

The Impact of Belonging to a Community of
Practice on Teacher Identity, Leadership and
Professional Learning: An Exploratory Case
Study of a Post-Primary School in Leinster,
Ireland

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Declaration

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

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Dedication

To my parents, Helen and John. Thank you for always supporting my educational journey and for setting me on the right path. I would not have reached this point without your enduring love. You have taught me the meaning and value of belonging;

Belonging is a circle that embraces everything; if we reject it, we damage our nature. The word 'belonging' holds together the two fundamental aspects of life: Being and Longing, the longing of our Being and the being of our Longing. (John O' Donohue)

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List of Abbreviations

CK	Content Knowledge
CPD	Continual Professional Development
CoP	Community of Practice
DE	Department of Education
ERC	European Research Council
EU	European Union
FCL	Fostering Communities of Learning
GoI	Government of Ireland
LAOS	Looking At Our Schools
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PD	Professional Development
PL	Professional Learning
RJ	Reflection Journal
TA	Thematic Analysis
TC	Teaching Council
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Abstract

The Impact of Belonging to a Community of Practice

Sharon Cunningham

This doctoral study investigates the impact of belonging to a Community of Practice (CoP) on post-primary teachers. The understanding of teacher professional learning (PL) as witnessing a transformative reform agenda stemming from recommendations from national and international reviews of existing teacher education teacher PL has also gained attention from the publication of Cosán's Framework for Teachers' Learning (2016) and the recent Action Plan (2021) to support its implementation, underpins this study. This investigation into belonging to a CoP in an increasingly demanding educational landscape is scaffolded by two key pillars: the impact on teacher professional learning and teachers' sense of belongingness. Firstly, teachers lead PL based on their own experiences, as continuous engagement and collective learning occur more frequently when teachers work together to develop their professional growth further CoPs offer a high-quality, job-embedded form of professional learning that has several benefits. Secondly, belongingness is a fundamental human need, and it is difficult for teachers to fulfil their duties and responsibilities fully without a high sense of belonging to their profession. Although teacher PL has its challenges (lack of motivation, lack of time and lack of appropriate learning opportunities), CoPs have a positive impact on members' self-directed PL in building community, collaborating with colleagues, developing instructional practice and feelings of support and belonging. A constructivist paradigm informs this qualitative case study design. This study researched the experience of seven post-primary teachers in a school in the Leinster region through employing participant reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis has shown three themes to emerge: CoPs for belonging and wellbeing, CoPs for PL and CoPs for teacher agency.

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

This research explores the impact of belonging to a Community of Practice (CoP) on post-primary teachers. The research is situated in a developing policy context within teacher PL. The potential of CoPs is widely accepted: however, there is a paucity of research on their impact within an Irish post-primary school context. This chapter begins by presenting a background context to the literature in the area. The rationale for and the aims of the research will be presented. Finally, an overview of the thesis is provided.

Rationale for the Research - My personal and professional motivations for this research

My personal motivations for this research include a love of learning and a belief in the value of lifelong learning. As a constructivist, I learn through my experiences with others and through social interaction with other people. I value community and bringing people together in my personal life.

Regarding my professional motivation, I have been teaching science and maths for 20 years. I have been teaching in the same school for most of this time. I saw a gap in my practice relating to in-career teacher PL. I see the worth in bringing teachers together, collaborating, and sharing our practice. I was looking for this for myself, I was brought to it in my research and formulating my research question. In this research, I hope to achieve a sense of PL community among the staff in my school, to support each other in our learning, and to promote a supportive, holistic group that adds to our sense of belonging within the school and our profession. As I aim to create this, I will add to the literature on TPL, belonging and wellbeing. I am also a middle leader in the school, involved in teacher PL and health and safety, including teacher wellbeing.

Outline of key policy developments in Ireland related to TPL

Workplace learning is a widely challenged, multi-disciplinary and relatively recent field of inquiry (Livingston, 2012). According to the LAOS document, teachers move from

‘effective’ to ‘highly effective’ practice when they ‘use formal meeting and planning time to reflect together on their work’ (DE, 2024, p. 33) and devise PL opportunities ‘that involve critical reflection on learning and on practice’ (DE, 2024, p.33). Leaders in the school manage the organisation and we ‘promote a culture of collaborative review’ (DE, 2024, p. 39). Cosan recognises that teachers’ practice is underpinned by four ethical values, set out in the Code of Professional Conduct for Teachers: respect, care, integrity, and trust. These values are important in the framework because TPL is as important to their practice as their teaching (Teaching Council, 2016, p.7). This research focuses on the holistic side of the teaching profession, and so these values are key. They focus on the emotional and relational dimensions of TPL.

TPL ‘can impact on their levels of engagement, motivation and enjoyment, thereby improving their practice as individuals, and also collectively’ (Teaching Council, 2016, p.9). One of Cosan’s aims is to create opportunities for teachers to think clearly in an evidence-based way and for these reflective practices to facilitate teachers to understand how their learning can benefit their students, school culture and the wider school community.

Teacher wellbeing is one of the areas Cosan advocates as an area for TPL. According to the Teaching Council, wellbeing encompasses teacher wellbeing. It advocates that teacher wellbeing ‘is vital if they are to effectively lead learning, and support and facilitate students in this endeavour’ and to promote flourishing for all the school community (Teaching Council, 2016, p.18). The Teaching Council mentions that wellbeing ‘incorporates cultural, academic, social, emotional, physical or technological dimensions, with a particular focus on resilience’ (Teaching Council, 2016, p.18).

Chapter One summarises each of the chapters in the thesis. The chapter ends with a brief overview of the thesis structure to orient the reader. Chapter Two, the literature review, explores pertinent literature related to the research question, which is situated in a developing policy context. This is followed by Chapter Three, the methodology chapter, which discusses the author as an insider researcher, her positionality, and the data collection tools used. The findings chapter follows, gives insight into the research findings and it shows the participants’ voices related to the research question. The discussion chapter follows in Chapter Five, where the findings are related back to the literature. Finally, chapter six concludes the thesis with recommendations and areas for future research.

The literature review focuses on policy in teacher PL, teacher leadership, learning theories, a historical view of teacher education in Ireland, CoPs, facilitation and belonging. The first area which this research addresses is policy in teacher PL. At the very least, there are two ways of viewing teachers' practices: an instrumental 'what works' approach or a holistic view. Carolyn Shields (2010) distinguishes between a transformational and a transformative view of teacher learning.

