual trust, respect, and open dialogue among participating schools.	
Distribute Leadership Roles	Share leadership responsibilities among participants, including facilitators, timekeepers, task leaders and reflection leaders.	
Schedule Regular Meetings	Plan regular, structured meetings for focused and critical dialogue, reflection, and planning.	
Encourage Mutual Challenge	Encourage 'mutual challenge and critical friendship' where schools provide constructive feedback and challenge each other's practices through feedback and questioning.	
Share Best Practices and Resources	Exchange effective practices, resources, and strategies that have been successful in different school contexts.	
Engage in Joint Inquiry	Collaboratively identify and inquire into specific areas of interest or challenges in inclusive education across schools. Utilise a structured framework to guide discussion and inquiry.	

Reflect on Progress	Reflect regularly on the progress of the collaborative efforts, assess impact with data/evidence, and identify areas for improvement.	
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5.4.4 Collaboration Beyond

For research to matter, that is, to better society and schools, it must escape the ivory tower and engage in the public sphere' (Oakes, 2017, p.91)

This quote resonates deeply with the findings of this study as it stresses the crucial role of researchers in universities, extending collaboration beyond the confines of academic towers, to actively contribute to the development of inclusive education within and between schools. The findings indicated that collaboration beyond harnessed knowledge within the system and facilitated mutual learning between universities and schools (Ainscow et al., 2012; Ainscow, 2016). This aligns with Ainscow, Chapman, and Hadfield's (2019) emphasis on schools and universities collaborating as learning organisations where shared responsibility is central to addressing inequities and improving practice. By engaging with SNAs, teachers, and principals, I gained valuable insights into the obstacles that schools must overcome (class-size, debates on full inclusion and supporting marginalised communities) when collaborating for equitable practice (Grudnoff et al., 2017). These interprofessional networks must not only encourage collaboration between schools and universities but also create opportunities for peer-to-peer school collaboration, fostering a common purpose towards more equitable student outcomes (Ainscow, Chapman and Hadfield, 2019). In this study, this collaborative professional approach ensured that all research participants examined their attitudes, knowledge, and values regarding inclusive education (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). Therefore, it ensured that the research was relevant, practical, and applicable to the realities of the diverse school contexts and interprofessionals I interacted with in the PLC. The SNAs, teachers, and principals appeared to have benefitted from the sharing of evidence-based approaches (for example, learning walks) that drove critical reflection and changed school practices (Grudnoff et al., 2017). The participants acknowledged that the external facilitation in this study connected theory and practice, supporting understanding and pushing conversations so concepts were teased apart. By creating the conditions for interprofessional learning, I supported empowerment so schools could adopt practices that

might benefit all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. This resonates with research in Wales on tailoring initiatives to local needs, to ensure interventions respond to the specific challenges schools and communities face (Ainscow, Chapman, and Hadfield, 2019). As a result, this research aligns with and reinforces recommendations by EASNIE (2020, p. 25), which call upon school leadership and universities to build capacity by ‘develop[ing] partnerships...to increase research engagement and well-informed practice’.

This study highlighted that researchers, such as the author of this thesis, play a fundamental role in the actualisation of the ‘shared social responsibility’ (NCSE, 2024, p.24) required to develop inclusive education and emphasises that local coordination is needed to encourage school-to-school collaboration (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018). However, as Gorman and Furlong (2023) have pointed out, partnerships between schools and universities can be complex, particularly in an environment where policy pressures and the emphasis on performativity and accountability can undermine authentic collaboration. Therefore, it is crucial that collaborations are not seen as a ‘fad’ but instead focused on empowering schools to lead the collaboration themselves (Armstrong and Ainscow, 2018, p. 618). This will take time (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021), as indicated by some key educational stakeholders asking for continued support (for example, SNADS2-SSI). When engaging in school-university partnerships, researchers must consider the long-term implications of collaboration beyond and recognise that there might be time implications because of the ongoing need for sustained collaboration and support. In sum, the original researcher’s presentation (Appendix D) called for the key educational stakeholders to develop a responsibility for all children in their locality (Ainscow, 2020). However, this study highlighted that this call is for everyone, and activism must be modelled by those who advocate for it. This modelling was achieved by reaching out to schools to get involved in interprofessional collaboration, placing time and importance on the inquiry process, challenging attitudes, encouraging new knowledge, and critically reflecting on values for inclusive education.

The next layer of the IDEA Framework, the Outer Layer (Figure 5.4), will explore how critical reflection supported changes to attitudes, knowledge, and values, particularly regarding two important changes in mindset.

5.5 The IDEA Framework: The Outer Layer

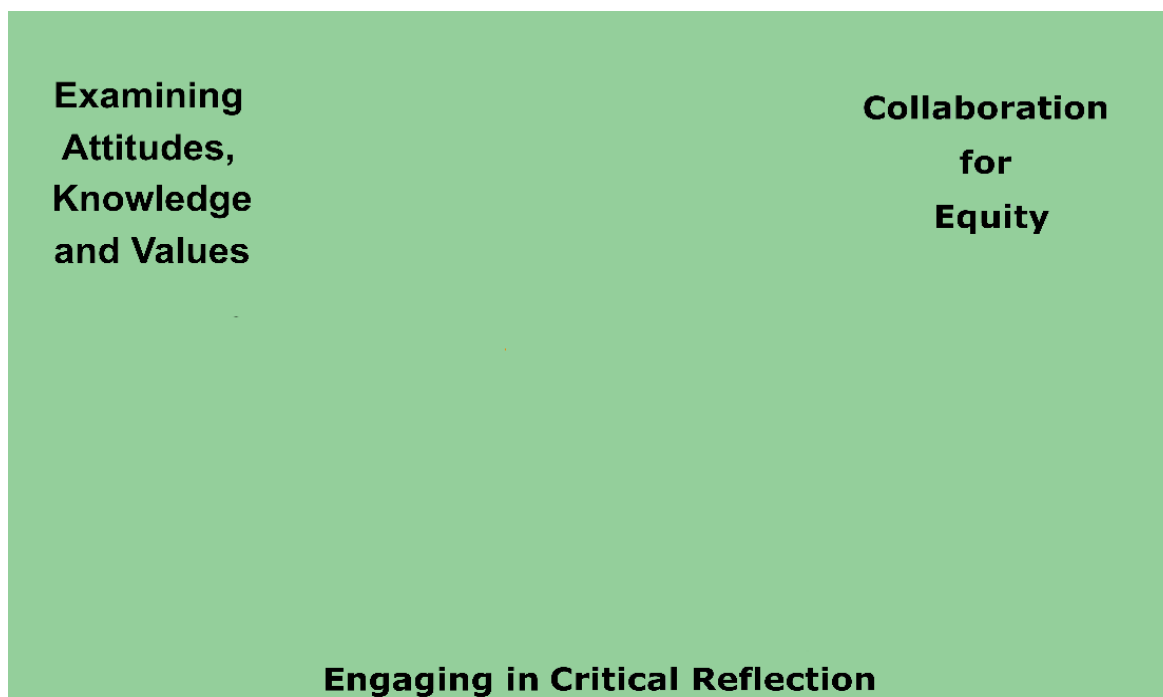


Figure 5.4 The IDEA Framework: The Outer Layer

At the outer layer of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.4), the focus extends to examining attitudes, knowledge and values which permeate and are influenced by each layer. Engaging in Critical reflection and Collaboration for Equity are embedded as essential practices throughout the framework, fostering shifts in perspectives on roles and collaboration for equity. These practices influenced and shaped certain attitudes, knowledge and values for inclusive education. The following section will explore these shifts in greater detail, mainly focusing on how these elements resulted in changed attitudes towards the role of the SNA and examining the special schools' role within an inclusive Irish education system.

5.5.1 Critical Reflection

To create a culture of critical reflection, photographs were taken to demonstrate practice aligned with the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). The participants acknowledged that the photographs gave them an insight into each other's contexts and were not burdensome as they focused on practices already in place (King and Logan, 2022). Reflecting on photographs of inclusive education in practice allowed participants to learn from each other's experiences, share attitudes, and problem-solve ideas for inquiry. For example, by exploring the students' photographs and drawings, there was a deeper

recognition that students' voices, particularly their desire for recognition, kindness, and fun, should inform inclusive education (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015). This new awareness highlighted a newfound value in truly understanding and connecting with students' lives (Grudnoff et al., 2017). Furthermore, as noted in the findings, different schools had different attitudes towards achievement. This diversity of attitudes captured by the photographs provided valuable insights for inclusive education in practice. It enabled key educational stakeholders to reflect on their assumptions and deeply rooted values towards high expectations and consider alternative perspectives - particularly regarding what success looks like for different students. This change of attitude is essential because by valuing each student's efforts, schools are more likely to create inclusive environments where every student feels noticed and celebrated (Mac Ruairc, 2013).

The critically reflective process developed in the PLC also enhanced the knowledge and capacity across the schools to identify hidden barriers and respond more effectively to diversity (Muijs et al., 2014). For instance, the decision by TeacherDS1 (PLC6-T) to adopt the communication app (Figure 4.5) for students transitioning from the special class context to their classroom demonstrates a shift in values towards ensuring all students have equitable access to learning by removing barriers to inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2012). Arguably, this was only achieved through discussions on what equity meant and how it looked in classrooms (for example, PLC1-T). TeacherSS2 demonstrated the importance of these critical discussions by acknowledging that during the PLC, equity transitioned from a misunderstood theoretical concept ('a banking term') to a tangible practice they could promote and value (Ainscow, 2024). This reflection demonstrates a change in understanding (knowledge) and attitude towards inclusive education in the classroom (EADSNE, 2012). Therefore, the photographs aligned with the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) enabled the participants to perceive what theory looked like in practice and articulate (share their knowledge) how they enacted inclusive education in their contexts (Hargreaves, 2001). By harnessing the process of taking photographs alongside critical reflection on the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021), this study highlighted a pathway to bridge this gap and foster a shared understanding of inclusive education across diverse contexts and voices. This is an essential message for those designing PL, as the findings of this research stress the effective use of photographs (Parker, Patton and O' Sullivan, 2016) in tandem with evidence-based frameworks (Timperley et al.,

2007). It promotes using frameworks to develop interprofessional inquiry and collaboration, ultimately empowering meaningful school change (Brennan and King, 2022).

As outlined in Chapter 2, teachers can find it challenging to include all students (Rose et al., 2015) mainly because of the knowledge-practice gap for inclusive education (Hick et al., 2019). This gap can often result from insufficient time to discuss this theoretical concept (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021). As key educational stakeholders explored what inclusive education meant, they were given time and space to carefully consider and select the most appropriate Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). This gave them autonomy over their decisions and placed value on the process of collaborative critical reflection over a product (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). As a result, the key educational stakeholders became invested in their inquiries, including the parent and student voices, resulting in a change in values among the PLC participants regarding whose voices should be heard and acted upon (Messiou and Ainscow, 2020). Another voice that led to a shift in attitudes and values regarding the importance of their voice in creating an inclusive school is that of the SNA, which will be explored next.

5.5.2 The Role of SNAs

Despite research in the Irish context recognising the value of 'in-school joint training of teachers and assistants' as the most effective means to develop a cooperative, collaborative approach (Logan, 2001, p. 40), findings from this study indicate that in mainstream and disadvantaged settings, it is often a sporadic, ad-hoc practice. Ireland's commitment to building capacity for inclusive education has been called into question by UNCRPD Article (24) General Comment 4 (UN, 2016, p. 4), highlighting barriers to inclusion due to a lack of understanding and capacity. The findings of this research illustrate a clear desire from SNAs to work more purposefully with others to develop and support equitable practices and address UNESCO's calls for a common responsibility towards inclusive education. However, education policy (DE, 2014) often denies the expertise of SNAs, confining them to a care role, contrary to the reality of their actual contributions to schools (Kerins and McDonagh, 2015; NCSE, 2018; Carolan, 2023). A notable discrepancy was evident in this study, with some SNA participants having experience in menial administrative tasks and being excluded from discussions on inclusive education. What stood out in the findings is the sense of SNA joy when invited to participate and contribute

actively to the PLC, met with teacher surprise at all they have to offer. These polarised feelings signify that while SNAs are committed, they are often omitted from valuable conversations on inclusive education. Hence, there is a need for system-level support to foster more effective collaborative interprofessional relationships in schools (Logan, 2006) and build 'a committed school staff' (UN, 2016, p. 4). For example, the SNA joy highlights the limited opportunities SNAs have to engage in interprofessional learning with principals and teachers, arguably hindering everyone's PL and student outcomes (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021; Carolan, 2023).

While SNA courses are rising, this study argues for more critical dialogue and reflection between teachers and SNAs. This study offers a pathway for utilising the essential expertise that SNAs bring to the table. Key educational stakeholders in this study have realised the value of interprofessional learning, demonstrated in the participants' recommendation of a collaborative approach moving forward (Pantić and Florian, 2015; Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). As evidenced in the PLC, this collaborative approach demonstrated that a culture of trust and respect can be forged through advice-seeking, the mutual exchange of knowledge, and working towards a common goal—the students (Ainscow, 2015). These sentiments align with one special school teacher's belief that 'a crew' is required to develop inclusive education. In this regard, the special school context acted as a model of a collaborative approach (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). They often noted they would 'not survive' without SNAs and found the examples of SNAs at photocopiers hard to fathom or imagine. In the PLCs, the special school context provided a stimulus for critical reflection for other schools on how collaboration between SNAs and teachers might be conducted. They modelled a culture of mutual respect for each other's ideas and a shared responsibility towards transforming practice for the greater good of all children and their families (Gerdes et al., 2020). For example, SNAs and teachers regularly engage in phone calls in the evening to share ideas and seek advice from one another. Teachers often attributed ideas to SNAs and publicly celebrated their innovative practice. The common purpose of 'for the good of the children' (SNASS1- PLC2-T) was frequently prefaced by all special school staff.

As a result, the findings of this research indicated that the special schools common purpose appears to have created an environment where staff understand and respect each other's actions because they are aligned with an overarching goal of benefiting the

children. This culture of mutual respect and understanding facilitated key educational stakeholders in other school contexts to note this effective collaboration, serving as a stimulus for others to emulate. This study recommends that mainstream schools (disadvantaged and mainstream) could benefit from adopting similar professional collaborative practices, ultimately leading to improved teamwork, better student support, and enhanced inclusive education. By harnessing the interprofessional collaboration expertise evident in special school contexts, all schools can create a more effective learning environment for the whole school community.

5.5.3 A New Role for Special Schools

Inclusive Education in Ireland is at a critical juncture due to a worldwide shift towards full inclusion (Shevlin and Banks, 2021, Tiernan, 2022). As a result, the traditional role of special schools is being re-examined (UN, 2007; NCSE, 2011; NCSE, 2019; EASNIE, 2022; NCSE, 2024). While special schools have long been at the coalface of practice for supporting students with complex SEN, the findings indicate they are at risk of being polarised and potentially eliminated within full inclusion policy debates and advice (NCSE, 2019; NCSE, 2024). The polarisation was expressed by special school participants regarding a system that allows mainstream teachers to absolve themselves of responsibility for inclusion, arguing that some children and teachers belong in different ‘places’ (Liasidou, 2012; Slee, 2019). As a result, the special schools felt that the system perceived them as the end of the line for families (Merrigan and Senior, 2023) instead of an important part of inclusive education.

To help prevent further polarisation of special schools, this research advocates for policy advice to move beyond the rhetoric of encouraging mainstream schools to collaborate with special schools and instead utilise the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) as a blueprint for building sustainable, tangible, effective school networks. The collaborative approach in this study examined how key educational stakeholders perceive special schools and the othering that can occur when we do not work together. The findings indicated that there was a perception that special school staff were more qualified and equipped to develop inclusive education for more complex needs (NCSE, 2019). This was reflected in the initial language from some teachers in the beginning PLCs, who said that special schools were entirely different. While initially divisive, the other schools began to recognise and

value the special school for its innovative practices when challenged (Merrigan and Senior, 2023). Indeed, the findings indicated that by recognising their expertise and the effectiveness of practices developed for the most complex needs, the other schools appreciated that they could be applied to a broader range of students. This mutual respect fostered an environment where effective collaboration flourished, leading to innovative solutions that might benefit all students. It also aligns with research where teachers might see more value in implementing what other teachers have found works (Landrum et al., 2002).

Over the years, there have been increased calls for collaboration between mainstream and special schools (NCSE, 2011; EASNIE, 2022; NCSE, 2024). What is noteworthy in the findings is the shift towards collaborative leadership and mutual responsibility that some in the special school now espouse for their partners in the mainstream schools. One teacher in the special school setting acknowledged that they should extend support to their counterparts in mainstream schools despite not holding a clear leadership role in the school (Wood and Roberts, 2019). This emphasises a proactive stance towards fostering collective efficacy and supporting others to navigate barriers to equitable practice. It highlighted how the PLC has empowered participants towards purposeful action as agents of social justice (Pantić and Florian, 2015). While before, the teacher saw mainstream attitudes as frustrating, they now recognise that it is within their ability to change these. This arguably supports the extensive research indicating collaborative PL as a key component for embedding inclusive education, developing agency and building teacher confidence (Travers et al., 2010; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Pantić and Florian, 2015; Brennan and King, 2022). It also hypothesised a role for special schools as ‘bottom-up leaders’ for inclusive education (King and Stevenson, 2017) and challenged the barriers created by transmissive forms of PL where time is less likely to be placed on changing attitudes (Kennedy, 2014). What is evident is the importance of unlocking the potential for leadership in special schools so barriers to equitable practice, such as attitudes, can be critically challenged and the knowledge-values gap closed.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the research findings regarding interprofessional and between-school collaboration in enhancing inclusive education. The intentional pairing of

schools from diverse contexts (special, mainstream, and disadvantaged) was examined, highlighting its impact on developing mutual challenge and critical friendship among key educational stakeholders. The study highlighted the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping policy environments and school decision-making processes. The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) offered a tangible blueprint and a structured approach for supporting interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration. This required attention to be placed on, for example, arranging regular meetings, the rotation of roles, and involving others (Table 5.2 and 5.3). The findings demonstrated that such an approach fostered a sense of collective responsibility, empathy, and openness to constructive feedback among participants. This, in turn, led to a heightened sense of efficacy and a commitment to social justice and inclusive education. The efficacy of these practices was validated through the positive changes observed in the attitudes, knowledge, and values of the participating key educational stakeholders. The next chapter concludes this research study with a succinct summary of the literature, methodological approach, and key research findings. It also presents the limitations of the study and offers a synthesis of the implications for future research, policy, and practice.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by outlining the key elements of the current research study, including the research questions and the core findings that addressed them. This research was specifically designed to investigate the experiences of key educational stakeholders involved in school-to-school collaboration in a PLC over a sustained period to develop inclusive education. These findings have important implications for inclusive education, collaborative practice and interprofessional learning in the Irish context. This study supports the NCSE's (2024) assertion that collaborative partnerships between schools in diverse contexts and increased joint PL between SNAs, teachers, and principals are essential for developing inclusive education. These research findings are consistent with literature advocating for whole-school (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010) and between-school approaches (Ainscow et al., 2023) for developing equitable outcomes for all. A single person will not win the battle for inclusive education (Mac Ruairc, 2016). Instead, a collective effort from all key educational stakeholders is required at all levels of the education system (Ainscow, 2024).

6.2 Overview of the Research Study

This is the first study of its kind in the Irish context that brought together diverse stakeholders (SNAs, teachers, and principals) from different school contexts (special, mainstream and disadvantaged) using the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), the inclusive indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and key elements of an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC (for example, Stoll et al., 2006; Armstrong and Brown, 2022) for developing inclusive education. The critical analysis of the literature in Chapter Two revealed that collaborative interprofessional and inter-contextual PL supports the development of inclusive education. However, the literature acknowledged that school-to-school collaboration is an emerging idea in the Irish context. For this reason, international literature was explored to guide the design process of school-to-school collaboration. This process was influenced by equity and social justice principles, Irish and international literature on the design features of PLCs, teachers and SNA PL. This critical analysis culminated in the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 (Figure 2.2 and Appendix C). This conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) guided and informed the interprofessional and

inter-contextual PLC for developing inclusive education. Overall, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature regarding interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration for developing inclusive education. While Irish policy (GOI, 1993; DE, 2017a) and policy advice (NCSE, 2018; NCSE, 2019; NCSE, 2024) have recommended an interprofessional and inter-contextual collaborative model of PL for inclusion, it has yet to be the subject of research or practice.

The study involved 13 key educational stakeholders from 3 different school contexts. Data generation methods utilised in this qualitative multi-site case study included PLC Meeting Transcriptions (PLC-T), Researcher Reflective Journal (PLC-RRJ), Participant Photographs, Participant Reflections (PLC-PR) and 13 post-PLC semi-structured Interviews (SSI). The data was analysed and interpreted using a six-step approach to Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This choice of analysis facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences during the interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC. The study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge and values toward inclusive education?

RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

Chapters 4 and 5 outlined the study's findings in detail. They will now be considered in terms of their contributions to the wider knowledge and practice around inclusive education. The limitations of the research will be discussed. Next, recommendations for policy, practice, and further research will be identified, as well as insights and reflections on my professional practice in response to these research questions.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

6.3.1 Contribution to Knowledge: The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1)

The construction of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) could impact inclusive education's policy context due to its flexibility and applicability across diverse contexts, yielding different but meaningful outcomes for inclusive education. By integrating the

MATIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021), and the use of photographs for evidence and critical reflection, the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) fosters collaboration within interprofessional and inter-contextual PLCs. This approach can drive transformative changes in attitudes, knowledge, and values concerning inclusive education as it supports:

- **Promoting Inclusive Education:** The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) aligns with EASNIE's (2022) recommendations and advocates for teamwork to examine and develop shared attitudes, knowledge, and values for inclusive education. In doing so, it facilitates the emergence of a shared language of practice where key educational stakeholders can pinpoint inclusive education in practice (Miles and Ainscow, 2011).
- **Bridging the Knowledge-Practice Gap:** The IDEA Framework helps develop teacher efficacy (Rose et al., 2015) and enhances key educational stakeholders' confidence in their capacity to be inclusive and collaborate with others (Travers et al., 2010). This leads to increased openness to experimental practices (Woodcock et al., 2022), fostering a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in inclusive education, where interactions can help support agency for change. Thus, helping to close the knowledge-practice gap (Hick et al., 2019).
- **Versatility and Flexibility:** The IDEA Framework's (Figure 5.1) adaptable nature ensures it can be effectively applied in different school contexts, supporting tailored results that address specific local needs and challenges.

6.3.2 Contribution to Knowledge: The Photographs

Using photo-elicitation (taking and discussing photographs) as a concrete tool for critical reflection and discussion crucially supports relationship building and fostering engagement by providing familiar visual contexts in this study. Photographs served as an innovative data generation method (Glaw et al., 2017) that enabled key educational stakeholders to capture and reflect on school practice visually (King and Logan, 2022), leading to new insights into developing inclusive schools. Photographs empowered key educational stakeholders to see real-life examples of their practices by supporting:

- **Visual Evidence:** Photographs provide tangible documentation of inclusive education, making abstract concepts more concrete and relatable for all key educational stakeholders.
- **Reflective Dialogue:** Photographs encourage reflective dialogue among key educational stakeholders, fostering shared understanding and value for inclusive education (King and Logan, 2022).
- **Familiar Visual Contexts:** Photographs offer familiar visual contexts, supporting relationship-building and engagement among key educational stakeholders (Glaw et al., 2017). They can also help lead to new insights that may otherwise be overlooked.
- **Empowerment and Voice:** Photographs facilitate the public sharing of work (Parker, Patton and O' Sullivan), empowering stakeholders to find their voices and engage in more critical levels of collaborative practice (O'Sullivan, 2011).

6.3.3 Contribution to Knowledge: The Role of the SNA

The study highlights the critical role of SNAs in promoting whole-school approaches for developing inclusive education (Logan, 2006). SNAs, often confined to care roles (DE, 2014), can influence teachers and principal PL when they have opportunities to fully engage in discussions on inclusive education. Schools can harness their unique perspectives and expertise by involving SNAs in PL and collaborative practices, fostering inclusive school cultures (Sirkko, Sutela and Takala, 2022). This study indicates that SNAs often lead collaboration efforts, suggesting their active participation in PL should be encouraged.

As bottom-up leaders for change (King and Stevenson, 2017), SNAs played a crucial role in driving inclusive educational practices from within the school community. For example, SNAs' leadership in collaboration fostered stronger relationships among staff, creating a more supportive school environment. As evidenced in this study, by taking on leadership roles, SNAs were empowered to work with others, promoting a sense of agency and ownership over inclusive education. Their unique perspectives and hands-on experience enable them to identify practical solutions and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation (Logan, 2001). As a result, the findings reinforce the need for macro-level support to optimise SNA and teacher interactions (Zhao, Rose and Shevlin, 2021;

RyanSheehan, 2023), demonstrating that SNAs' insights can offer new perspectives on inclusive education and support school improvement (DE, 2022).

6.3.4 Contribution to Knowledge: Collaborative Practice

This study contributes to collaborative practice in inclusive education by providing practical, detailed guidance for improving collaboration within, between and beyond schools. The development of the Collaborative Inquiry Framework for Schools (Tables 5.1 and 5.2) offers a structured approach that promotes shared decision-making, distributed leadership, and collective responsibility, which are vital for school improvement and inclusive education (Ainscow and Sandill, 2011; Azorín and Muijs, 2017; Ainscow et al., 2023). A further contribution of this research is the integration of these collaborative frameworks within the 'Ecology of Equity' (Ainscow et al., 2012), ensuring that the collaborative practices required are aligned with the specific needs of different contexts, enhancing the effectiveness of the collaborative practices developed.

The study emphasises the importance of context-based PL (Sugrue, 2002). By facilitating collaboration between schools from different contexts—mainstream, special, and disadvantaged—this research shows how such partnerships can lead to mutual learning and innovation (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). The findings demonstrate that these cross-contextual collaborations help schools challenge existing practices, share effective strategies, and develop new approaches to inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2012). By embedding these practices within the ecology of equity (Ainscow, et al., 2012), the study provides a framework that ensures collaborations are effective, sustainable, and contextually responsive. This study effectively bridges the policy practice gap by providing practical tools and resources to develop these collaborative interactions (Figure 5.1, Tables 5.1 and 5.2).

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Regardless of the strengths of this qualitative study in line with Tracy's (2010) indicators of quality, it is important to acknowledge that these findings and contributions should be considered within the context of the research's limitations. One limitation might be the small sample size from a specific geographical location in Ireland. However, the strength of the study lies in the rich qualitative descriptive detail, offering

valuable recommendations for researchers, DE support services, ESCI, the NCSE, HEIs, and school principals interested in promoting and leading inclusive education.

One limitation was the time constraints that affected teacher and SNA attendance at the six PLCs (Table 3.7). While principals agreed to not attend PLC2, only three SNAs and one teacher attended all six PLC meetings. Additionally, four participants attended five sessions, one attended four, and one attended three. Despite these challenges, participants made efforts to contribute and support the inquiry upon their return. Notably, no collaboration between schools occurred outside the PLC times, indicating that the external facilitator played a crucial role in promoting between-school collaboration. This suggests that schools might require additional support to lead such efforts internally (Brennan, King and Travers, 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2022).

Another logistical barrier mentioned in Chapter 3 was the scheduling conflict due to mandatory state provided curriculum PL sessions (through Oide) for two schools at the education centre. To address this, the PLC meetings were relocated to the education centre. Although there was concern that this might detract from context-based learning, it allowed the education centre's director to engage with the group. Some SNAs mentioned they had never been to the education centre before or only during their undergraduate studies ($n=4$ PLC3-T). This led to a discussion about increasing SNA face-to-face PL opportunities and their representation on the education centre management committee. It also allowed teachers and principals to experience the education centre as a venue for sustained, voluntary PL, rather than just for one-off curriculum development sessions. This highlights ESCI's potential role in fostering school-to-school collaboration for inclusive education.

Although participants had support from their principals for travel time between schools, the urban setting's traffic congestion posed barriers to collaboration. The research used carefully selected schools, considering school closing times, travel routes, and bus congestion, which can be a barrier to visitors to the special school. These considerations are crucial for expanding this research nationally. Online platforms like Zoom, used by Brennan and Gorman (2023), could help overcome these issues. This research emphasises the need for locally-led approaches, with ESCI and local researchers coordinating to address

contextual barriers in school collaborations (Armstrong and Brown, 2022; Ainscow et al., 2023).

As the number of special classes and special schools continues to increase (NCSE, 2024) despite calls for their ultimate removal (UN, 2007), this study highlights the potential benefits of dual campuses, which would enable greater collaboration. This approach signals that policy advice aims not to shut down special schools (NCSE, 2019) but to place them at the heart of inclusive education (GOI, 1993; Merrigan and Senior, 2023).

6.5 Recommendations

Considering the findings, this study makes several recommendations across policy, practice and research, each with broader implications for developing inclusive education.

6.5.1 Recommendations for Policy

Ten policy recommendations are made. These recommendations centre around the need for macro-support to leverage the expertise of SNAs and changes to PL opportunities for SNAs, principals, and teachers so that value is placed on interprofessional PL. Additionally the need for policy to develop the external facilitation role of university lecturers. Similarly, the recommendations focus on incorporating photo-elicitation, the MATAIPPA framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), and a case study of this research within Irish policy.