In Ireland, education policies and circulars are derived from many sources (for example, the DE, NCCA, OIDE, and TC, among others). Policies from these agencies include Looking At Our School (LAOS) 2022; A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2022), (LAOS, 2022) and 'Cosán - Framework for Teachers' Learning' (Teaching Council, 2016), to name a few. Teacher education in Ireland is guided by the contents of these policies. Teacher PL in the past has involved teachers working in silos, and a top-down model of PL prevailed in the past to a more teacher-centred, collaborative model that is working towards a transformative model of teacher PL for the future. The Teaching Council (TC) has focussed on the professional status of teaching into focus (Sexton, 2007) as it is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, which regulates and promotes professional standards in teaching. It upholds and enhances standards in the profession. One of the many aims of the TC is 'to foster a culture of "powerful professional learning" based on teachers' active engagement in their own learning, for their benefit and that of their students' (Teaching Council, 2016, p.3). Supporting teachers to work collaboratively, share their expertise and take risks together (Stoll and Fink, 1994) may lead to greater capacities for change and school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). In many countries, including Ireland, the focus of PL has traditionally been placed on the support offered to teachers, for example, Continual Professional Development (CPD), but now there needs to be more consideration made for the 'learning experiences and activities of teachers as they put that support to work' (Cordingley, 2016, p.53). The OECD noted that teachers in Ireland are not required to partake in professional learning, but many choose to do so (OECD, 2020). It identified that a teacher PL and appraisal system linked to career progression could help improve satisfaction among the educational workforce (OECD, 2020). However, there is not much evidence regarding how to support teacher PL to bring about change (King, 2016). Recent Irish research also calls for research on capitalising on

the emotional, relational dimensions of teacher professional learning (Kennedy, 2021). This research aims to add to the literature in these areas.

Historically, literature uses four terms; in-service, lifelong learning, professional development, and professional learning. Career-long professional learning may be the next term. But no matter which term researchers use, the ‘sense of history and tradition in teaching can help teachers place their immediate circumstances against a larger backdrop, one that adds significance to what they perform’ (Hansen, 1995, p. 135). Teacher education in Ireland has been significantly redesigned over the last decade (Vanassche *et al.*, 2015). Recent policy in Ireland has been moving towards school-based PL, as promoted in the ‘school-based collaborative enquiry’ (Teaching Council, 2011).

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are well documented in the literature (Wenger, 1998;) Nistor *et al.*, 2015); (Wenger, R. A. McDermott and Snyder, 2002). They involve groups of people sharing a concern or a passion for something they do, and they learn how to do it better as they collaborate regularly, over a long period of time, and engage in common activities (Nistor *et al.*, 2015). CoPs are a group engagement which offer a safe space for learning and sharing ideas (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). CoPs are, recently, more commonly called ‘learning communities’ or ‘teacher learning communities’, maybe reflecting an emphasis on learning as opposed to simply practice (Kennedy, 2014a). Within a CoP, teachers can identify some specific key problems or hot topics relevant to them and connect with people around these problems (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017). Researchers have promoted the use of CoPs in Ireland (Teaching Council, 2016) and abroad (Borzillo and Kaminska-Labbe, 2011). School and teacher networks, frequently in cooperation with Education Centres, are examples of structures promoting some of these principles. Projects such as Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-first Century (TL21) (Hogan *et al.*, 2007) and Project Maths (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008) operationalise several CoP principles (Halbert and MacPhail, 2010). Other projects in Ireland include monitoring and evaluating the impact of a collaborative learning framework as a potentially effective model for professional learning and seeking to create and implement models of good practice in physical education at junior cycle (Halbert and MacPhail, 2010).

To succeed, PL must consider how teachers learn and be intentionally designed to enhance and foster that learning (Cohen and Hill, 2000a). Coinciding with this recognition is the

belief that the role of the teacher includes that of a learner rather than merely a technician providing knowledge. King (2016) posits that teacher PL is a learning process leading to a growth of teacher expertise. There are many learning theories in education, namely: behaviourism, cognitive, constructivism, humanism, and connectivism. Learning theories that fall under the constructivist umbrella will be discussed because a CoP is a social learning theory branch within the constructivist paradigm. This research focuses on teachers' sense of belonging to a CoP. These learning theories include social, group and workplace learning, including situated learning.

The title of this research is the impact of belonging to a CoP. It is important to explore the meaning of the word belonging. Exploring the concept of belonging generally acknowledges its roots in the work of Maslow (1954), who situates it as a psychological need within his Hierarchy of Needs model as a fundamental human need. Belongingness is a sense of feeling secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008). Theorists such as Greenhaus define professional belonging as 'the gaining importance of the profession in the life of the individual' (Greenhaus, 1971, p. 22). Other researchers defined it as 'the relative power that an individual identifies with his occupation' (Aranya, Pollock and Amernic, 1981). Acknowledging that several definitions for belongingness exist within the literature, Jena and Prachan (2018) suggest that a common theme regarding belongingness is the individual's perceptual assessment of relational value in the eyes of others. It is very difficult for teachers to fully fulfil their duties and responsibilities without a high sense of belonging to their profession (Özdogru, 2022).

Chapter Three sets out the chosen methodology. As the aim of the research was to examine the impact of belonging to a CoP, to answer these questions, data was generated to explain understanding of these concepts. This chapter describes the approach taken for this research, along with the techniques used. This chapter also provides the context for the activities involved and the explanations for using them, because it is important to be clear about one's methodology and the context in which the methodology is employed (Bryman, 2016). The methodology chapter (1) discusses the researcher's positionality and reflexivity (2) explains the conceptual framework for the research design (3) presents the research questions together with the research methodologies adopted in this study (4) justifies a case study research approach underpinned by a qualitative research design is presented (5)

discusses qualitative data collection methods and ethical issues relating to the study (6) and, finally, presents the methods for data analysis.

The term ‘positionality’ refers to my stance as a researcher concerning the study’s social and political context (Rowe, 2014). It describes my worldview and reflects my chosen position within my research study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This ‘positional knowing is the ability to understand location, embodiment, and perspective and to recognise that position is partial, locatable, and critical’ (Haraway, 1988, p.584). As a novice researcher, I am required to explore and explain my positionality because my ontological and epistemological beliefs influence my research, and readers should know my identity as a researcher (Yazan, 2015). Added to this, self-reflection and a reflexive approach are very important prerequisites for me to be able to identify, construct, critique, and articulate it (Holmes, 2020). I took time to think and reflect, and I took measures to uncover implicit researcher bias and record and develop personal insights. I regularly spoke with my critical friend and supervisors and kept a reflective journal. Such reflexive processes supported the ‘methodological and interpretive rigor of the study’ (Waterworth *et al.*, 2016, p.58).

In this study, I aimed to be reflexive in researching the impact of belonging to a CoP and my engagement with it. I identified, constructed and articulated my positionality while weaving through the research and answering the research questions. It is true that engaging in reflexivity is full of ‘muddy ambiguity’ and ‘multiple trails’ as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure (Finlay, 2002). This was true as the process has brought me closer to understanding my real-life perspectives in this research. The methodologies decided upon and the research questions asked, are all informed by my prior experiences and knowledge, to name a few (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The use of a CoP in this study means that the researcher holds an “insider-outsider status” position (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995, p. 182). I am aware that I am conducting the research in my own school, as an insider researcher and an insider in the teaching profession.

Constructivism is a world view ‘in which knowledge or mental images are seen as the creations of the observer interacting with the environment’ (McNamara, O’Hara and Rousi, 1998, p.19). The constructivist theories of learning include community of practice. The community of practice creates a conducive environment for the successful implementation

of action learning, and different organisational cultures impact the implementation of action learning (Bwegyeme and Munene, 2015). There were several approaches available to me to select my methodological position. The research question determined the appropriate approach to use. My research question involved the impact of belonging to a CoP. This research question falls into the category of qualitative research because ‘qualitative studies can attend to the contextual richness of (these) settings’ (Yin, 2016, p.3). I wanted to better understand teachers’ wellbeing in our school. After considering all the qualitative approaches, I decided a case study was the most appropriate approach. This approach also builds knowledge which can inform practice (Stake, 1995).