- Advocate for macro-level support to optimise SNA and teacher collaboration and joint PL. The study highlights the need for systemic changes to fully leverage the potential of SNAs towards developing inclusive education. This advocacy should include comprehensive policy adjustments and structural support to harness SNAs' contributions beyond their traditional care roles. For example, reference to SNA and teacher collaboration should be made within LAOS (DE, 2022) as a framework for identifying how interprofessionals can jointly contribute to inclusive school cultures.
- Extend NCSE support services to SNAs and facilitate joint SNA and teacher PL opportunities. Expanding the support services provided by the NCSE to include SNAs will ensure that they can avail of targeted PL in their contexts. Creating opportunities for collaborative PL for SNAs and teachers will foster better collaboration and a more cohesive approach to supporting all students. This

collaborative PL could initially focus on conditions for effective communication, shared inquiries, and mutual understanding of each other's contributions. Policies such as Cosán (TC, 2016) and LAOS (DE, 2022) or similar teacher guidelines could explicitly outline pathways for embedding interprofessional collaboration and joint PL opportunities within school development plans.

- Consider the secondment of SNAs to the NCSE to develop PL and offer sustained PL interprofessional support. Temporarily seconding SNAs to the NCSE could allow these professionals to contribute to developing tailored PL. This approach would also enable SNAs to provide ongoing support, fostering a more integrated approach to inclusive learning. Such secondments would help bridge the gap between policy development and on-the-ground implementation.
- At a policy level, the time required to build collaborative PL needs to be recognised. This should be based on the context needs of schools and not DE-decided-upon clusters.
- A shared responsibility between HEIs, support services and schools will foster more effective and collaborative partnerships, enhancing inclusive education for all. Policies should prioritise the allocation of time and resources within HEIs to support university lecturers in developing coaching approaches. Flexibility is essential, allowing lecturers to partner with support services to develop these coaching approaches. This can align with collaborative policy goals in frameworks such as Cosán (TC, 2016).
- In response to the SNAWDU findings (DE,2024), the NCSE and Oide must place emphasis on auditing the collaborative needs of SNAs, teachers and principals across diverse contexts (including special schools and special classes). This audit should aim to identify the specific support requirements for developing interprofessional and inter-contextual collaboration for inclusive education (for example, team functioning requirements). Policy frameworks such as LAOS (DE, 2022) could serve as tools for evaluating these needs and embedding interprofessional collaboration as part of the WSE process.
- Policymakers should establish clear tangible advice for how school principals can develop a distributed leadership model within the Irish context and take tangible steps to enhance principals' capacities to engage in this model. Oide and NCSE should lead the development of this model through principal networks, focusing on

how distributed leadership can be effectively implemented to support inclusive education. The distributed leadership approach could be expanded in Circular 004/2022 (GOI, 2022) or other updates to LAOS (DE, 2022) to emphasise principals' roles in fostering interprofessional collaboration. By embedding these practices, principals can better empower others to develop agency towards change for inclusive education.

- Given the success of its use in this study, Irish policymakers may wish to incorporate the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) in their policy documents, particularly those that focus on developing teacher efficacy and agency. Based on this study's evidence, policymakers can promote practices that enhance confidence for developing inclusive education.
- Incorporate a case-study reference to this research in the review of the DE (2017a) 'Teacher Guidelines for Supporting Pupils with SEN in Mainstream Schools'. This might provide a concrete illustration of how key educational stakeholders collaborated across contexts for inclusive education. This case study could offer school leaders actionable insights and practical advice on fostering agency and collaboration through PL.
- Incorporate visual methods, such as photo-elicitation, in PL and policy frameworks, showcasing their transformative potential. In this study, participants used photographs to stimulate discussion and reflection, essential to developing effective PL. Including these methods in frameworks can illustrate their potential to enhance efficacy and develop agency towards effective change.

6.5.2 Recommendations for Practice

This study makes six recommendations concerning PLCs, the Collaborative Inquiry Frameworks (Tables 5.1 and 5.2), HEI lecturers as facilitators for PLCs, the use of photo-elicitation, and the role of special schools as models for interprofessional learning.

- This study demonstrated the benefits of interprofessional and inter-contextual PLCs in developing inclusive education. The PLCs were notably effective, partly due to the organisational capacity provided by the school principals who valued and supported them. All schools could benefit from implementing PLCs that unite diverse key educational stakeholders and contexts to advance inclusive education

by leading to changes in attitudes, knowledge, and values. To maximise the effectiveness of these PLCs, schools should consider forming partnerships with support services and universities for external facilitation. This approach would help build capacity within schools, enabling them to eventually lead these initiatives internally.

- HEI lecturers should serve as key facilitators in advancing inclusive education by actively engaging in partnerships with schools, leading PLCs through a coaching approach, and sharing evidence-based practices. By doing so, lecturers will help bridge academic theory and practical application, reinforcing the shared responsibility for inclusive education and enhancing the capacity for effective school-to-school collaboration.
- Make the Collaborative Inquiry Framework for Schools (Tables 5.1 and 5.2) accessible for schools by adding them into policy to guide in developing and sustaining effective collaboration. The icons can become pop-up boxes where further information or useful tips are inputted; for example, 'Involving Others' could include a detailed list of suggested diverse stakeholders to speak with. Interactive elements, such as pop-up boxes with additional information or tips on involving diverse stakeholders, can make the framework more practical and accessible for all.
- Future PL and policies for SSE (DE, 2022) should integrate the inclusive indicators (UNESCO, 2021) that extend beyond SEN to encompass principles of equity for marginalised communities. These indicators can be utilised to support critical reflection for school improvement. They can also support the content focus of PLCs and enhance the critical reflection and dialogue necessary to develop agency for inclusive education. This approach will help schools foster a more holistic approach to equity issues.
- Encourage school principals to develop the use of photo-elicitation in their schools to support reflective practices. Principals can facilitate meetings focused on inclusive education where teachers discuss images related to their teaching experiences, leading to richer discussions on equity. Schools could also use photographs to document and share examples of inclusive education and diverse classroom environments. This can help raise awareness and provide concrete examples of how inclusive education is developed. Like this study, the photographs

can be further analysed to identify and address potential barriers to equity within the school environment.

- Utilise the special school context as a model of effective interprofessional collaboration. The culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility observed in special school settings can serve as a stimulus for other schools to emulate, promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment.

6.5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Six recommendations for further research are made. These recommendations centre on the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1), PL, external support for PL, and the use of photo-elicitation to engage diverse stakeholders.

- Research the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1) in various schools, including early years, post-primary settings, and rural schools, to evaluate its effectiveness and adaptability. This research could identify how the framework performs in different contexts and whether its benefits are consistent across various types of schools. Comparative studies between these settings can provide insights into how the framework can be tailored to meet diverse educational needs.
- Explore how agency and efficacy are developed in various school contexts and how they interact with other layers of the IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1). This research could consider measuring agency and efficacy to inform how they should be integrated into the existing framework.
- Analyse the specific PL requirements of school leaders to maintain and enhance collaborative practices within schools. This research could focus on identifying the types of support and PL opportunities most effective for leaders in fostering and sustaining collaborative environments. Understanding these needs will help develop targeted PL that empowers school leaders to better support whole-school collaborative practice for inclusive education.
- Investigate how external support (through HEIs or support services) can be gradually reduced as schools become more self-sufficient in leading inclusive education. Research could identify best practices for this gradual reduction of support, ensuring that schools have the necessary resources, skills, and confidence to develop inclusive education. This investigation could explore the role of building

internal support, where SNAs and teachers link with university partners during the transition period.

- Explore how feedback and photo-elicitation from students and parents can provide valuable insights into school practices. By examining perspectives from various school contexts, including special, mainstream, and disadvantaged contexts, researchers can identify effective strategies for engaging stakeholders and integrating their feedback into school development processes. This approach can reveal how inclusive education is experienced differently and inform more effective practices across diverse educational environments.

6.6 Insights and Reflections for Professional Practice

I have found this study's experience invaluable in terms of its contribution to inclusive education and my PL. My aim in completing this research was to contribute towards the development of inclusive education in Irish schools. At the heart of this purpose is a deep commitment to equity and social justice, where every student should be able to participate in and fully experience an excellent and quality education.

The study has reinforced the value of bringing diverse contexts together in relation to my work in postgraduate teacher education. Often, when I work with teachers in formal PL settings, for example, with the Postgraduate Diploma in SEN, they prefer to focus exclusively on the specific contexts of their schools and classrooms (for example, special schools only working with special schools, junior infant teachers working with junior infant teachers). This study demonstrated the value of bringing diverse contexts and professionals together as it can challenge and offer unique perspectives on inclusive education. There is an opportunity within my context to support schools in working collaboratively and thus maybe begin to develop the habit of cross-context working, which they might transfer to their schools.

This study has made me reflect on some aspects of teacher PL that I have taken for granted, such as collaboration. It has made me aware that collaboration is not embedded within schools. Therefore, the evidence in this study has made me consider how I should better approach such a complex concept within ITE. I am interested in working with first years next year and exploring whether focusing on aspects of Table 5.2 can help undergraduate students develop towards the more complex forms of collaboration

(O’Sullivan, 2011). This could perhaps create opportunities for them to be the bottom-up leaders of the future.

In my professional practice, the HEI provides SNA PL facilitated by practising teachers and principals. Given the bottom-up leadership from SNAs, I am curious to work with my colleagues to empower SNA facilitators for this PL. If SNAs and teachers have opportunities to co-design and co-deliver PL, it could lead to a shift in perspectives regarding who does what in inclusive education.

Moving forward, I cannot forget the schools that explored their experiences of collaboration between schools in a PLC to develop inclusive education with me. At the end of the study, they expressed interest in coming together again. Researchers are responsible for not disappearing when the research is done. A key part of my moral purpose is to support the empowerment of this group of key educational stakeholders by providing them with the tools, resources, and guidance necessary until they are confident enough to lead the interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC independently. This involves fostering a collaborative culture, continuing the coaching practices, and encouraging reflective practices so these key educational stakeholders can take ownership of the PLC and drive sustainable, inclusive education between their schools.

6.7 Conclusion

In summary, the research offered valuable insights into the experiences of key educational stakeholders collaborating in an interprofessional and inter-contextual PLC to develop inclusive education. The experiences revealed how sustained collaboration between schools and key educational stakeholders can bridge the knowledge-practice gap, foster positive attitudes, lead to changes in values, enhance teacher efficacy, develop agency and create innovative ways of working together. These findings contribute to growing evidence that effective collaboration is required at all levels of the education system (Ainscow, 2024). The key contribution of the study, The IDEA Framework (Figure 5.1), is offered as a structure and support for those interested in investing and leading in collaborative practices for developing inclusive education.

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Appendix A: The Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021, p.16)

Amendments are denoted in yellow.

Indicator Name	Indicator Prompts
Indicator 1: Everyone is made to feel safe and welcome	Do students in the school feel safe? Are parents and visitors made to feel welcome on arrival at the school? Is accessible information about the school made available? Are all teachers and SNAs in the room when students arrive to class?
Indicator 2: Students are equally valued	Is the work of all students acknowledged and, where possible, displayed around the school and classrooms? Are all students encouraged to take part in all school activities? Do some students have a leadership role in the school? Is student choice important?
Indicator 3: There are high expectations for all students	Do all students feel that they expected to achieve? Are the achievements of all students celebrated? How is achievement discussed and quantified? How is achievement shared with parents, SNAs and teachers
Indicator 4: Staff and students treat one another with respect	Are there warm and friendly relationships between staff and students? Is respect shown for different languages, cultural traditions and religious beliefs? How is student voice gathered and implemented
Indicator 5: There is a partnership between staff and families	Is there effective communication between homes and school? Do parents feel they are involved in supporting their children's learning? How do parents share their ideas with the school?
Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students	Are efforts made to overcome potential barriers to participation and learning? Can students and adults with disabilities gain access to all parts of the building? Are students who speak a different language helped to participate?
Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn	Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of collaboration? Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of teaching? Do senior staff observe lessons and offer supportive suggestions for improvement? Do SNAs have opportunities to observe one another's practices? Do SNAs and teachers have opportunities to reflect on practice together? Do teachers have opportunities to observe one another's practices?

Indicator 8: The school monitors the presence, participation and achievement of all students	Are there systems in place for checking on student attendance in school and during lessons? Is the school aware of specific reasons why students do not attend school at times due to practices in the wider school community? Are students offered opportunities to comment on how it feels to be a member of the school? Are students offered opportunities to plan lessons with teachers? Is the progress and achievements of every student tracked?
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Poster and QR code shared with PLC participants.

A Framework for Leading Inclusive Schools (Adapted from UNESCO, 2021)

Indicator 1: Everyone is made to feel safe and welcome.
 Do students in the school feel safe?
 Are parents and visitors made to feel welcome on arrival at the school?
 Is accessible information about the school made available?
 Are all teachers and SNAs in the room when students arrive at class/school?
 Do students hear their names?

Indicator 2: Students are equally valued.
 Is the work of all students acknowledged and, where possible, displayed around the school and classrooms?
 Are all students encouraged to take part in all school activities?
 Do students have opportunities to plan lessons?
 Do some students have a leadership role in the school?
 Is student choice important?
 Are there materials that engage the interest levels of all students?

Indicator 3: There are high expectations for all students.
 Do all students feel that they are expected to achieve?
 Are the achievements of all students celebrated?
 How is achievement discussed and quantified?
 How is achievement shared with students, parents, SNAs and teachers?

Indicator 4: Staff and students treat one another with respect.
 Are there warm and friendly relationships between staff and students?
 Is respect shown for different languages, cultural traditions and religious beliefs?
 How is student voice gathered and implemented?

Indicator 5: There is a partnership between staff and families.
 Is there effective communication between homes and schools?
 Do parents feel they are involved in supporting their children's learning?
 How do parents share their ideas with the school?
 Are family members encouraged to come into school to support learning and social activities?

Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students.
 Are efforts made to overcome potential barriers to participation and learning?
 Can students and adults with disabilities gain access to all parts of the building?
 Are students who speak a different language helped to participate?

Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn.
 Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of collaboration?
 Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of teaching?
 Do senior staff observe lessons and offer supportive suggestions for improvement?
 Do SNAs have opportunities to observe one another's practices?
 Do SNAs and teachers have opportunities to reflect together?
 Do teachers have opportunities to observe one another's practices?

Indicator 8: The school monitors the presence, participation and achievement of all students
 Are there systems in place for checking on student attendance in school and during lessons?
 Is the school aware of specific reasons why students do not attend school at times due to practices in the wider school community?
 Are students offered opportunities to comment on how it feels to be a member of the school?
 Are students offered opportunities to plan lessons with teachers?
 Are the progress and achievements of every student tracked?