In this research, data was collected through the use of reflective journals, semi-structured interviews and the researcher’s fieldnotes, as described in the following sections. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to gain insight into the teachers’ experience within the CoP. The semi-structured nature of this interview type enables the interviewer ‘to modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them’ (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.271). Data was also generated through the use of reflective journals by the participants. Data analysis involved transcribing the interviews and the RJs. A qualitative data analysis computer programme, NVivo, stored and organised my data, enabled me to assign labels and codes to the gathered data and provided structured data exploration. It was important to report the data honestly, to show respect to readers and users of the information (Creswell, 1994). Thematic analysis was applied to the collected data from the semi-structured interviews and the reflective journals.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the research and explores the data collected from the participants’ reflective journals and the semi-structured interviews in order to answer the research question: the impact of belonging to a CoP. Data was collected through participants’ reflective journaling at the end of each session and through semi-structured interviews completed at the end of all six CoP sessions. There were seven participants in the CoP after the pilot interview had been completed. These participants attended six CoP sessions, four Monday lunchtime sessions for half an hour and two Wednesday afternoon sessions for an hour after the half day at school. Themes and their sub-themes that emerged from phase five of data analysis are explored using the research questions as follows:

1. CoPs for Belonging and Wellbeing

- 1.1 Atmosphere
- 1.2 Connection
- 1.3 Collegiality
- 2. CoPs for Teacher Professional Learning
 - 2.1 Sharing ideas
 - 2.2 Reflection
 - 2.3 Affirming practice
- 3. CoPs for Teacher Agency
 - 3.1 Facilitation
 - 3.2 No agenda
 - 3.3 Sustainability

The findings chapter explores each of these themes and sub-themes, including excerpts from the participants.

Chapter Five, the discussion chapter, links the research findings to the literature review. This research has highlighted five main areas regarding the impact of belonging to a CoP. These five areas are discussed in this discussion chapter. Analysis of the data has revealed that the impacts of belonging to a CoP include the following:

- 1. Creating connections between colleagues
- 2. Affirming teacher's practice
- 3. A reflective space
- 4. A comfort blanket for lone soldiers
- 5. The impact of the facilitator's role

An example of one of these discussion topics includes the topic of 'connection'. Connection in this research focuses on the connection between colleagues working together in the same school. Recent Irish research calls for research on capitalising on the emotional, relational dimensions of teacher professional learning (Kennedy, 2021). This is paramount because teachers' inter- personal skills are important in establishing relationships with colleagues

and parents (Stemler *et al.*, 2006). In addition, teachers with good emotional regulation skills have higher job satisfaction and increased feelings of personal accomplishment (Brackett *et al.*, 2010). Data analysis revealed consistency across participants regarding feelings of connection. This connection led to feelings of belonging within the CoP and further, to an increase in members' wellbeing.

Furthermore, this connection enabled PL, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In sharing and listening to ideas and experiences, a connection was felt that teachers share the same difficulties in their classes. It opened teachers' eyes to different areas of pedagogy and encouraged the sharing of ideas. The data suggests that participants loved that they were all talking about the same topic and sharing ideas within that same topic. They were there for a common purpose, which enabled further connection. Participants felt that belonging is very important for human connectedness, and in that belonging, they felt a strong connection to people in the group. This is in line with Vygotsky's work, as processes or problems that a learner needs to deal with and solve independently in the social context/environment, such as an educational setting, originate initially, in social dialogue. CoPs highlight the role that communities play in the social experiences that create knowledge formation (Novak and Tucker, 2021). This connection felt by members towards their colleagues may then transfer to connection with parents of the school. It is worth noting that participants who had fewer years of teaching experience had a greater sense of belonging to the CoP. Furthermore, participants with less than five years' experience recorded an increase in their wellbeing from being part of the CoP.

Chapter Six, the concluding chapter draws the literature and findings together, presenting the new knowledge that has emerged from the research. This chapter will also focus on the study's recommendations, areas for future research, and limitations.

Given the personal nature of this research section, the researcher will self-refer to the first person for its duration. I am a post-primary science, biology and maths teacher with 20 years of teaching experience, graduating from the H. Dip in Education in 2004. I have experience teaching junior and leaving certificate students at higher, ordinary and common levels. I have taught girls for most of my career, taking a career break a few years ago. In my current position, I hold an AP2 post in teacher PL, which has recently moved to health and safety coordinator in the school. I have an interest in community, relationships and how

teachers relate to their students and each other. I feel strongly about supporting mid-career teachers and allowing us to be lifelong professional learners and continue to have ideas for the students in our classrooms. This constructivist approach underpins the research. The doctorate allowed me the opportunity to explore the impact of belonging to a CoP for post-primary teachers.

Summary

The research originates from calls for more research into the PL of teachers and how it can be sustained over time. The notion of teacher PL is part of a broader conversation about teacher identity, teacher agency and teacher leadership. As teacher PL moves from a top-down model towards a more transmissible form of PL, CoPs could form part of the sustainable solution. In addressing the research gap relating to teacher PL, this study aims to explore the impact of belonging to a CoP for post-primary teachers. The introductory chapter summarises each of the chapters in the thesis. The next chapter, the literature view, explores the literature relating to the research question: the impact of belonging to a CoP.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

This research sought to investigate the impact of belonging to a CoP on post-primary teachers. This chapter aims to give the reader a background context to teacher professional learning policy, teacher leadership, learning theories related to the research question, a historical context of teacher education in Ireland, and the role of the facilitator. It explains the use of CoPs for teacher professional learning, and finally, it explains teacher belonging in relation to CoPs. The first topic discussed is teacher PL policy. The literature review was approached rigorously through searches on the intuitions online library databases, for example, ERIC. A timeframe was put on some searches, mainly for reading recent literature. Seminal authors were read and cited as much as possible. European authors were searched for in many searches.

Teacher professional learning (PL) policy

Policy is to be found everywhere in education, not just at the government level or on a pedestal (Vidovich, 2021), and education research engages with policy in some way (Ozga, 2000). The Salamanca Statement (1994) called upon all governments to give high policy priority to improve their education systems to include all children (UNESCO, 1994). The OECD education policy outlook in Ireland ‘is an opportunity to take stock of progress and where the education system stands today from the perspective of the OECD through synthetic, evidence-based and comparable analysis’ (OECD, 2020, p.1). This policy outlook identified that a teacher PL and appraisal system linked to career progression could help improve satisfaction among the educational workforce (OECD, 2020). It notes that teachers in Ireland are not required to partake in PL, but many choose to do so (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, in Ireland, education policies and circulars derive from many sources (for example, the DE, NCCA, OIDE and TC, among others), and policies from these agencies include Looking At Our School (LAOS) 2022; A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2022) and ‘Cosán - Framework for Teachers’ Learning’ (Teaching

Council, 2016) to name a few. The contents of these policies guide teacher education in Ireland, for example, The LAOS framework ‘provides a unified and coherent set of standards for two dimensions of the work of schools: teaching and learning, leadership and management’ (DE, 2022, p. 5). Regarding teacher PL, the framework is ‘used to facilitate reflective practice and to inform the design of continuing professional learning for teachers and school leaders’ (DE, 2022, p.6). It ‘views career-long professional learning as central to the teacher’s work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart’ (LAOS DE, 2022, p. 9). Understanding ‘theory about teacher professional learning might better help us to understand policy and impact positively on practice’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 688).