Reference:
 UNESCO (2021). REACHING OUT TO ALL LEARNERS: A resource pack for supporting inclusion and equity in education. Geneva: UNESCO. Available at:
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00003830147posInSet-1&queryId=57eb3a31-6d93-44f8-acda-59daac4d373e>

Appendix B: Model of Aspects of Teacher Agency and Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Action (MATAIPPA) Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015, p.344)

Amendments are denoted in yellow.

Aspect	Inclusive Practice
Purpose	Teachers', SNAs and principals' perceptions of their moral roles, sense of identity and motivation as agents of social justice and inclusive education Teachers', SNAs and principals' understanding of social justice and inclusive education
Competence	Teachers', SNAs and principals' understanding of broader social forces that influence schooling and (micro-)political competence Teachers' practice of inclusive pedagogy, including: 1. Replacing deterministic views of ability with a concept of 'transformability' 2. Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students 3. Modelling new creative ways of working with and through others
Autonomy	Teachers, SNAs and principals' beliefs about individual and collective efficacy 1. levels of confidence, control and resilience 2. collaboration and collective agency for social justice and inclusive education 3. levels of power and trust in teachers' SNA'S and principal relationships 4. perceptions of school cultures and the principal's leadership 5. perceptions of Teachers', SNAs and principals' roles as school and system developers and participation in decision-making 6. broader education policy and socio-cultural contexts
Reflexivity	Teachers', SNAs and principals' capacity to articulate practical professional knowledge and justify actions, Teachers', SNAs and principals' meaning-making of the structures and cultures in their schools as sites for social transformation critical and open reflection on their assumptions, practices and exploration of alternatives

Appendix C: References for the Conceptual Framework (Figure 2.2)

Sections	Key Points	References
Global Perspectives on Inclusive Education	1. Transition from deficit ideologies to biopsychosocial models that emphasise equality for all students. 2. UNESCO's role in shaping inclusive policies globally. Significant international agreements, such as the Salamanca Statement, the Dakar Framework, and the UNCPRD, have driven inclusive education reforms. 3. Equity and Social Justice: Recent shifts in inclusive education have increasingly focused on equity and social justice, aligning inclusive education with broader social justice goals to overcome systemic inequalities.	UNESCO (1990; 1994; 2005; 2021; 2023) Ainscow (2007) UN (2007) Mac Arthur (2009) Hyttén and Bettez (2011) Florian (2013; 2019) Slee (2011) EASNIE (2020) Chapman and Ainscow (2022)
Inclusive Education in Ireland	1. International policies and local legislative milestones influenced the shift from segregated to inclusive education. 2. Key legislation such as SERC, the Education Act and the EPSEN Act underpin the inclusion of SEN students. 3. The 'Continuum of Educational Provision' means most students are educated in mainstream education unless deemed 'not feasible' for some.	GOI (1993; 1998; 2000; 2004) O' Hanlon (1993) Banks, Frawley and McCoy (2015) Tiernan, McDonagh and Casserly (2020) Merrigan and Senior (2023) Travers (2023) NCSE (2024)
Developing Inclusive Schools	1. Inclusive indicators serve as benchmarks for evaluating and improving inclusive education within schools. They help schools measure their progress in creating inclusive environments that support all learners. 2. While inclusive indicators are valuable, they must be adapted to fit the specific contexts of different schools and countries 3. Indicators should link to equity and social justice. Indicators help ensure that schools are inclusive not just in name but in practice, by promoting fairness for all students.	Booth and Ainscow (2002) Carlisle. Jackson and George (2006) Grimes (2009) NCSE (2011) Ainscow et al., (2012) Pantić and Florian (2015) Grudnoff et al., (2017) UNESCO (2021) DE (2022)

Distributed Leadership and Agency	1. Promoting shared leadership across school communities is essential for fostering inclusive education. Distributed leadership encourages agency at all levels, enabling teachers, SNAs, and other staff to contribute to its development. 2. Distributed leadership involves building the vision, understanding and developing people and providing time and space for collaborative practices.	Spillane (2006) Ainscow and Sandill (2010) Bush and Glover (2014) Pantić and Florian (2015) Polatcan (2021) DE (2022) Moynihan and O'Donovan (2022) NCSE (2018) NCSE (2024)
Agency, Efficacy and Power	1. Empowering key educational stakeholders through PL and distributed leadership may lead to higher efficacy in promoting inclusive education. 2. Power dynamics within and between schools need to be addressed to foster true agency and collaboration among all staff, including SNAs and teachers. 3. Higher efficacy can support key educational stakeholders to problem-solve, innovate and collaborate with others.	Emirbayer and Mische (1998) Weisel and Dror (2006) Pantić and Florian (2015) Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) Barni, Danioni and Benevene (2019) Woodcock et al., (2022) Burke and Lehane (2023)
Attitudes, Knowledge and Values	1. Attitudes are tendencies to respond positively or negatively toward certain ideas about inclusive education. 2. Knowledge is the understanding of for example, pedagogy and diversity. Knowledge can be acquired through collaboration and experiences. 3. Values: Ethical principles guiding inclusive education.	Shulman (2004) Rouse (2008) Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) EADSNE (2012) EASNIE (2021)
Collaboration Within and Between Schools	1. Effectively harness expertise to inquire into and develop shared goals, especially between diverse schools. Building trust, communication, shared decision-making, teacher autonomy, and external facilitation are essential for effective collaboration. 2. Creating inclusive cultures where all stakeholders, including SNAs, are actively involved and have autonomy over the process.	Kerr et al., (2003) Katz et al., (2008) Hadfield and Chapman (2009) Daly and Finnigan (2010) Lima (2001; 2010) Muijs et al., (2010)

	3. Collaborative efforts should be underpinned by a commitment to equity, ensuring that all voices, particularly those traditionally marginalised, are heard and valued in the decision-making process. 4. Power dynamics and competition within and between schools can hinder effective collaboration and must be addressed.	Ainscow (2015) Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) Brown et al. (2020) Ní Bhroin and King (2020) Armstrong and Brown (2022) DE (2022) Ainscow et al. (2023) Barron, Gorman and Looney (2023) NCSE (2024)
SNA and Teacher PL	1. PL for SNAs and teachers is crucial in developing their capacity to support inclusive education. 2. Joint PL opportunities for SNAs and teachers promote collaborative school environments, enhancing inclusive education. 3. Challenges exist in facilitating adequate PL for SNAs and teachers due to policy focus (care role and accountability) and logistical barriers.	Logan (2001; 2006) Kerins et al. (2018) NCSE (2018) Zhao, Rose and Shevlin (2021) Atta Acheampong and Atta-Asiamah (2022) Sirkko et al. (2022) RyanSheehan (2023) DE (2024)
Design Features Effective PLCs and PL	1. Effective PLCs are characterised by shared values, reflective dialogue, inquiry, collaboration, and shared responsibility. 2. The design of PL must consider school contexts, support collaborative inquiry, and foster an environment of trust and openness.	Bolam et al., (2005) Stoll et al., (2006) Timperley et al., (2007) Harris and Jones (2010) O'Sullivan, (2011) Parker, Patton and O' Sullivan (2016) Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner, (2017) Brennan, King and Travers (2021) Brennan and O'Gorman (2023)

Appendix D: Staff Presentation

Exploring the impact of school-to-school collaboration on inclusive education

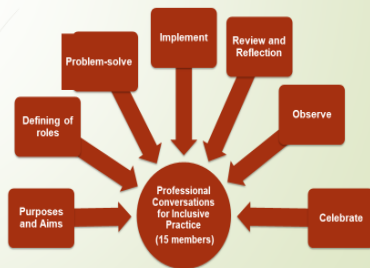
Máire Love

maire.love3@mail.dcu.ie

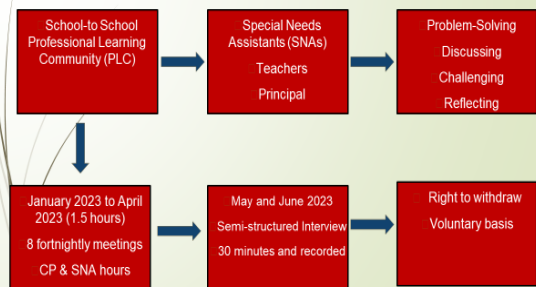
Our Common Purpose

- The need for schools to embrace collaborative networks, so there is a **'wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own schools'** (Ainscow, 2020, p.13).

What is a PLC?



What is involved?



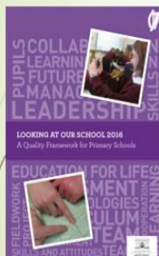
What does participation entail?

- Engage in a PLC of approximately 15 people, with 8 meetings (approx. 1.5 hours), over a 4 month period (Jan 2021-April 2023), facilitated by the researcher.
- Engage in discussions regarding professional ideologies, beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge toward inclusive education. Take pictures (identifying no persons); complete learning logs and flipcharts/google docs that reflect these discussions.
- Engage in adaptations to their professional practice following suggestions at the PLC meetings.
- Engage in an optional observation of practice by the researcher or other members of the PLC. (Observation is not a requirement of the research)
- Engage in a 30 minute semi-structured interview with the researcher upon conclusion of the formal PLC meetings (participants may choose to continue the PLC format)

Possible Professional Benefits

- Reflect on and share their professional and personal ideologies, beliefs, values, attitudes and knowledge toward inclusive education
- Evaluate the efficacy of current inclusive practice
- Consider areas that may improve their practice and how with collaboration this could lead to greater inclusive education for all
- Reflect on developing a shared commitment to inclusive education
- Identify key factors that inhibit or enable inclusive practice
- Describe the impact (if any) of school-to-school collaboration on inclusive practice

Collaborative Practice



- value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration
- work together
- collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable practices
- contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing experience

Volunteers

- Complete link if you wish to receive The Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent Form
- Read The Plain Language Statement
- Complete Informed Consent Form
- Return via email

Appendix E: Student Voice (MS Context)

What does your teacher/SNA/principal do to help you feel you belong, included, noticed, or happy?

The teacher notices our work and praises it.	They reward kindness and our work with stickers.	We like the chance for 'doing' work (i.e. hands-on making something, doing it in groups and being creative).	I'm wearing my crest on my uniform.
Being in my classroom with teacher.	In yard everyone plays together and with their friends.	We do art or experiments.	We go to assembly.
Being with my teacher because she smiles.	They teach us and explain things that we don't know.	I win things in school when we play PE games.	I get wet in the rain with my friends.
Teacher minds us and helps us feel safe and protected.	They display all of our work.	We go for a run with the teacher.	They let us bring treats on Fridays.
Teacher lets us play with our friends.	They praise us.	I make mistakes and teacher helps me.	I'm with my class.
I get a hug in my classroom.	Someone says well done.	I win pupil of the week.	My friends are with me.
Everyone is nice, I love my teacher.	Someone is kind to me.	We have fun with games (Bingo).	I fall and someone helps me.

Appendix F: Parental Voice (SS Context)

Parental Voice: The front door is always open and accessible at all times for parents. Even after Covid-19, we weren't kept away.

Parental Voice: The videos they send home are great. Especially them having fun with the children. The school is inclusive. The students there don't have any hang-ups about creed or colour they accept all around them 😊. The school promotes that.

Parental Voice: I know I am welcome. They want to hear from me. They keep my child safe. (The bus escort) is great for passing on information.

Parental Voice: I want him to be happy; they make him happy. He can't talk but he missed school so much during Covid. They tried their best but I never want to go back there again. It was torture. I missed school. They are a lifeline.



A COMMON PURPOSE TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Name:
School- to-School
Collaboration for
Developing Inclusive
Education

PLC Agreed on Norms and Protocol

Important to us is	We can build this by
Respecting opinions and ideas	Focusing on the speaker
Punctuality	Being on time
Staying focused and on-topic	Keeping focused, completing tasks
Feeling safe and comfortable speaking honestly	Listening
Willing to listen and be listened to	Having time to speak
Equal contribution-not one person taking over	Being respectful
Timekeeping	Respecting other people's time (completing tasks, getting involved, showing value on others work)
Being open to learn from other experiences	Being open to different ideas and change
Open-mindedness	Being willing to change your mind
Everyone involved	Look for others contribution
Valuing others' opinions	Giving and accepting feedback
We have all volunteered to be here, we want to belong	Non-judgemental

How do we collaborate, negotiate and reflect on practice?

- ▶ How were they chosen?
- ▶ How was consensus reached? Was there disagreement?
- ▶ Who was involved?
- ▶ Who did you collaborate with?
- ▶ Was it difficult to get agreement? Why did you discount other indicators?
- ▶ What data might you gather to find out more about this indicator?
- ▶ Who could you involve?

Questions/comments for others

School 1 Questions	School 2 Questions	School 3 Questions

Reflections

Words/concepts/ideas that stand out for you as you watch the video.

Appendix H: Sample Participant Overview of the PLC

Aspect	Inclusive Practice	PLC Practice	Task
Purpose	Teachers', SNAs and principals' perceptions of their moral roles, sense of identity and motivation as agents of social justice, teachers' SNAs and principals' own understanding of social justice and inclusive education	Norms and Protocols agreed for effective PLC sessions. Discussion on the common understanding of inclusion Created a common purpose of perspectives about inclusive education and social justice.	Inclusive definitions (favoured broader international definitions such as UNESCO) Mentimeter
Competence	Teachers', SNAs and principals' understanding of broader social forces that influence, schooling and (micro-political competence Teachers' practice of inclusive pedagogy, including: 1. Replacing deterministic views of ability with a concept of 'transformability' 2. Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students 3. Modelling new creative ways of working with and through others	Discussion on exclusion/inclusion of mainstream, disadvantaged and special schools. Societal barriers and social justice, schools navigate barriers. Including hidden voices in our schools. Views on academic needs versus holistic needs- how we have different perspectives on this. The assumption also is that some children are not able to choose certain subjects for example, exclude them from Irish. Inquiry into practice (sharing stories of daily challenges and reflecting on our different contexts). Opening up our schools to each other so we can create learning between schools	Challenging the status quo in conversation Discussion on who creates barriers? Do we create our own sometimes? How can we support the hidden voices to overcome barriers, particularly as they do not have the same advantages as middle-class whites? Photographs for example, assemblies, calendars, communication systems, library layouts, achievement awards, music generation, displays, notice board policies, visual, collaborative

			student projects, schedules student councils, sensory diet and sensory areas, music/smell for transitions.
Autonomy	Teachers', SNAs and principals' beliefs about individual and collective efficacy 1. levels of confidence, control and resilience 2. collaboration and collective agency for social justice and inclusive education 3. levels of power and trust in teachers', SNAs and principals' relationships 4. perceptions of school cultures and the principal's leadership 5. perceptions of SNAs, teachers and principals' roles as school and system developers and participation in decision-making 6. broader education policy and socio-cultural contexts	Discussion on how we reached a consensus with the indicators. Analysing collaborative practice in our contexts. Inquiring into other voices. Being willing to learn from others. Offering feedback to each other.	Reflecting on the Indicators. Reflecting on the collaborative process. Seeking and inquiring into 'hidden voices' and how they can support learning. Other voices taking photographs
Reflexivity	Teachers', SNAs and principals' capacity to articulate practical professional knowledge and justify actions, Teachers', SNAs and principals' meaning-making of the structures and cultures in their schools as sites for social transformation critical and open reflection on their assumptions, practices and exploration of alternatives	The description of the critical process we went through when choosing the indicators. Discussion, thought, inquiry, gathering views and voices. Critical analysis and reflection of the prompts to support the development of practice.	The reflection logs. Flipcharts of ideas for moving forward. Asking questions and being curious about other settings.

The Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021)

Indicator	Descriptor	School chose as working well	School chose as even better if
Indicator 2	Students are equally valued Is the work of all students acknowledged and, where possible, displayed around the school and classrooms? Are all students encouraged to take part in all school activities? Do some students have a leadership role in the school? Is student choice important?	Have collaborated with other colleagues through flipcharts and gathered data of photographs (music, Student Council, displays, visual schedules) that represent value on diversity of learners. Further reached out for the voice of the student. The student photographs involved a lot of collaborative pieces, where 'everyone could get involved'. They felt the SC needed to represent younger children too. They spoke of 'equality' and 'fairness' in bringing in younger student voice. Interesting that students are starting to display evidence of social justice perspectives in their opinions. Points to consider from discussions: How honest the student council is, they see their voices as valued and respected. Could student voice support the development of indicator 7?	
Indicator 3	There are high expectations for all students Do all students feel that they expected to achieve? Are the achievements of all students celebrated? How is achievement discussed and quantified?	Collaborated as a group and all had a similar view that achievement was holistic achievement. Everyone rewarded for effort and individual strengths (for example, kindness, respect, participation) as well as academic strengths or effort. Gathered data as photographs in a group thread of 'The Better Box'.	

	How is achievement shared with parents, SNAs and teachers	Further reached out for the voice of the student The students photographs depicted recognition of being noticed for a wide variety of achievement in student assemblies. Also noted the power of social media in sharing good news with their families abroad. Interesting the importance of school reaching out to the community touched upon by students. Students see the school valuing family connection. Points to consider from discussions: The student's idea of achievement aligns with teachers/SNA/principal, the ethos of the school is embedded in their opinions. Is there hidden voices within the student voice?	
Indicator 5	There is a partnership between staff and families Is there effective communication between homes and school? Do parents feel they are involved in supporting their children's learning? How do parents share their ideas with the school?		Collaborated with eachother in the group regarding what is collaboration', it emerged that collaboration should make school a happy, safe, welcome space for everyone. The idea of helping others succeed and building teamwork was also acknowledged as essential. The group reached out to other colleagues to gather ideas on developing parental engagement. How to reach the hidden voices within the parents is being

			considered. Ideas such as surveys of parents regarding collaborative systems is suggested.
Indicator 6	Indicator 6: The school is accessible to all students Are efforts made to overcome potential barriers to participation and learning? Can students and adults with disabilities gain access to all parts of the building? Are students who speak a different language helped to participate?	Have collaborated with other colleagues through flipcharts and gathered data of photographs (for example, communication aids, sensory stimulus, playground, library, ACA devices, visual schedules) that represent value on ensuring participation and active involvement for all learners. Further reached out for the voice of the parent. The parents' photographs involved the open-door policy and the sense of belonging. Also noted that barriers such as religion and creed were not obstacles to participation in the school. Everyone is welcome, everyone belongs. Points to consider: The parent view of inclusion is underpinned by equity, everyone getting what they need, not everyone getting the same. Interesting also how the school brought joy during Covid to parents through videos. The school has reached out and noticed their parental voice and they welcome this.	

Indicator 7	Indicator 7: Senior staff support teachers in making sure that all students participate and learn Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of collaboration? Are there regular staff development activities focused on the improvement of teaching? Do senior staff observe lessons and offer supportive suggestions for improvement? Do SNAs have opportunities to observe one another's practices? Do SNAs and teachers have opportunities to reflect on practice together? Do teachers have opportunities to observe one another's practices?		We have collaborated through a buddy system (pairing to speak to one other member of staff) to seek opinions on indicator 7. Relationships, trust, purpose of observation, choice, and stage of career all emerged as important. Collaborated with flipcharts on 'what is collaboration', it emerged formal/informal, whole school community, listening to hidden voices and supporting hidden voices, common purpose was the holistic development of the student. Collaborating with each other in the group regarding what collaboration is, it emerged that everyone should be empowered to lead collaboration, and it needs to be organised and planned with a specific focus. In supporting hidden voices, the environment and culture to increase active participation were noted as essential. Have collaborated with staff through a survey on views of observing each other's practice
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Appendix I: Frameworks PLC 1-6

PLC 1

1. Introduction (5 mins): Outline of the session (displayed on slides) Discussion around different roles and power.
2. Around the room (5 minutes), introduce yourself, your school and role within your school. Highlight what made you come today.
3. Get into mixed school groups (displayed on slides).
4. Establish norms and protocols (10 minutes)—what creates a conducive working environment. Read the newly established norms and protocols. Introduce the roles of facilitator, timekeeper, reflection leader and task leader. The external facilitator will model these today.
5. Present and discuss MATAIPAA (Pantić and Florian, 2015) (10 minutes).
6. Our Common Purpose (10 minutes)-Definitions of inclusive education
7. Back into the same school groups
8. Introduce the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) and align with The MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), (10 MINUTES)
9. Discuss with a group which one of your schools is doing well. How do you know, explore and discuss prompts (10 minutes)
10. Introduce taking a photograph of the inclusive indicator in action as the task to explore before the next day (5 minutes). Each school picks somebody to return the task.
11. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections and picking roles for the next day (facilitator, timekeeper, and task and reflection leader).
12. School learning walk (10 minutes-MS context)

PLC 2

1. Introduction (5 mins): Outline of the session (displayed on slides) Discussion around different roles and power. How did everyone feel coming back today? Norms and protocols read. The facilitator, timekeeper and reflection leader are introduced. No principals are present today. Back to the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and key assumptions. Get into same school groups.
2. Photographs (30 minutes): Introduce your school group, individually or collectively, the indicator you have chosen and why this shows this practice. Tell us how you engaged in this process, what led you to this indicator, and how it was chosen.
3. Photographs (20 minutes): Based on the photographs, ask each other questions and give feedback to other schools (process and product). What would you have taken a picture of?
4. Mixed school groups (20 minutes)—Discuss indicators not chosen. Do we need to develop these further? What might that look like? What photographs would you take of barriers you are experiencing?
5. Discuss (10 minutes) who we might contact to ensure we are doing our indicators well. Who could we discuss it with? Schools will choose another stakeholder to discuss it with. They will also decide on an indicator of inquiry. Each school picks somebody to return the task. How will we discuss progress with others in the group?

6. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections and picking roles for the next day (facilitator, timekeeper, and task and reflection leader).
7. School learning walk (10 minutes-disadvantaged school context)

PLC 3

1. Introduction (5 mins): The outline of the session (displayed on slides) is read. The norms and protocols are read. The facilitator, timekeeper, and reflection leader are introduced. There is a discussion around different roles and power. The principals are back today. We return to the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and key assumptions.
2. Each school will present photographs from its stakeholders (20 minutes). Feedback will include what surprised them. All photographs related to the inquiry are displayed around the room. Participants will 'move' to each school context.
3. Schools to offer feedback on what they are noticing (15 minutes).
4. Discussion and return to the othering of special schools from PLC1 (25 minutes). Bring up the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015), assumptions we make, and power. Watch the video Luvvie Jones Ted Talk (Ajayi Jones, 2017) as a stimulus. What barriers can we make for others? Why might people be afraid to speak up? Are there hidden voices in our schools? How do we empower them?
5. Focus on the next steps of inquiry (10 minutes) with Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021) (mixed school groups and feedback to each other)
6. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections and picking of roles for the next day (facilitator, timekeeper, and task and reflection leader).
7. Director of the education centre invited to speak (5 minutes)

PLC 4

1. Introduction (5 mins): Outline of the session (displayed on slides) Discussion around different roles and power. Norms and protocols read. The facilitator, timekeeper and reflection leader were introduced. Back to the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and key assumptions.
2. Participants will be given the MATAIPPA Framework (15 minutes), a discussion on aspects explored to date, and examples to be given on blank copy (mixed school groups).
3. Flipcharts on walls with school inquiries (45 minutes). Schools to introduce the inquiry focusing on one thing working well and 2- a barrier they are facing. The other schools must offer insights to help overcome their barrier.
4. Mixed schools' groups (10 minutes) What connections are we noticing with the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021)?
5. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections and picking of roles for the next day (facilitator, timekeeper, and task and reflection leader).
6. School learning walk (10 minutes- SS context)

PLC5

1. Introduction (5 mins): Outline of the session (displayed on slides) Discussion around different roles and power. Norms and protocols read. The facilitator, timekeeper and reflection leader were introduced. Back to the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and key assumptions.
2. Professional Groups and data sources (evidence) (20 minutes). What evidence is important to you and why? Each given 6 data sources (observation of practice, standardised scores, observation of students, samples of students' work, planning documents, and teacher-designed tests). Professional groups to rank according to one they do the most and one they'd like to find out more about. Each group is given literature in the Google Drive to guide the process.
3. Report back (20 minutes) are there similarities and differences across the professional groups, and how might observation of practice be used in your context? What are the barriers and how do we overcome these (build trust, common purpose, what's the focus)
4. Watch (20 minutes) [Learning Walk](#) (Edutopia, 2018) what might a learning walk look like for evidence gathering for inclusive education? Mixed school groups. Ideas to be placed on post-its. How can SNAs and teachers explore this together?
5. Next steps in inquiry (20 minutes) (what challenges are we facing?) Each school will give another school 2 points for developing the inquiry further.
6. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections and picking of roles for the next day (facilitator, timekeeper, and task and reflection leader).

PLC6

1. Introduction (5 mins): Outline of the session (displayed on slides) Discussion around different roles and power. Norms and protocols read. The facilitator, timekeeper and reflection leader were introduced. Back to the MATAIPPA Framework (Pantić and Florian, 2015) and key assumptions.
2. Each school will present its case study of its final inquiry (30 minutes) with the Inclusive Indicators (UNESCO, 2021). This will include a reference to what particularly helped them during the process and what challenged them. The other schools are to consider and outline whether similar inquiries would work in their context and, if so, why. Or why not?
3. Action Plan (20 minutes) for moving forward, what do you want to continue? What from others' inquiries could you blend into your approach? Does it overlap with another Inclusive Indicator (UNESCO, 2021)?
4. What aspects did you find helpful for building collaboration between schools? In mixed-school groups discuss (10 minutes).
5. Return to the first conception of inclusive education (20 minutes). Discuss ideas now. What words would you place on the word cloud now. Reveal word cloud. Place beside the first conception. What stands out? Why does it resonate with them? Whats their purpose moving forward?
6. Review of Learning (5 minutes), participant reflections. Outline of SSI schedule.

Appendix J: Sample Researcher Formal Reflections PLC 2

Reflections (pre-transcription).	Reflection on CF	Alignment with Research Qs
Meet and greet in hosting school. SNADS1 was the main greeter. XXXX brought visiting participants to the staffroom. Hosting school teachers were the last to join the group. Comments regarding never being in the school before, different staffroom. Visuals everywhere in the staffroom (for example, for recycling). How the visuals are for the adults (humour). The conversation circled back incidentally to the discussion on what can be good for one can be good for all from the previous PLC. This conversation was led by SNASS2- (profile of an inclusive teacher). FN: Interesting the principals are not present this evening, the SNAs are leading.	Build time in school-to-school collaboration for 'learning walks' within schools? Does this need to be a greater feature when visiting other school contexts? Social meet and greet. Point to consider: SNAs and teachers have separate breaks in the majority of schools, for this group of interprofessionals, meeting at the start of the PLC for tea and scones is one of the only times they 'socialise in school' together. Competence The inquiring stance that the SS school staff take when entering a building. They are in cupboards, asking questions and taking photographs. FN in diary this evening: This group of professionals' inquiring stance is stimulating organic conversations on inclusive education. It is also the SNAs from the 3 contexts that are leading these conversations. They show real interest when we enter the special class on why it is set up in this way. They ask the routine, why the different coloured areas. Their questions show value on the needs of the students, its organic and building problem-solving.....Incidental Q's is that a preference of the student?.... How do you get them all to join the morning meeting? Do they move the schedules? How do you change things if something has happened for the child that morning? (Competence)	RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education? RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration? RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge, and values toward inclusive education?

	TeacherSS2 said before we start can you talk to us about the room..... SNADS1... have we not already started? (Power- Am I perceived as starting the 'real' PLC business?) Interprofessional learning and power imbalances – Also, is the professional dialogue in the staff room seen as separate or additional instead of inquiry for inclusive practice? FN Are the SS school staff more open in dialogue.? Am I picking up on a 'guardedness' between the mainstream and the DS? Watch for this in the photograph discussions. Is competition a factor here (3km away from eachother)?	RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration? RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?
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Appendix K: Sample Researcher Informal Reflections PLC 2

PLC 2 - Researcher

On the go

Meet & Greet - feels comfortable - groups came in together

Funny some never been in another's school staff room before

my assumption because I do it so much!

Some nerves talked about why is that - the unknown? Trust myself?

SNA - did you get our pictures, I was worried you wouldn't - was going to ring you

Thinking about it - didn't it be? was done it - seeking clarity

Pictures

SS 1/ Teacher lead

MPS 2/ SNA lead

DS 3/ SNA lead

SNA clarifies

No Q's during presentation so they reflect on what they want to ask

Working well - 2 interruptions - do people find

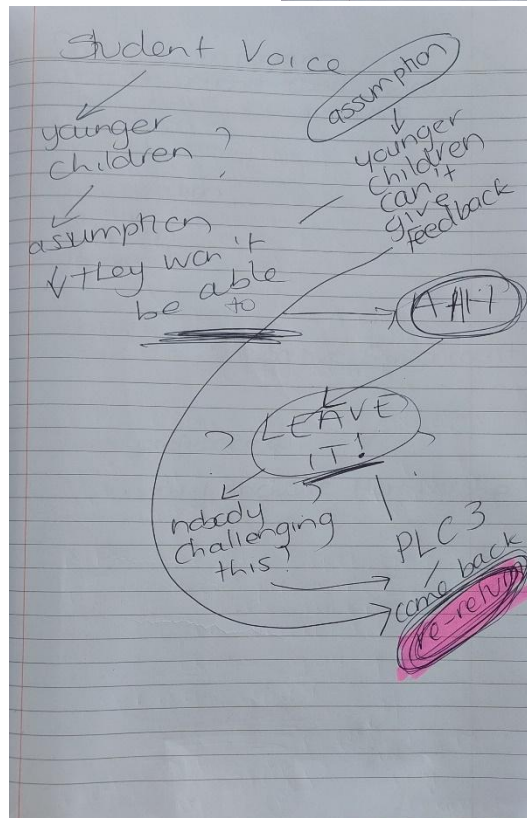
Hold back on action - we're in action - silence unnerving?