Workplace learning is a widely contested, multi-disciplinary and relatively new field of inquiry’ (Livingstone, 2012, p. 101). Teacher PL in the past involved teachers working in silos, and a top-down model of PL prevailed in the past to a more teacher-centred, collaborative model that is working towards a transformative model of teacher PL moving forward. The Teaching Council (TC) has focused on the professional status of teaching (Sexton, 2007) as it is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, which regulates and promotes professional standards in teaching. It upholds and enhances standards in the profession. One of the many aims of the TC is ‘to foster a culture of “powerful professional learning” based on teachers’ active engagement in their own learning, for their benefit and that of their students’ (Teaching Council, 2016, p. 3). Through its collaboration with teachers, the DE, and other bodies, the TC ‘represents a remarkable intersection of community, creativity, and professional standards that is capturing the attention of the OECD and European Union’ (Ruairc, 2021). Cosán is the national framework that guides and supports teachers’ PL, recognising the many ways teachers learn (Teaching Council, 2022).

Furthermore, the Council’s Strategic Plan 2022-2027 ‘sets the ambition for the systemic implementation of Cosán’ amongst other focus areas (Teaching Council, 2022). It values learning processes such as engaging in professional conversations, collaborative reflection, and facilitating school-based learning events. The LAOS quality framework considers schools as dynamic learning organisations, where teachers are supported to learn individually and collectively to improve their professional capacity (DE, 2022). The

framework ‘views career-long professional learning as central to the teacher’s work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart’ (DE, 2022, p. 9).

However, ‘teachers need to embrace a critical mindset when translating and enacting policy (Barron, Gorman and Looney, 2023, p. 19). These policies are critical regarding teacher PL for now and the future as teachers’ learning is ongoing and is required in order for us to empower students to be the best that they can be (Teaching Council, 2016). This is not only because teachers are a central resource in the education system but also because the system depends on the quality of teachers (Coolahan, 2017). Simply stated, it is evident from this literature that policy supports collaborative professional learning, yet little is known about the impact of belonging to a CoP. Hence, there is a call to develop ‘a coherent and wide-ranging body of theory that will serve both to impact on practice and to interrogate policy’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 695), and this research hopes to answer that call.

Shield’s (2010) distinguishes between two views of teacher learning. A transformational view focusses on uncritically embedding reform-minded approaches to teacher pedagogies and PL for the development of the school as a high performing learning organisation. The transformative view is concerned with the organic development of community, the school as a community, a care-based and holistic community of learners. Michael Fielding’s (2007) research aligns with this view of person-centred education. This research aims to show that there are at the very least two ways of viewing teachers’ practices, for an instrumental ‘what works’ approach or a relational and holistic view. On the one hand, the ‘phenomenon that is teacher learning’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 689) is arguably a complex system rather than a single event of changing practices (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). This complex system involves systems within systems made up of individual teachers, interactions between teachers, school-level systems and interactions between teachers and school-level systems (Opfer and Pedder, 2011b). On the other hand, collaboration between these systems needs time and support from management, which can be difficult to find given the busy dynamics of schools. However, unstructured, organic, school-led contact that allows time for teachers to develop, discuss and practice new knowledge (Opfer and Pedder, 2011) is needed. Accordingly, the issue of time, echoed by Sugrue, needs to be

addressed as a big structural issue that is limiting PL (Sugrue, 2002). Indeed, there can be a tension between keeping what is effective while changing what is not effective, and this makes change quite difficult (Timperley *et al.*, 2020). Further to this, some teachers feel no responsibility to change practices as a result of PL either (Bubb, Earley and Hempel-Jorgensen, 2008). Equally, while teachers may value certain practices, they don't necessarily implement them (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). However, supporting teachers to work collaboratively, share their expertise, and take risks together (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2005) may lead to greater capacities for change and school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

In many countries, including Ireland, the focus of PL has traditionally been placed on the support offered to teachers, for example, Continual Professional Development (CPD), but now there needs to be more consideration made for the 'learning experiences and activities of teachers as they put that support to work' (Cordingly 2016, p. 53). This means that, while acknowledging that traditional PL courses have a role in teachers' PL, there is a need to move beyond a quick-fix approach and to involve teachers in sustainable PL that is more participative, collaborative and situated. However, there is not much evidence regarding how to support teacher PL to bring about change (King, 2016). Because of this, it is important that teachers are provided with PL opportunities where learning is aligned, coherent, and sustained (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999), the absence of which could result in a 'continual churn' within our profession (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 294). This means that PL needs to be aligned with individual teachers' needs, beliefs, practices and levels of experience or expertise (Kervin, 2007). However, this is often impacted by system needs, and while teachers may engage in PL experiences, this may or may not lead to teacher PL or growth (King, 2014; 2022). PL is, therefore, an outcome of engagement in PL (Liou and Canrinus, 2020) and not something that is 'done' to teachers (Timperley, 2007, p.33). It needs to be coherent, systematic and well-organised. And it needs to be sustained and continued over time (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). CoPs may offer this, and a PL space in which enduring traditional structures can be overcome (Stoll *et al.*, 2006). After all, these traditional structures included teachers working as silos, a top-down model of PL and CPD being 'given' to teachers, which prevailed in the past. This research

addresses this as it focuses on teachers' experience of belonging to a CoP. In addition, it focuses on the process of belonging and the impact of this belonging on teachers in schools. It focuses on their collaboration and how they learn together within a CoP because when done well, teacher PL can be transformative for teachers. That is to say, enquiry communities, like CoPs, can lead to teacher learning because teacher learning is most likely to occur when teachers have opportunities to collaborate with professional peers (King and Newmann, 2001). Literature from other professions also believes that being part of a CoP makes participants better practitioners and more able to give patients what they truly need (The Balint Society, 2021).

Simultaneously, recent Irish research calls for research on capitalising on the emotional, and relational dimensions of teacher professional learning (Kennedy, 2021). This is paramount because teachers' interpersonal skills are important in establishing relationships with colleagues, parents and students (Stemler *et al.*, 2006). This is reflected in policy, where Cosan recognises the importance of self-care for teachers so that we can meet our students' multiple and ever-changing needs. The LAOS (2024) document promotes the holistic nature of learning and the learner as one of its ten key principles. This can start with teachers. In addition, teachers with good emotional regulation skills have higher job satisfaction and increased feelings of personal accomplishment (Brackett *et al.*, 2010). However, despite the well-recognised importance of the interpersonal dimension of teaching, international research suggests that it is seldom a prominent feature of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) or PL programmes, both of which tend to focus on skills in instructional practice (Patti and Polyak, 2015); Zeichner, 2010). Recent research suggests that continuous engagement and collective learning can occur more frequently when teachers work together to develop their own professional growth further. While learning communities have been shown to have some transformative potential (Dogan *et al.*, 2016), more recent literature calls for further research to substantiate effects on teacher learning (Hairon *et al.*, 2017). In the same way, as noted by Van Kruiningen (Van Kruiningen, 2013), despite the potential of CoPs, the interactional processes of CoPs and how they support growth are under-researched. This research aims to narrow this theory gap by focusing on the impact of belonging to a CoP. While much literature describes the

characteristics of CoPs and, indeed, the benefits of engaging in and with CoPs, more evidence of how CoPs work effectively needs to be shared. This need has been echoed by Kennedy, who believes that the literature on teachers' PL is fragmented and under-theorised (Kennedy, 2014). More importantly, she believes that the purposes of PL can vary along a continuum from the transmission of knowledge and skills to transformative practice at the other end, where teachers are encouraged to work collaboratively in a constructivist manner to change their practices to better meet the needs of their students, in context (Kennedy, 2005, 2014). Equally, PL can also be designed and organised in many ways and several different objections (Kennedy, 2014).