Lovely Buzz in room people chatting - feels less shifted to last PLC

2 week

nobody has talked between schools + PLC

Big questions - Do they see between only allowed in the PLC?



Appendix L: Participant Reflections PLC 1-6

PLC1 Participant Reflections (n=13)

Today I learned:	1. That special schools feel that we want to shut them down. 2. How the views of everyone are so valued, but not everyone feels valued. Special schools feel we don't want them. 3. That teachers in special schools think they are closing and encounter less inclusive attitudes from mainstream teachers. 4. About a variety of people's opinions and experiences of inclusion. 5. How to try and improve inclusion and what equity means. 6. A lot more about welcoming everyone 7. All participation is welcome regardless of experience/role. 8. We are all there for the same goal: to make everyone belong. 9. We are all out for the better good of the children. 10. About teacher's fears and anxieties around SEN and children's needs. 11. The view of inclusion and the challenges of mainstream teachers' attitudes. 12. Inclusion definitions have similar words/angles and the different views we have of them. 13. What inclusivity means to professionals in different schools.
It was interesting how:	2. Inclusion definitions and discussions of barriers. 3. Mainstream teachers respond to courses like TEACCH, like the pupils are an encumbrance. 4. Discussing about special schools not feeling included. 5. We heard about experiences in other schools and what they have encountered concerning inclusion barriers. 6. Many different ideas are out there. 7. There was such variation in opinions across schools. 8. [SS] teachers and staff felt they weren't being listened to/supported or wanted. 9. Listening to everyone. 10. All schools had both similar and different opinions and ideas. 11. Everyone was so honest. 13. How other schools define inclusion, it's different but belonging is the same

PLC 2 Participant Reflections (n=9)

Today I learned:	1. How various schools have different views/approaches to/of inclusion. 4. About other schools' approach to giving value to student achievements. 5. Today's session was very informative. I loved seeing the different photographs and the ways each of the schools approach their indicators. I felt that all groups had such valuable information about inclusion – much of which I had never even considered to be inclusion before. I felt more confidence speaking this week, it was nice to get to know the teachers and SNAs, more familiarity now with the group. 6. How another school 'operates'. Different situations are good to see. 7. I do feel in my school there is a teacher and SNA difference, which sometimes bother me. 8. about techniques used in other schools that could be incorporated in our school. 9. about different inclusive practices in other schools. The DEIS school context can be very different from the non-DEIS one.
It was interesting how:	1. How on board the students in (MS context) are about giving their views and how they take their role so seriously. 2. One person viewed indicator 3 from an academic viewpoint whereas it didn't even occur to me to think of this from an academic point of view. 3. It revealed kindness and effort are achievement. 4. Even though we had met and discussed indicators together – further discussion today brought up new ideas. 5. How open we could all be in the groups. There are different interpretations of things, in a good way. 7. I was surprised to hear that some teachers find a difference between teachers (each other). 8. How others engage all (or more) of a child's senses to encourage learning/communication/sense of belonging. 9. My school had different interpretations of high expectations in indicator 2.
You grabbed my attention when:	1. Visual timetables are used in all classrooms. 2. The photographs were shared. 3. We were discussing our indicator to work on. 4. We saw the photos from other schools. 5. The silence you leave is very powerful. 6. When we saw the photographs from other schools, it opened up new ideas. 8. We were reflecting on our indicators to work on. 9. Your interest that we were unsure of our 2nd indicator and valued our honesty.
I'm going to try:	

	2. To voice my opinion in our collaboration meetings and ensure we give adequate time to this as a school group. 3. Making a point of greeting all students, making it positive. 4. To look at the ways we could give better recognition to student's achievements where students see what other are doing. 5. Really listening to others. 6. More commenting on good behaviour and kindness in pupils. 8. To spend some more time considering and reflecting on the level of collaboration. 9. To focus more on the hidden voice.
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PLC 3 Participant Reflections (n=10)

Today I learned:	1. What others felt about their schools and achievement. 2. I really enjoyed today's session. It felt like a series of conversations, but I was learning so much. I felt that moving around the room was beneficial as it broke it up and the session flew by. 3. How to be more involved. 4. There are hidden voices we need to find out who they are in our school. 5. The power when we band together. 6. Obvious barriers to inclusion. Even physically. 7. How to be more inclusive – display boards, every effort is recognised. 8. Value of collaboration to see barriers that you might not otherwise see. 9. Parent teacher meetings set up in ours. Maybe consider the setting to be inclusive, parent special needs, Irish Travellers ect. 10. Special schools have a more welcoming/open door for parents.
It was interesting how:	1. When they mentioned the student voice not just speaking up for themselves but spoke up for their younger counterparts. 3. How voice recording is needed and works. 5. She used Domino's. 6. The domino effect used. How we can use our voices to support others. 7. Discussing hidden voices. Who is the hidden voice? How to empower those voices eg, disadvantaged students, be mindful. 8. Listening to all voices is vital. 9. A lot of our comments were aligned around collaboration. 10. Inclusion does not mean agreement. There needs to be tension for inclusion. We don't choose to be a voice, we do it with fear. What about those without capital to face the fear?

You grabbed my attention when:	1. Discussing challenges and potential ways of overcoming – collaboration to assist others. 2. You always bring it back to something somebody said, even from weeks back, you help us to join the dots. 5. You talked about the variety of noticeboards. 6. I heard comfort is overrated. 7. Discussing hidden voices. Who is the hidden voice? How to empower these voices e.g., disadvantaged students. 9. Talked about hidden voices from parents – disadvantaged or Traveller Community and how we can assume so much. 10. The children all left in the assembly that they were in contention for a prize. Parents of children in special schools had a broader view of inclusion.
I'm going to try:	1. And reach out to a hidden voice. 3. And work on learning and recognising more hidden voices. 7. Facilitate the hidden voice to ensure it is valued and heard. 9. Be mindful of who we are leaving out 10. Irish awards at assembly. Going well/Getting better
Maybe you would consider:	3. Asking more of children's opinions. 6. Subgroups of the student council. 9. Domino effect. 10. Some parents face fear akin to skydiving every day, caring for their children and trying to advocate for them to institutions.
How do you feel about adding:	3. More time- it goes so quickly.

PLC 4 Participant Reflections (n=11)

What?

1. Everyone wants to be noticed for good. Looking at adapting the methods used and being flexible in approach. Trust/non-judgemental is a big aspect for parents and staff across all schools.
2. Learned to start small with trying to tackle issues.
3. Different approaches to similar questions. Different school types have different needs around information gathering from parents.
4. I feel that we're moving forward positively with our indicator. At the start of the session, I wasn't sure what direction we were going, the other schools gave good advice, I'm less foggy now.
5. Reluctance for observation in class by management understandably but told by other schools to make it our own for context.
6. All the great work that has been done.
7. The challenges/obstacles all 3 schools face are with different indicators, e.g. effective communication with parents, effective collaboration. So beneficial to hear how these challenges are dealt with.

8. Picture in CM. Inward thinking/outward thinking.
9. Our problems and issues are the same/similar even though we have very different contexts.

So What?

1. Looking at my own practices and thinking about adapting. Make sure I notice others, staff.
2. Start small or with small groups in trying to progress indicators.
3. We are not all the same, 'one size does not fit all'.
4. Keep going but by reaching out in school groups and then with wider groups with a clearer idea.
5. I'm wondering why I'd be reluctant for others to watch me. I'm confident in my lessons and teaching.
6. Purpose of the PLC and how it's coming together.
7. Effective collaboration is an obstacle for me personally as a result of time constraints throughout the day.
8. Moving forward. Great richness in the variety as a social justice advocate.
9. It reinforces the need for increased school to school collaboration among staff of all sorts.

Now What?

1. Different ways of adapting.
2. Work with students' ideas. Try to promote them with other adults.
3. Collaborate in small groups before talking to large groups.
4. Share feedback with junior teachers, help plan a student-led lesson for their own class.
5. Think further on how I reflect on how I'd be more comfortable with it.
6. Planning our next approach and we realised we have more work to do on the 2nd part of the indicator.
7. Communicate with senior management and teachers about organising a time each week to discuss events.
8. Task the leadership team with enquiring of links SNA's and teachers already have with other school staff.

PLC 5 Participant Reflections (n=9)

What?

1. The importance of all staff being involved (where applicable) in planning, being prepared and aware of what's planned.
2. The different priorities of the different professions. The SNA views on observation caught me by surprise.
3. Got some really interesting ideas from the other schools in how they have progressed their indicators and got some ideas that can be used in my school, too.
4. How important everyone's point of view is.

5. Learning is always good.
6. Priorities for SNAs, teachers, and principals about making familiar unfamiliar.
7. Being more open to other practices and ideas.
8. SNAs interest in developing a research lesson with teachers was a wow moment.

So What?

1. So I can work to the best of my ability. Being prepared will help the day go smoother. Also, more inclusive.
2. Because I work with all these people and think it's important to know what's important to them and how they see themselves professionally.
3. Has been great to open my mind to new ideas and strategies that can be tried.
4. I always knew that collaboration was important, but the reality is even more powerful.
5. I love the fact that the children are being listened to, so important and empowering for them long term.
6. Developing learning walks. Adapting concept. What would work for me/School class.
7. Yes, because different practices may work for the benefit of one pupil.
8. It struck me that it could easily be the starting point/pilot project for broader observation and should create lesson creation among all staff. Great ideas from the SNAs on this.

Now What?

1. Collaborate with SNAs about observing lessons. Collaborate with teachers over involvement in lesson plans.
2. Look into the learning walk, and what area we might focus on. How can SNAs be more involved?
3. Meet my group to discuss our plans going forward.
4. The next two steps are defined. I know we need to go back and think.
5. Sea saw the pilot for (SS Context).
7. Moving our ideas forward but 'small and slow'.
8. Encourage SNAs to swap timetables and/or observe each other as a first step.

PLC 6 Participant Reflections (n=11)

What?

1. Great ideas to build trust amongst staff - Co-planning lessons - Area of expertise.
2. The value of openness. The insights from SNAs.
3. We all come to similar results - Time needed to collaborate and be the change makers in our school.
4. From working on the indicators, it became clear that other schools are facing the same obstacles as us.
5. Notice time allocated is time well spent.

6. Two different ways of approaching a task can lead to similar findings - diversity of thought is positive. Every week, I forget we are not all teachers.
7. Reflection on school PLC journey with all schools.
8. I learned as much as we are different, we are all the same. We all have the same goal.
9. The importance of the link between school and home - The reaction from students to photos sent in from home.
10. ideas today and help from other members of the group. Very supportive environment so we can move forward.

So What?

1. To build the trust to share expertise.
2. To reach out for support and ideas.
3. It moves the school forward in the most positive way, which benefits both teachers and schools.
4. We can bounce ideas off each other on how to overcome these obstacles, working with other schools so we can help each other.
5. Can't allow barriers to remain. Takes effort to break them down, but the outcomes are good.
6. listen to others' opinions and be open to learning.
7. Bringing all our learning and journeys together.
8. Because we all want the best for the children.
9. Giving students a voice/a way of sharing.
10. I think we have some great ideas we can implement and new initiatives that we hadn't thought about before now such as mentoring and coaching.

Now What?

1. Conversing with a colleague about planning/executing a lesson.
2. Be more willing to communicate and hear new ideas. I like that the APP (SS) might be an idea for us to develop.
3. Continue to listen for and look out for hidden voices - Make time to collaborate (even if the answers may be uncertain).
4. Ensure we continue to collaborate. Keep in touch with [the researcher] so this doesn't die.
5. Staff report, explain outcomes, and proceed.
6. Encourage peers to talk, ask for help, and be willing to do it myself.
7. Meet as a group and discuss the next steps on the information tree.
9. Streamline parent involvement/Seesaw information tree - Continue seeking out the hidden voice/building relationships.
10. Meet with my group and try to bring our ideas forward and develop this further in our school.

Appendix M: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Exploring key educational stakeholders' experiences of a school-to-school Professional Learning Community (PLC) for developing inclusive education.

Aim

The research aims to explore the experiences of collaboration between key educational stakeholders (Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)) teachers and principals across different school contexts within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for developing inclusive education.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do key educational stakeholders describe and experience within and between school collaboration?

RQ2. How do key educational stakeholders describe their attitudes, knowledge and values toward inclusive education?

RQ3. What factors do key educational stakeholders identify as contributing to supporting inclusive education?

Prompts for the researcher: (Not shown to participants- yellow)

1. I want to take this opportunity to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

2. Can I check that you have completed the consent forms?

3. I will provide anonymity to you by using pseudonyms when recording and reporting data. However, there can be no absolute guarantee of total anonymity.

4. Do I have your permission to record?

5. The semi-structured interview should last approximately 30 minutes.

6. You may ask to stop the interview at any stage.

7. I will ask mostly ask the questions based on the interview schedule sent to you last week. However, we may also stop and discuss a point you make in more detail. This is so I capture your points correctly. As a result, we may not explore all the questions.

8. I may take notes and check my prompts as I listen to ensure I address the important elements of the research.

9. This semi-structured interview seeks to get your views and experiences of being involved in interprofessional school-to-school collaboration for inclusive education and whether it impacted your attitudes, knowledge and values. The interview will also explore the factors that enabled or inhibited inclusive education.

10. Today is the (date) of the (month) 2023 and this interview is taking place in (place).

Semi-Structured questions

Personal and professional details

Can you tell me about yourself? What is your role? The years working in this role and your qualifications to date.

Professional Learning and Collaboration

- Why were you motivated to participate in the professional learning community (PLC)?
- What were you hoping to get from your participation within the PLC?
- What is your experience of collaboration within your school to date?
- What is your experience of collaborating between schools to date?
- How did your school organise collaboration for the PLC tasks? (Were there barriers that you needed to overcome? How did you overcome them? Were there any practices already present in the school that supported collaboration?)
- Did you notice anybody leading the PLC tasks between meetings? How did you divide the tasks, share the learning? Was there agreement, disagreement? How was this negotiated? Did any part of this process (or anyone involved in this process) surprise you?
- Has the study helped you identify expertise in others?
- How has this experience of professional learning differed from previous experiences? (inter-professional, school-to-school, outsider facilitating, frequency, duration, alternative venues, voluntary, membership individual V collaborative, job-embedded V. generic, transmissive V transformative, dialogue based, critical reflection)

Inclusion

- Can you describe your attitudes, knowledge and values towards inclusive education at the start of the PLC?
- Can you describe your attitudes, knowledge and values towards inclusive education at the end of the PLC?
- Can you think of any factors that influenced your practice? (That seemed like a positive factor would you agree? What about any negative factors?)