The transformative category allows teachers to be trained in implementing policy (Kennedy *et al.*, 2020). Transformative learning is the process by which learners become aware of and increasingly in control of habits of perception, inquiry, learning and growth that have become internalized (Mezirow, 1981, p.12, as cited by Kennedy *et al.*, 2020). It involves the transformation of meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (Mezirow, 2006, as cited by Kennedy *et al.*, 2020). Looking at this continuum, CoPs fall into the malleable category. Although there is an increase in professional autonomy and teacher agency, compared to the transmissive model, it is not at the transformative stage yet (Table 1). With transformative models of PL, teachers can be supported to work collaboratively in a constructivist manner to change their practices to meet the needs of their students in their contexts (Kennedy, 2005). This is evidenced in the terminology change over the years, for example, 'communities of practice' are perhaps more commonly called 'learning communities' or 'teacher learning communities' maybe reflecting a more explicit emphasis on learning as opposed to simply practice (Kennedy, 2014, p. 692). Kennedy believes 'that this middle category is perhaps the most important as it acknowledges that one particular type or model of CPD can be used to different ends depending on the intended (or unintended?) purpose(s)' (Kennedy, 2014, p. 692). Kennedy positions CoPs in the malleable category for PL because in order to be in the transformative category, the CoPs would have to combine with action research with a focus on,

‘problematising practice within a shared, local context (and)....such approaches to CPD must fundamentally be teacher and student driven (albeit they might be supported by external facilitation), otherwise they risk being used as a form of contrived collaboration that serves to promote externally imposed interests. (Kennedy, 2014, p. 692)

In other words, transformative TPL includes ‘all models and experiences that include an element of collaborative problem identification and subsequent activity, where the subsequent activity involves inquiring into one’s own practice and understanding more about other practice, perhaps through engagement with existing research’ (Kennedy, 2014, p. 693). Teacher agency also increases as we move up through the model. This means that TPL in the transformative category, has more capacity for teacher agency than the TPL in the malleable category. It is important to note that not all PL needs to be transformative, rather than a transformative plan or aim will privilege particular models of CPD, while still recognising that some skills may well be best refreshed through more transmissive approaches to learning (Kennedy, 2014). In an attempt to challenge the dominance of the ‘what works’ policy-borrowing approach to the development of policy to promote teacher learning, Kennedy’s model highlights the importance of CoPs for teacher agency and teacher autonomy in our schools.

Table 1: Spectrum of CPD Models (Kennedy, 2014)

Purpose of model	Examples of models of CPD which may fit within this category
Transmissive	Training models Deficit models Cascade models
Malleable	Award-bearing models Standards-based models Coaching/mentoring models Community of Practice models

Transformative	Collaborative professional inquiry models
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Increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency (Kennedy, 2014).

Learning theories related to the research question

To be successful, PL must take into consideration how teachers learn and be intentionally designed to enhance and foster that learning (Cohen and Hill, 2000b). Coinciding with this recognition is the belief that the role of the teacher includes that of a learner rather than merely a technician providing knowledge. Teacher PL is also seen as a process of learning leading to a growth of teacher expertise (King, 2016). To this end, teachers are learners in collegial settings, becoming thoughtful practitioners through collaborative discourse. There are currently many learning theories in education: behaviourism, cognitive, constructivism, humanism, and connectivism. Learning theories that fall under the constructivism umbrella will be discussed because a CoP is a branch of social learning theory that resides within the constructivism paradigm, and this research focuses on teachers' sense of belonging to a CoP. These learning theories include social learning theories, group learning, and workplace learning, which includes situated learning. These will be discussed below.

Social learning

In the first place, the idea of social learning is not new, having been an important part of early developments in the science of psychology. However, psychologists largely ignored social learning over the years, relegated at best to the study of background context, not really on a par with the individual's learning (Gardner, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) developed a theory of socio-cultural development in which learning in a social context (for example, an educational setting) forms the basis for the acquisition of higher mental functions such as voluntary attention, categories of perception and particular types of 'schooling' knowledge (Vygotskij and Cole, 1981). For Vygotsky, problems which a learner needs to deal with and solve independently in the social environment, such as an educational setting, originate initially in social dialogue. Socio-cultural theories assert that the mind originates dialectically through the social and material history of a culture in which a person inhabits (Conway, 2005). Other early contributions to the CoP concept paved the way for the current

popularity of the studies of knowing-in-practice (Nicolini, 2011; Orlikowski, 2002; Rennstam and Ashcraft, 2014). More recent research believes that learning involves gaining new understanding, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values and attitudes (Gross, 2010). It is a change in participation (Conway, 2002). This research aims to investigate the impact of belonging to a CoP. To be clear, a CoP is a social system defined as a group of individuals who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion for a specific topic. The goal of individuals participating in a CoP is to deepen their learning in a process of collective learning (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). It is true to say that in a CoP, 'learning is portrayed as a social formation of a person rather than as only the acquisition of knowledge' (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017, p. 390). This learning theory stems from the work of Dewey and Vygotsky, who asserts that we learn best through the interplay between our experiences, the artefacts we create, and our social interactions. CoP highlights the role that communities play in the social experiences that create knowledge formation (Novak and Tucker, 2021). Furthermore, socio-cultural theories heavily emphasise fostering communities of learners (FCL) and emphasise that learning is a social act (Conway, 2002, p.80).

In spite of this, depending on the individual's role as a member of the wider team, learning within such a community could be either a positive and proactive or a passive experience, where the collective wisdom of dominant members of the group shapes other individuals' understanding of the community and its roles (Kennedy, 2014, p. 345). This research explores the teachers' experience of a CoP and their sense of belonging when they engage in a CoP over a period of time.