Interprofessional Learning and Inclusion

- Do you feel there was learning for all professionals within the group?
- Has your views of other professionals altered/ stayed the same as a result of the PLC?
- What did you think of the relationships between people within the PLC? (power dynamics, personality clashes, new friendships affecting how the PLC unfolded)
- Are you in contact with the PLC members still?
- Would you see the PLC continuing in any form in the future?
- Has the study impacted your ability to collaborate with others? Tell me about collaboration within your PLC school group (a way of doing things now, can you think of anything that has influenced your collaborative practice).
- Has the study impacted who you are as a professional?

Common Purpose for inclusive education and leadership

- Whose voices did you hear on your PLC journey? (Did you find out any ways to better elevate previously hidden voices?)
- Has leadership a role to play in developing inclusive education? (Inclusive leadership, SNA leadership, Teacher leadership, student leadership, the role of the principal)

School University Partnerships

- How did you find working with a university partner in this PLC?

Any further information you would like to add?

Thank you for taking the time to express your experiences of interprofessional school-to-school collaboration for developing inclusive education. I will now stop the recording device.

Appendix N: Informed Consent and Plain Language Statement

School Informed Consent

Dear Chairperson,

My name is Máire Love and I am a [REDACTED]. I am a Doctoral student at Dublin City University (DCU), and I am undertaking research exploring the experiences of collaboration between key educational stakeholders (Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)), teachers, and principals across different school contexts within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for developing inclusive education. To this end, your school principal has indicated an interest in participating in this research. Participation in the study (part-funded [REDACTED]) will involve a Professional Learning Community (PLC) between key educational stakeholders (Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), teachers and principals) within a school network in the North West of Ireland. The research seeks to explore whether school-to-school and inter-professional collaboration will develop inclusive education. It will also explore whether collaborative practices between schools can support professional learning for inclusive education. The researcher will facilitate the PLCs and they will rotate between the three participating schools. The PLC meetings will occur during school-agreed Croke Park hours. The PLCs will be (approximately) an hour and a half in duration and take place fortnightly over a four-month period (January to April 2023). The purpose of the PLC is to discuss, problem-solve and challenge professional attitudes, knowledge, and values of inclusive education. The venues of the meetings will rotate to provide participants with an opportunity to explore how neighbouring schools. The PLCs will take place outside school hours and no students will be present.

Participation in this research could contribute to the professional learning of SNAs, teachers, and principals. Moreover, it also has the potential to build a common responsibility between schools toward inclusive education.

Consent

At all stages of the research process, the school has the right to withdraw without reason. If you require any further information on this research before consenting to participation, please get in touch with me at [REDACTED] or my supervisors listed below.

If you do not require any further information and wish to consent to participate please complete the following statements (Place Yes or No for each question)

I understand the information provided Yes/No _____

I have had an opportunity to ask questions Yes/No _____

I have received satisfactory information regarding my questions Yes/No _____

I understand the school will be used for the purposes outlined above Yes/No _____

Signed: _____

Chairperson, Board of Management

School: _____

Supervisors' contact details:

Dr Fiona King, School of Inclusive and Special Education, Fiona.king@dcu.ie

Dr Paula Lehane, School of Inclusive and Special Education, Paula.lehane@dcu.ie

Participant Informed Consent Form

Purpose of the Research:

This research is in part fulfilment of a doctoral study that explores the impact of school-to-school collaboration on inclusive education. The researcher will facilitate a Professional Learning Community (PLC) between key educational stakeholders (Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), teachers and principals) from three participating schools. The research will explore key educational stakeholders' experiences of school-to-school collaboration for developing inclusive education.

Requirements of Participation in Research Study:

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be part of a Professional Learning Community (PLC). The PLC will discuss, problem-solve and reflect on inclusive education across three school contexts. The PLC will include SNAs, teachers, and principals from three schools. The researcher will record the PLC on an audio recording device to support writing the research. The PLC will take place from January 2023 to April 2023 and involve no more than eight meetings. It is envisaged that the meetings will rotate between school contexts. The PLC participants will decide on the setting and the duration of each meeting (approximately 1.5 hours). By partaking in the PLC, you agree to take photographs of inclusive education in action (no persons permitted within images), complete personal learning logs and add ideas to flipcharts/Google docs to support reflection and stimulate conversations within the PLC.

Following the PLC, there will be a semi-structured interview. This will be audio recorded. Each semi-structured interview will last approximately 30 minutes. The researcher will provide participants with the questions before the interview. Participants will also be given an opportunity to volunteer to have their practice observed. Observation of practice is not a requirement for participating in the research and there is no penalty for not partaking.

Consent

At all stages of the research process, participants have the right to withdraw without reason. During the semi-structured interview, participants may seek clarification or ask questions to be explained further. The researcher will seek permission before starting the recording device.

Personal Data Protection Notice (GDPR)

DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie;
Ph:7005118/7008257)

- The data gathered will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be provided.
- Confidentiality of the information provided to the researcher cannot always be guaranteed.
- Information can only be protected within the limitations of the law, i.e., data can be subject to subpoena, freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions.
- The audio files will be stored on the researcher's google drive and deleted following transcription.
- All data will be kept in the researcher's DCU google drive and will only be accessed by the researcher or her supervisors.
- In five years (January 2028) the data will be deleted per DCU Data Protection Policy.
- It is important to note that as a volunteer in this research, you are entitled to withdraw at any stage without reason.
- Upon completing the research, I will contact the schools in September 2023 to provide feedback on the findings.
- It is important to note that the findings will form part of a thesis. All data gathered is subject to the established legal limitations on confidentiality.

If you require further information on this research before consenting to participation, don't hesitate to contact me at 0858756564 or maire.love3@mail.dcu.ie.

(Continued below)

If you do not require any further information and wish to consent to participate, please complete the following statements (Place Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement	Yes/No _____
I understand the information provided	Yes/No _____
I have had an opportunity to ask questions	Yes/No _____
I have received satisfactory information about my questions	Yes/No _____
I understand I will participate in a PLC	Yes/No _____
I understand that the PLC will be audio-recorded	Yes/No _____
I understand that observation of practice is not a requirement	Yes/No _____
I understand that I will be interviewed	Yes/No _____
I understand that these interviews will be audio-recorded	Yes/No _____

I give my consent to take part in this research.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Plain Language Statement

Exploring Key educational stakeholders' experiences of school-to-school collaboration in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for developing inclusive education.

Principal/Teacher/ Special Needs Assistant (To be amended as appropriate)

The Project

My name is Máire Love and I am a lecturer at the [REDACTED]. I am a Doctoral student at Dublin City University (DCU) and I am undertaking research exploring school-to-school collaboration for developing inclusive education. As part of my research (part-funded by [REDACTED]), I wish to invite you to be part of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) between 3 schools in the North West of Ireland. This PLC will be facilitated by the researcher and will include key educational stakeholders (Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), teachers and principals) from 3 different school contexts.

What is involved?

The PLC will explore school-to-school collaboration for developing inclusive education. The participants of the PLC will meet to discuss, problem-solve, challenge and reflect on attitudes, knowledge and values concerning effective inclusive education.

The researcher will facilitate the PLCs and they will rotate between the three participating schools. The PLC meetings will occur during school-agreed Croke Park hours.

The PLCs will be (approximately) an hour and a half in duration and take place fortnightly over a four-month period **(January to April 2023)**.

The purpose of the PLC is to discuss, problem-solve and challenge your attitudes, knowledge and values towards inclusive education. All PLC participants will be responsible for discussing inclusion and trialing new ideas (agreed to by the PLC) in their practice.

By partaking in the PLC, you agree to take photographs of inclusive education in action (no persons permitted within images), complete personal reflections and add ideas to flipcharts/ google docs to support reflection and stimulate conversations within the PLC. Throughout the PLC and to aid the gathering of data the researcher will make recordings and field notes based on observations and discussions within the PLC.

Possible observation of practice

The researcher may observe your practice to explore how school-to-school collaboration impacts inclusive education. There may also be opportunities for members of the PLC to view each other's practice. Observation of practice is not a requirement for participating in the research and there is no penalty for not partaking.

The Interview

Following the PLC, participants will be invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview will last approximately thirty minutes. The rationale for the semi-structured interview is to allow the researcher to gain a deeper insight into your experience of the PLC and school-to-school collaboration for inclusive education. It will also enable the researcher to gain insight into inter-professional learning experiences within the PLC. The semi-structured interviews will be recorded on the researcher's audio device. This is to aid transcription as the researcher writes the research.

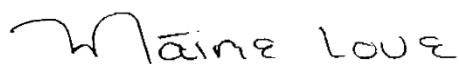
Personal Data Protection Notice (GDPR)

DCU Data Protection Officer: Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie; Ph:7005118/7008257)

- The data gathered will be anonymised and pseudonyms will be provided.
- Confidentiality of the information provided to the researcher cannot always be guaranteed.
- Information can only be protected within the limitations of the law, i.e., data can be subject to subpoena, freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions.
- The audio files will be stored on the researcher's google drive and deleted following transcription.
- All data will be kept in the researcher's DCU google drive and will only be accessed by the researcher or her supervisors.
- In five years (January 2028) the data will be deleted per DCU Data Protection Policy.
- It is important to note that as a volunteer in this research, you are entitled to withdraw at any stage without reason.
- Upon completing the research, I will contact the schools in September 2023 to provide feedback on the findings.
- It is important to note that the findings will form part of a thesis. All data gathered is subject to the established legal limitations on confidentiality.

You can contact the researcher or the named supervisors below at any stage during the research.

Thank you for taking the time to read this statement and considering participating in this study.



Máire Love

maire.love3@mail.dcu.ie

Supervisors' contact details:

Dr Fiona King, School of Inclusive and Special Education, Fiona.king@dcu.ie

Dr Paula Lehane, School of Inclusive and Special Education, Paula.lehane@dcu.ie

Appendix O: Step 1: Familiarising Myself with the Data Set

9th June 2023
The interviews are finished today. I transferred the audio files but I haven't listened to anything yet. I have a supervisor meeting next week so I am ^{going to} have written a few reflections to discuss and also discuss a timeline for data analysis. What really stood out today for me though was leadership. The value others placed on them not having all the answers there was a real sense of surprise from some SNAs & teachers that they don't know it all. The principal today, stated he really pushed that agenda, not wanting to be seen to lead giving room for others. I need to go back on PLC Transcriptions on this.

16th June 2023
I am transcribing and listening to the interviews. The invitation to the PLC is big for the SNAs, there's a sense of finally, I can help with the big stuff. The Photocopier and laminator are making an appearance in their stories. It really for me makes me think of hierarchical structures in schools - maybe power? It doesn't seem the same in the SS?? I'm thinking of PLC Transcriptions and the Reflections - the picture of the photocopier came up here too.

25th July 2023
I'm back transcribing, it's very slow. I think it's slow because as I listen and type, I find it hard not to stop and think about what's been said. I know I mentioned leadership previously but it seems so strong this

Sense of stepping back so others will step forward - a real feeling of wanting to empower each other and drive each other forward.

11/08/23
Still transcribing and listening. a pattern of nosiness in getting involved. I'll be interested when finished if this is evident across all. Curiosity to see and hear and learn.

15/08/23
A funny moment in the data today. a participant made the point that when she looked at the reflections - nobody had written nice lunch! She used to work for PDST so I understand this statement - it contrasts the 'happy sheets' with real critical reflection.

Uh, well, first of all, we have. When you mentioned the other 2 schools schools I had experience in working in both the schools and I suppose maybe it was nosiness or curiosity or just inquisitiveness I wanted to work with both those schools, again I actually am. I did my long term placement in the XXXXX. I loved it there. Yeah. And I had missed an opportunity to apply for interview when they had jobs and then I ended up getting a job here? Uh. So I'd always kind of wondered. You know what? If I had my career and kind of taking a different path. In that route I'm interested to know how the school with DEIS status would approach inclusion as opposed to ourselves and then also in the Special School I've done July provision there in 2019 and found it very challenging but very rewarding at the same time. And so with both schools in mind that were participating, I was interested. And your message as well. When you came in and said what the purpose of the group was, I thought you know what, actually yeah, and it was interesting in the other two schools. And appreciated that. So, yeah, those are the two reasons I was interested in the other two schools. And when you were given the kind of look breakdown of the project and you know something you mentioned inclusion and certainly a strategy in your head and then you're like, OK, what exactly is that and how are we doing? I kind of had a few questions for myself. When you were going through it. So I thought you know, What? There's one way to find out more. And so yeah, I put my name down and yeah, I didn't know if I then I didn't know. How the selection process is? Gonna be was, uh, exclusive? but. Anyway, yeah, I was delighted when you told me uh, that I was selected for it. Thank you.

Speaker 1: positive emotional feeling.
That's just really interesting inclusion is this buzzword. How do you mean?

Speaker 2: I do or I did because even you know, it's like a module in college and you know, when something becomes a module, it becomes just something to be done. And I don't know the kind of feeling that I don't know how to do it in reality. It was kind of like something that I studied and in different studying something and doing your exam then actually facing it in real life and breaking down what exactly it was. But now I really did feel like uh this whole process and when we had to meet and question our practice as a group. UM, like those meetings I used to always meet and one person, and it was really good that you would ask one person to kind of lead it and one person always did and I'd look, we'll meet this day after school and there. They weren't long meetings, but it just kind of encouraged us to talk about inclusion. I feel like those conversations with the three of us, the ones I nearly got the most out of because you're kind of hearing different insights and maybe people speak out more and you know in that smaller room and we'd have chatted it through so it wasn't as daunting telling the other schools because there was a group decision element to it. So nearly it became real as opposed to a module to be studied.

Speaker 1: Sorry is it inclusion became real?
Speaker 2: Ya I can't learn it off, its everything from the hello in the morning to the goodbye in the evening. I got that from the XXXXX and their 5 positive interactions. also the pictures is should say. Everyone's pictures of what inclusion was for them, they were great because it wasn't up there anymore or just from college how you'd start your essay with it was this inclusion in my school.

Speaker 2: Made Inclusion Tangible? pictures positive factor?

inclusion as a huge concept
self-reflection
Teacher Efficacy
Ponhc (2015)
collective agreement? short, frequent dialogue
alternative perspectives
Being chosen?

Appendix P: Step 2: Sample Initial Coding (Interview Extract)

Researcher: Interesting. So, was the little meeting to chat after the PLC a positive factor that supported professional learning?