Group learning

Secondly, in recent decades, various literature has developed within sociocultural learning theories, and group learning is prominent within them (Hager, 2014). These theories view learning as a *process* within a framework of participation and not some *thing* in an individual mind. Here, learning is thought of as connections of relations between group members. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that communities and groups of people can learn (Hager, 2011). In the same manner, group learning is a distinctive feature of the

life of an orchestral musician also (Hager, 2014). There is a hierarchy that is essential for the orchestra to function. There is also a strong egalitarian sense within each of the many groupings and subgroupings that are located within the hierarchy. This may be true for participants within a CoP also, i.e. the CoP could be the orchestra, and the hierarchy may stem from years of teaching experience. However, there is a sense that everyone is equal and valued and belongs. Participants may think that they play in tune on their own, but once the group plays together, ‘everyone has a slightly different idea of pitch’ (Hager, 2014, p. 587). And so, we learn from each other within a group because a certain amount of learning takes place beyond the confines of the individual mind (Salomon and Perkins, 1998, p.1). In Rome, there is ‘an evolved motoring practice that adapts to pedestrian cross-traffic (whereby) no amount of individual training of motorists would produce it’ (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1996, p. 490). Today’s Roman motorists are, together, carrying out a skilled performance that is more than a combination of their individual driving skills while participating in a social practice. Belonging to a CoP may be like this, whereby participants are individually skilled in their pedagogy, but together, they can learn from each other and, at the same time, participate in a social practice together. In addition, learning and practice are closely entwined (Hager, 2014). In the natural world also, and in the study of ecology, ‘the principal main effects are likely to be interactions’ (Bronfenbrenner 1977, p. 518), and these interactions occur among an individual, and their social surroundings. Similarly, group learning is also subject to constant change and expansion (Hager, 2014), and within a CoP, this is likely to happen so the research will explore the teachers’ experience of learning and change while belonging to the CoP.

Workplace learning and situated learning

In the third and final place, workplace learning is a wide, contested, multi-disciplinary and relatively new field of inquiry (Livingstone, 2012), an embryonic field. There is a social ecology of workplace learning based on multi-level, interdependent social relationships in work environments (Evans, Guile and Harris, 2011). Other research indicates a need for more effective and affective workplace learning (Beatty, 2011). To add to this, the learning characteristics of a CoP are conducive to ‘a special kind of potential’ (Hogan, Barrett and Hogan, 2007, p.8), and CoPs are a form of situated learning whereby;

Consistent with situated learning perspectives, as groups of teachers move toward the CoP end of the continuum their distinguishing characteristics become apparent, ... The farther to the right of the continuum, the deeper the learning, more focused the direction, and stronger the growth. Groups with shared facilitation showed the most growth, empowerment, and seemed able to reflect on their growth and its impact on teaching practice and in many cases student learning. (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012, p.101)

However, depersonalised professional discourse can represent so many organisations giving rise to silent but deadly threats to workplace learning (Beatty, 2011). Additionally, the literature is demanding answers to questions regarding work processes and the interrelations between work and learning are much needed in this field (Livingstone, 2012). This research, focused on belonging to a CoP, aims to answer these calls.

In conclusion to this section on learning theories, I have discussed social learning theory, group learning, workplace learning and situated learning. However, all of these acknowledge the importance of individual learning, which is far more complex than is commonly assumed (Allix, 2011). It is just that the universe of learning includes more than this (Hagels, 2014) and ‘some learning is best done in groups and some learning is best done by oneself’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 226). Learning is influenced by a myriad of situational factors that can support or impede a change in practices. This is defined as a change in knowledge, understanding, skills, behaviours, attitudes, values, or beliefs (Evans 2010). To emphasize this complexity, the classroom is a ‘secret garden’ in our schools (Conway, 2002, p.63), and teachers are learning in the classroom just as much as students are learning. I will conclude this section with a quote from Wenger (1998), who describes how we cannot design learning, only allow it to flow and make its own path; ‘Learning cannot be designed... it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design’ (Wenger, 1998, p.225).

Teacher leadership

Simply stated, positioning teachers as leaders elevates their voice in ongoing reform and develops the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for advocacy within and beyond

their schools (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Levenson, 2014). However, there needs to be more literature related to leadership development processes (Poekert, Alexandrou and Shannon, 2016) and on teacher leadership and models of PL to empower teacher leadership (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, if teachers' autonomy, the ability to facilitate risk and make informed judgements is restricted by forced standards and laws to which there is tightly policed adherence (Mooney Simmie and Moles, 2020), then this could affect their leadership and PL. King and Holland's research evidences the capacity of early career teachers for teacher leadership development. It highlights the importance of supporting newly qualified and early career teachers as they transition from pre-service teachers to working in schools (King and Holland, 2022). Cognisant of how difficult it can be for 'teachers and school leaders to negotiate the shifting terrain that is teacher professionalism in the Republic of Ireland' (Barron, Gorman and Looney, 2023, p.2), CoPs could support this transition.

Teacher identity

Teacher identity is dynamic, complex, continuous, and worth examining (Tran and Dee, 2023). Additionally, research interest in the topic has gathered much momentum over the past four decades. However, identity is a hard concept to describe objectively (Tran and Dee, 2023), and there needs to be more agreement about the definition of teacher professional identity (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009). Furthermore, analyses have focused on the descriptions of professional identity and its development, which is various and dynamic (Izadinia, 2013); (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004). However, continued inquiry and research are highlighted as being very important. In addition, teacher identity can often be used interchangeably with professional identity and mixes both personal and professional identities influenced by what teachers have determined as essential based on their experiences in practice along with personal backgrounds (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop, 2004); Pennington and Richards, 2016).

Above all, identity development is a continual process in which identity shifts over time (Beijaard et al. (2004), and the concept of teacher professional identity has been used in many different ways to provide insights into various topics related to teaching and teacher

education (Beijaard and Meijer, 2017). Competency increases over time in the profession (Veenman, 1984), and improvements in professionalism, communication skills, classroom management and inclusive practice are strongly related to increased teacher identity and experience (Fitzsimons *et al.*, 2024). Importantly, studies have shown that professional identity influences teachers' performance affects the attrition rate and teachers' sense of self-efficacy (Hong, 2010; Ingersoll, 2003; Mahan, 2010). Not only can having a strong professional identity lead to a deepening of teacher's values and beliefs (Mockler, 2011), enhance decision-making ability in the classroom (Beijaard *et al.*, 2000) and have an effect on one's general wellbeing (Sammons *et al.*, 2007) but influences from multiple internal and external sources also form teachers' perceptions of how they view themselves as teachers (Olsen, 2016). A Teacher's professional identity depends on an individual's knowledge of a profession. However, equally important is the confidence to successfully undertake a particular professional role (Sachs, 2001). The strength of one's professional identity is linked to the strength of belongingness and attachment, which positively impacts career success (Slay & Smith, 2011). Vahasantanen *et al.* (2008) argue that for a teacher to develop their professional identity, opportunities to continuously refine their individual professional orientations by actively negotiating and renegotiating what is important and meaningful in their work are very important (Vähäsantanen *et al.* 2008).

Despite burgeoning international literature advocating teacher PL as an essential mediating factor for enhancing student outcomes, the knowledge practice gap (Kennedy, 2014) and the continuation of change in schools remains somewhat hard to find (King, 2016). In like manner, little evidence exists regarding whether and how teachers implement and sustain new practices (Baker *et al.*, 2004; Priestley, 2011) and thus narrow the knowledge–practice gap (King, 2016). For improvement and change to happen within education, there needs to be PL for teachers (Timperley *et al.*, 2020), and this gap between theory and practice relating to collaborative PL needs to be explored, especially in the Irish context where individual practice still reigns (O'Sullivan, 2001; Eivers and Clerkin, 2013). This research hopes to respond to this call.

Teacher PL in context

Full-time classroom teachers are uniquely situated to test theoretical solutions in an immediate laboratory of practice (Harris and Muijs, 2003; Frost, 2014), while at the same time working to develop new perspectives and solutions to improve their schools, and their practices identifies three significant contexts in which professional learning is acquired – the academic context, institutional discussion of policy and practice and itself (p. 20). Furthermore, positioning teachers as the leaders of job-embedded professional learning activates their individual development as leaders among their colleagues, which is a worthy outcome of PL ((Alexandrou and Swaffield, 2014). To continue, these teachers' subsequent enactment of leadership contributes to further individual and community professional growth as they guide collaborative, contextualised learning opportunities for their colleagues (Poekert, 2012). Moreover, some researchers believe that 'professional learning *in context* is the only learning that ultimately counts for changing classrooms' (Fullan, 2007, p. 153). This points to the need for contextualised and sustainable learning experiences that require intimate knowledge of the school and district setting – knowledge that practising teachers have (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). The call for this type of learning is echoed in what other scholars refer to as job-embedded PD (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991) or PL (Webster-Wright, 2009). Nonetheless, teachers' values and beliefs may often be greater than their practices (Opfer and Pedder, 2011a), the school's culture and context and individual teacher characteristics. This again highlights the importance of the school context regarding teacher PL and their engagement with it. Unfortunately, however, the success rate of long-term school-based PL is not high (Timperley *et al.*, 2020), and the 'absence of support at school/classroom level means learning is not sustained as it lacks appropriate support and context-sensitive feedback' (Sugrue and Day, 2002, p. 334). Perhaps this is because it is difficult to design PL that balances the needs of teachers and schools as well as the needs of the system (Sugrue *et al.*, 2001). Sugrue (2002) argues that teachers need not only to be supported, and to support each other but also to be challenged if they are to learn to stretch and to challenge themselves at a deeper rather than at a more surface level. Teacher learning is complex and while teacher ownership of reforms is important, teachers also need to be supported and

challenged in border-crossing partnerships (authentic school-university partnership), so that they continue to grapple with theory, with research and with policy throughout their careers (Mooney Simmie et al., 2023). Teaching is an intellectual as well as an ethical project and practice. This research addresses this and focuses on teacher PL through their sense of belonging to a CoP. It is important to consider, though, that relying only on context-based learning can lead to lost opportunities for sharing ideas and resources, there can be less collaboration among teachers from other contexts, less efficient use of outside expertise and less exposure to a broad vision for improvement (Guskey, 2002). So, there is a critical need for deep understanding of how to make PL mechanisms scalable for a system-wide effort, with demonstrated efficacy in supporting individual teachers to improve their use of evidence-based practices. Indeed, this systemic approach to enhancing teacher quality characterises the world's most successful educational systems, such as Singapore and Finland (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

Reflection and professional learning

Initiated by Dewey (1960) and developed by Schön (1983), reflective practice is an important component in teacher education, and it brings numerous benefits to teachers (Choo Yee et al., 2021). Reflection journals (RJs) have been recognised as a vital tool in promoting learning, as they facilitate critical thinking and self-engagement and push participants to overcome challenges (Draissi, BaoHui and ZhanYong, 2021). Critical reflection is a key principle of PL (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002; Liou and Canrinus, 2020). In the same way, workplace involvement in reflective dialogue is a successful method for the PL of teachers (van Kruiningen, 2013). To clarify, reflection 'entails the observer's deliberate scrutiny of his/her interpretive point of view' including 'culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal value commitments' (Erickson, 1986, p. 125) and there are three models of reflection proposed on the Teaching Council's website (Rolfe, Gibbs and Brookfields). Rolfe et al.'s (2001) framework aids reflection for the participants, and it fits my context the best, and it encourages the participants to develop their writing style, recognising the difficulties of such reflection (Giot, 2002). Rolfe et al.'s (2001) framework for reflection enables participants to reflect on how they could implement what they had

learnt from the CoP into their classes and to plan their PL. The framework consists of three elements: What? So What? Now What? These will be discussed further in chapter three.

To conclude, this section discussed teacher PL, including teacher leadership, the knowledge-practice gap, teacher PL in context and reflection. The following section will discuss learning theories related to the research question.

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are well documented in the literature (Wenger, 1998; Nistor *et al.*, 2015; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). They involve groups of people sharing a concern or a passion for something they do. They learn how to do it better as they collaborate regularly, over a long period of time, and engage in common activities (Nistor *et al.*, 2015). Importantly, CoPs are a group engagement which offers a safe space for learning and sharing ideas (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). Even though it is often at the definition stage that we make our first mistake (Phelan, 1995), an attempt must be made to give some definitions for a CoP. Wenger *et al.* defined CoPs, saying that CoPs ‘are groups of people who share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). Baker and Beames (2016) maintain that this is the simplest definition of a CoP to date. However, CoPs are, recently more commonly called ‘learning communities’ or ‘teacher learning communities’, maybe reflecting an emphasis on learning instead of simply practice (Kennedy, 2014, p.692).

Nevertheless, we all belong to different communities of practice, at home, at work, and at school, for example. They are a big part of our daily lives; they do not have names, and they do not ‘issue membership cards’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). Each one has its routines, rituals, stories and histories (Au, 2002). Added to this, within a CoP, teachers can identify some specific key problems or hot topics relevant to them and connect with people around these problems (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017a, p. 391). In the past, the early literature on CoPs focused on learning and exchanging information and knowledge, while recently, the literature has moved towards CoPs being used as a tool to improve clinical practice and the implementation of evidence-based practice (Ranmuthugala *et al.*, 2011). Additionally, the successful community of practice ‘has developed as a formal and explicit relationship

between practising teachers and teacher educators' (Yeatman & Sachs (cited in Day, 1999, p. 183). According to Wenger, we 'all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate, and share them' (Wenger, 1998, p. 48). More research is needed, however, to fill gaps in the understanding of CoPs (Holland, p.15). This research focuses on the impact of belonging to a CoP.

CoPs are founded upon three dimensions: Domain, Practice and Community (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Each of these will be discussed below.

1. Domain- The domain dimension is characterised by a shared enterprise, which provides members, in this case teachers, with a sense of collective identity (Wenger, 1998) and a sense of common purpose (Saldana, 2014). Teachers have some input into what they need to learn concerning teaching (McDonald, 2014). Together, they share a commitment to develop their expertise (Wenger, 2006; Wesely, 2013). They offer their experience and knowledge to other CoP members (Wesely, 2013). The domain moves people to participate and collaborate (Saldana, 2014).

2. Practice- CoPs are created to address teachers' interests (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). This involves developing "*a shared practice*" (Wesely, 2013, p. 307), a framework of doing (Rock, 2005). CoP members share concerns (Wenger, 2009) and help each other solve problems in pursuit of their passion (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, members pose and answer one another's practice-based questions (Wesley, 2013). For one thing, if knowledge is the potentiality to act, then knowing is using what the CoP members know in practice (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017b, p. 390). Knowledge 'sticks to the practice', and the potential to act is developed in the social context (Pyrko *et al.*, 2017, p. 392). Members work together to generate a shared bank of resources (Wenger, 1998, 2006). What they bring to the CoP and develop together influences their collective practice (McDonald, 2014). The development of the practice dimension supports the capacity of members to innovatively and creatively adapt, overcome challenges, refine existing knowledge and co-generate new knowledge (Saldana, 2014). As CoPs promote the application of knowledge, members return to their workplace to put their learning into practice (Lum Kai Mun, 2016).