TeacherSS2

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. Exactly, yeah. like there was never a time I felt hang on what's going on here. Maybe it's because we weren't afraid to ask in the PLC. We were all about helping each other, weren't we? so ya in our meetings even with the framework and there were, I suppose more complicated words on it but we'd chat through it. XXXX is great for that as she'd be into research, so we'd chat through what I'd have seen as jargon before and nearly resented, but now I see as important for me to know, you know if I don't understand social justice how can I create that culture? but if you don't feel safe asking those questions and think people are looking down on you, you remain clueless. So ya, I came to appreciate it, appreciate the language and be able to say, is this it? No, ok, what is it? Remember on the first day in the PLC, I thought equity was a banking term, like that Ad, what's a tracker mortgage? It was after the discussion on respect and listening and in one of the definitions XXXX felt there need to be more emphasis on equity, hmmm on banking no that's not right so I thought I'll ask and it was so simple to say but not understanding it leaves my lads at a loss. But XXXXX explained it to me, with examples from [the] classroom, and I thought oh yes, I do believe in equity and fairness, and yes, it's important, and now I am wondering what examples I can give.

Researcher Interesting so..(TeacherSS2interjects)

Code: Respect and Listening (Norms and Protocols)

Code: Safe and Supportive Environment
Code: Leadership

TeacherSS2 Also the pictures, we would remember the picture that somebody brought and then that would help us remember what they were talking about. And it was good they were in the drive. Not that I was in the drive you know me and ICT but XXXX would be on the drive loads and reminding us about the pictures and what language we put with the pictures. XXXX go back on [the] notes before the start of our meetings, too, so the language was fresh for her; that was a good tip XXXX gave us for focus.

(Further sample)

Researcher: So I'm hearing that you might think there is room to develop learning walks between the schools.

TeacherSS2

Ideally yes but it would need to be well organised, like and supported by the roles and protocols and what we had in the PLC., especially as when they rotate, then everyone has an understanding. God, it is tricky to chair a meeting.

Continued on the next page...

Code: Hierarchical Dynamics

Code: Turn Taking (Norms and Protocols)

So then next time I will be better at listening, so I am not stressing the facilitator out; its that understanding of what everyone must do. And you never read the rules we came up with; you handed the gauntlet over to us. I noticed that more as time went on that the facilitator or turn taker wasn't as busy chairing as we were monitoring ourselves too and more aware of thinking how will I include everyone, you become more mindful of your actions so you aren't preventing somebody from being included. We talk about including children, and then we can exclude our colleagues so the protocols keep everyone thinking of that. So to properly structure the learning walks we need that organisation or it gets messy. Unless we had someone like you or someone I don't know, it definitely takes somebody to be an organiser, one person to coordinate it. Sorry I'm not giving you a job but honestly, I don't know if we would be able to run that without somebody. Well, I think schools are busy places logistically, aren't they? So you need kind of a linchpin to organise it. You know what I mean? You need someone flexible and approachable and enthusiastic just think about it and organises us and I don't think would happen without it. You brought the structure and the big questions and we responded to that.

Code: External
Facilitator

Code:
Overwhelmed

Code: Common
Purpose
(Norms and Protocols)

Code: Group Roles in
Hierarchial Dynamics
Code: Power Dynamics
(Challenging the Status
Quo)

Appendix Q: Step 3: Generating Initial Themes

The themes in this step were actively constructed through a reflexive process, where I engaged deeply with the data.

Excerpts (Sample)	Code (Sample)	Initial Theme	Description
Maybe it's because we weren't afraid to ask in the PLC. We were all about helping each other, weren't we? (TeacherSS2- SSI)	Safe and Supportive Environment Code: Respect and Listening (Norms and Protocols)	Foundations of Inclusive Participation	This theme explores how the PLC's structured environment, supported by norms, protocols, and external facilitation, fosters inclusive participation. Participants felt empowered to ask questions and support one another without fear of judgement. The careful management of power dynamics within the PLC led to a sense of belonging and unity, reinforcing a collective commitment to inclusive education and acting with agency within the group.
We talk about including children, and then we can exclude our colleagues, so the protocols keep everyone thinking of that. (TeacherSS2- SSI)	Respect and Listening (Norms and Protocols) Power Dynamics		
...letting them come up with the solution...When we hold power, we can help or hinder others...You can raise a colleague, or you can keep them down. It's the same with children. (TeacherMS1-SSI)	Respect and Listening (Norms and Protocols) Power Dynamics		
We are all there for the same goal: to make everyone belong. (PLC1-PR)	Common Purpose (Norms and Protocols)		
I learned as much as we are different, we are all the same. We all have the same goal. (PLC6-PR)	Common Purpose (Norms and Protocols)		

Appendix R: Step 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes and Subthemes

Excerpts	Code Samples	Participant and Data Source	Subtheme Label	Description
We all listened. You could hear a pin drop as XXXX spoke.	Safe and Supportive Environment	PrincipalMS-SSI	Safe and Supportive Environment	This subtheme reflects the importance of creating a learning environment where participants feel secure in asking questions and seeking clarification. The PLC's norms and protocols were key to challenging hierarchical structures and harnessing collective participation.
She grew as XXXX spoke.	Power Dynamics (			
It felt ok to talk and say I don't know	Safe and Supportive Environment	TeacherDS1-SSI		
You always bring it back to something somebody said, even from weeks back, you help us to join the dots	External Facilitator =Qualities: and Organisation	PLC3-PR		
nobody should feel lucky that their hidden voices are heard Having a safe space to share ideas makes a big difference	Power Dynamics Safe and Supportive Environment	SNADS1-PLC3-T		
SNAs strongly advocating for parental and student hidden voice	Power Dynamics	PLC3-RRJ		

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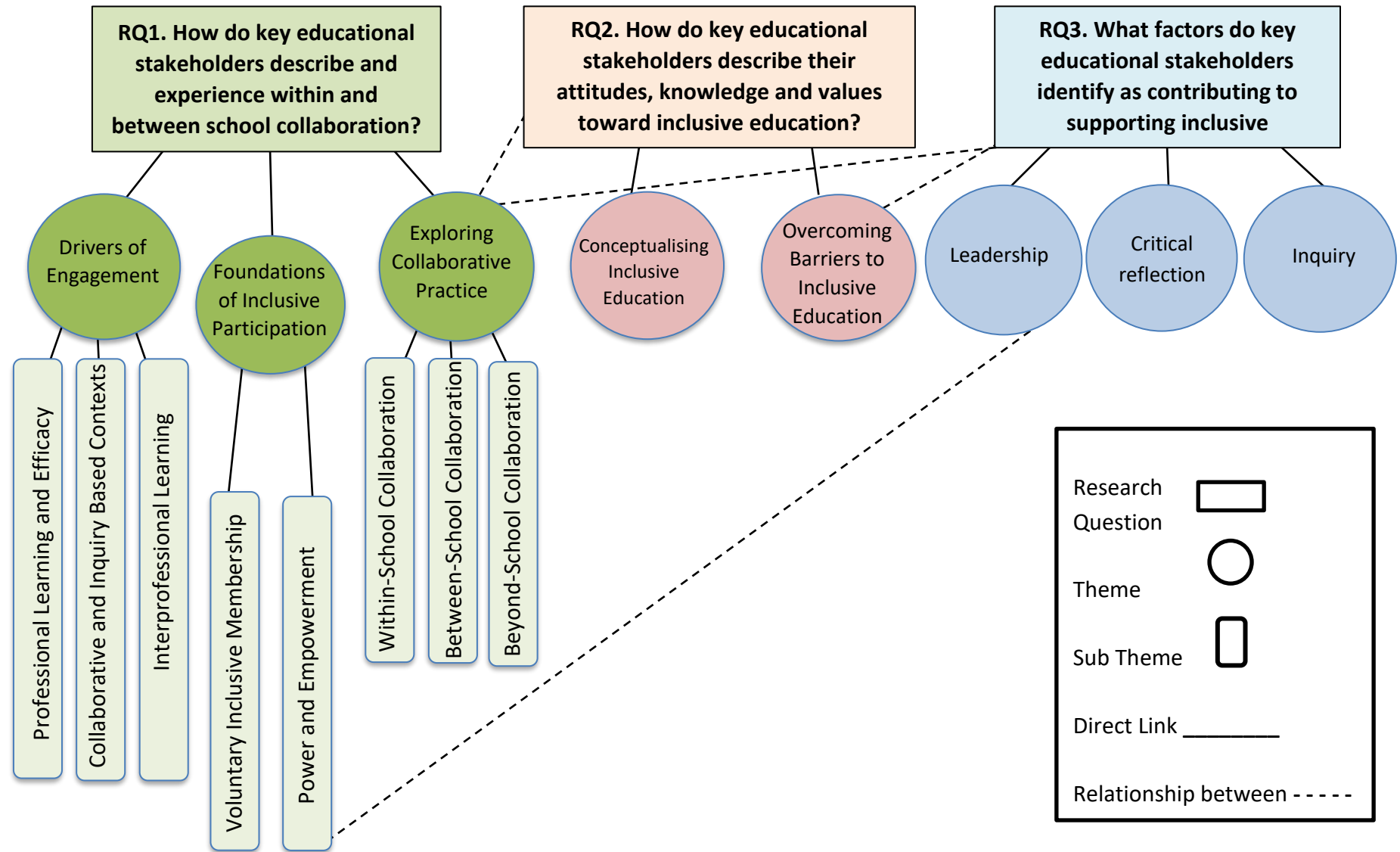
Excerpts	Code Samples	Participant and Data Source	Subtheme Label	Description
The protocols. We came up with them. We read them. You have to set up the jobs so everyone can be heard, they guided us....spotting good ideas was part of it, part of the jobs so then helping each other became part of the job... it was nice,	Norms and Protocols Group Roles in Power Dynamics	SNADS2(SS1)	Establishing Norms and Protocols	This subtheme reflects the necessity of a structured and well-organised approach to ensuring the effectiveness of a PLC. It describes the development of a culture where all participants take responsibility for team functioning, including roles and responsibilities.
The facilitator started the norms today without being prompted	Norms and Protocols	PLC4-RRJ		

Appendix S: Step: 3- 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes and Subthemes

This table outlines how the subthemes 'Norms and Protocols' and 'Safe and Supportive Environment' merged to create the subtheme 'Power and Empowerment,' highlighting key excerpts and relevant codes at each step. The decision to combine 'Norms and Protocols' and 'Safe and Supportive Environment' into a single sub-theme was driven by the overlap in how these elements functioned within the PLCs. By merging these subthemes, the analysis offers a better understanding of how structured environments contribute to individual and collective empowerment to promote inclusive participation within the group.

Step 3: Generating Initial Themes	Step 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes and Subthemes	Step 5: Refining, Defining and Naming Themes and Subthemes
This subtheme reflects the importance of a safe and supportive learning environment where participants feel safe asking questions and seeking clarification. The participants valued conditions that challenged hierarchical structures and used power to harness participation in the PLC. Relevant Codes: Safe and Supportive Environment Power Dynamics (Challenging the Status Quo) Hierarchical Dynamics External Facilitation Norms and Protocols	The excerpts under 'Norms and Protocols' and 'Safe and Supportive Environment' overlapped discussions about power dynamics, hierarchical influence, and the empowerment of participants within the PLC. Establishing protocols, external facilitation, and ensuring a safe and supportive environment were crucial to creating a sense of empowerment among participants.	This subtheme, 'Power and Empowerment,' captures the interplay between norms and protocols and creating a safe environment for managing power dynamics and fostering empowerment within the PLC. Structured protocols guided discussions and empowered participants to speak freely and share ideas. The external facilitation supported this process and was crucial in establishing these norms, enabling more effective and democratic participation.

Appendix T: Step 6: Writing Up: The Thematic Framework



Appendix U: PLC Agreed on Norms and Protocols

Important to us is	We can build this by
Respecting opinions and ideas	Focusing on the speaker
Punctuality	Being on time
Staying focused and on-topic	Keeping focused, completing tasks
Feeling safe and comfortable and speaking honestly	Listening
Willing to listen and be listened to	Having time to speak
Equal contribution-not one person taking over	Being respectful
Timekeeping	Respecting other people's time (completing tasks, getting involved, showing value on others work)
Being open to learn from other experiences	Being open to different ideas and change
Open-mindedness	Being willing to change your mind
Everyone involved	Look for others contribution
Valuing others' opinions	Giving and accepting feedback
We have all volunteered to be here, we want to belong	Non-judgemental

Appendix V: Staff Voice (DS Context)

Teachers and SNAs were asked about their views on observation as a form of collaboration among colleagues. A brief summary of the following observations was noted:

- Teachers are not overly receptive to in-class observation by their peers. Some felt it could be judgemental; others felt it was unnecessary.
- Agreeable that observation to assist NQTs is acceptable, but not once they have completed the NQT process or are qualified for a longer period, there needs to be a purpose.
- SNAs are more receptive to being observed in class by experienced colleagues and accepting advice re successful techniques a child may respond to, especially if the colleague had previously worked with that child.

Addressing Collaboration Concerns:

- Teachers currently use 1 Croke Park Hour a month dedicated to collaboration/planning-year group teachers and SET
- SNAs in the relevant year groups will be part of this monthly collaboration/planning to create a more unified approach.

Inquiry Going Forward: Learning Walk (LW): Advantages of LW to us specifically:

- When sharing ideas and knowledge, we realised that talking about it eliminates the 'fear' of the unfamiliar.
- Barriers we could encounter: Time constraints, Supervision cover, Resistance, Organisation
- Overcoming these barriers: Be clear on the purpose of having a Learning Walk for us: To learn from each other and to:
 1. Provide an inclusive and holistic education with improved teaching and learning outcomes for all children and everyone (teachers and SNAs) can contribute to this.
 2. Aid the integration of pupils from ASD class to mainstream- ASD class teachers can observe lessons their pupil will partake in and observe that pupil in the classroom during a lesson. The focus can be what works for the student.

Practical Ideas:

1. Share learning walk video with senior infant teachers (TeacherDS1 and SNADS2 work with this group).
2. Bring group together to discuss what it might look like as a pilot.

Appendix W: Inclusion Definitions

Definition	Reference
A matter of social justice, human rights and human dignity. Inclusion implies twining equity and quality to ensure that every learner matters equally. Inclusive policies are imperative to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.	(UNESCO, 2021, p. 4)
Addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures, and communities and removing barriers within and from education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.	(NCSE, 2011, p. 13)
Increasing the participation and broad educational achievements of all groups of learners who have historically been marginalised. This can be achieved in three overlapping ways: as reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students; as increasing the capacity of schools to respond to the diversity of students in their local communities in ways that treat them all as of equal value; and the putting of inclusive values into action in education and society.	(Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006, pp. 295-297)
Promote equality of access to and participation in education and promote the means whereby students may benefit from education.	(GOI, 1998, p. 10)
inclusion involves belonging, participation, equitable opportunities, and recognition of the valuable contribution that each person makes	(Cologon, 2022, p. 398)