When they return to the community, mentors ask and answer one another practice-based questions (Wesely, 2013). In doing so, consensus validates their practice, and dissensus leads to the appropriate re-examination of their existing practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wesely, 2013), building a network of relationships to connect and combine the diverse knowledge and abilities that exist in their specific practices for collective learning (Wenger, 1998). In this sense, learning and practice are interlinked (Hagel, 2014).

3. Community: Community has been defined as ‘the site for the relationships among citizens’ (MacKnight, 1995, p. 121) and it is a widely celebrated notion within education and other fields (Fendler, 2006). Communities are collectives of people (Rock, 2005), and so a CoP is a community that learns; participants are jointly committed to developing practice and, in this case, raising standards in mentoring and coaching programme management (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). There are many ways in which a community is built: collaboration, social interaction, knowledge reciprocation, enterprise negotiation and shared problem-solving (Saldana, 2014). Furthermore, man ‘is essentially a communal animal. We work well in groups’ (Phelan, 1995, p. 241). And so unlike traditional CPD, the community dimension allows for social learning and bonding (McDonald, 2014). In addition, as learners engage in activities and discussions and share strategies and solutions, they build supportive relationships (Wenger, 2006). To better understand what CoPs are and how they can be cultivated, learning more about the learning processes that happen ‘in practice’ and that lead to CoP development (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017a, p. 390). This will be discussed in the next section.

Irish context of CoPs

CoPs have been promoted in Ireland (Teaching Council, 2016) and abroad (Borzillo and Kaminska-Labbe, 2011). School and teacher networks, frequently in cooperation with Education Centres, are examples of structures promoting some of these principles. Projects such as Teaching and Learning for the Twenty-first Century (TL21) (Hogan *et al.*, 2007) and Project Maths (NCCA, 2008) put into practice several CoP principles (Halbert and MacPhail, 2010). Other projects in Ireland include monitoring and evaluating the impact of a collaborative learning framework as a potentially effective model for professional

learning and seeking to create and implement models of good practice in physical education at junior cycle (Halbert and MacPhail, 2010).

For a CoP to be successful, it needs to bring value to its members, and it requires leadership, trust and respect among members (Hindi, Willis and Schafheutle, 2019). CoPs ‘come to life from peoples’ trans-personal processes of thinking together’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017b, p. 389). Furthermore, suppose the CoP is created to address teachers’ interests. In that case, it has a higher chance of being successful because one of the key characteristics of CoPs is the teachers themselves- their commitment to the community and to improving their craft (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012).

I will now discuss some of the benefits of CoPs, which include identity, effectiveness, creation of new knowledge, sustainability, collaboration and thinking together. Educational research in recent decades has paid special attention to the quality of group interaction, which is considered to be the strongest predictor of group performance (Nistor *et al.*, 2015). This leads me to one of the benefits of CoPs, which involves identity. Participation in groups ‘shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do’ (Wenger, 1998, p. xvi). However, ‘teacher learning is complex’ (Timperley *et al.*, 2020, p. 4), and learning ‘entails change in one’s identity, as well as the (re-)negotiation of meaning of experience’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017a, p. 391).

Furthermore, learning alters our identities and ability to participate in the world by changing our practices (Wenger, 1998). The process by which Newcomers to a CoP form a professional identity is influenced by the CoP (Hindi, Willis & Schafheutle, 2022). It is worth noting that CoPs are promoted in health professions also, where ‘learners participate in ‘communities of practice’ and acquire knowledge and skills through newcomers moving from ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ toward ‘full participation’ in the sociocultural practice of a community (Hindi, Willis and Schafheutle, 2022, p.2). Returning to the education sector, however, the school context and the centrality of the individual teacher in the change process are very important (Kervin, 2007). This research will, thus, focus on teacher identity and how belonging to the CoP impacts teacher identity. In addition to this, there will be a sharp focus on the school context.

A second benefit of CoPs is how effective they are. First, CoPs have the potential to embed more high-quality professional learning than traditional CPDs and are considered to be collaborative, effective, meaningful and relevant (Jess and McEvilly, 2015). Additionally, our familiarity with them can serve us well in research because ‘(a)rticulating a familiar phenomenon is a chance to push our intuitions: to deepen and expand them, to examine and rethink them’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 7). However, it is important that attending a CoP supports rather than adds to the workload (King and Logan, 2022) for participants. Moreover, suppose successful CoPs are active, ongoing, driven by participant need and interest, situated and collaborative, and rely on external facilitation (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012). In that case, researchers cannot ‘just add facilitators and stir’ (Abbott et al. 2011, p.1). Rather, it is important that attention be paid to how groups of teachers are structured and designed if we are to support them in maintaining their efforts. (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012). Whilst CoPs are a very popular idea, how they operate in organisations has proved challenging to understand (Waring and Currie, 2009). In Ireland, although researchers and the Teaching Council (2016) promote the development of CoPs, school management and teachers have not put adequate support and structures in place to develop CoPs in schools (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017).

Furthermore, whilst traditionally, CoPs emerged organically via a bottom-up process (Orr, 1996), a CoP should not be fully autonomous but instead should be guided to a degree for the sake of the CoP members’ engagement and knowledge-sharing levels (Kirkman *et al.*, 2011; Bardon & Borzillo, 2016). Subsequently, the effectiveness of CoPs, the possibility of over workload, and how the CoP operates will be considered in the research as they may impact teachers. However, Yeatman & Sachs have observed that successful CoPs have developed ‘as a formal and explicit relationship between practising teachers and teacher educators’ (cited in Day, 1999, p. 183), and this research was carried out in a school context among practising teachers.

A third benefit of CoPs is that they can create new knowledge. They are used as a tool for ‘generating and sharing knowledge and improving organisational performance’ (Ranmuthugala *et al.*, 2011, p. 1). Initially, change is complex, and solutions happen when people interact purposefully (Fullan, 2004, p. III). New knowledge, therefore, created

within a CoP can aid this change. Furthermore, individual knowledge and the combinations of several individuals' knowledge through practice are influential in the creation of new knowledge (Kennedy, 2021). Through this new knowledge, many post-primary CoPs have been used as educational change mechanisms (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012). However, 'CoPs cannot be 'set up' as formal teams, and to better understand CoPs, it is important to pay attention to the nuances of the lived practice' (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017, p. 392). Some attempts have been made to 'set up' CoPs in order to obtain knowledge as an output, which is reflected in the interventions where 'CoPs-to-be' were expected to implement certain pre-specified strategies based on 'evidence' (Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2014). The range of topics can also be defined in too general terms, making it difficult to relate to more specific problems that could be of particular interest. For one thing, members of CoP are attracted to discussions that they will gain immediate value from, such as engaging discussions, new working relationships, the ability to share their views, solutions to their problems, opportunities to see what others are doing, and some tools or techniques that they could use in their work (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017). Some research suggests that successful CoPs develop a formal and explicit relationship between practising teachers and teacher educators (Yeatman & Sachs (cited in Day, 1999, p. 183). This may not, though, be possible in many school settings. CoPs also take 'practice' as their uniting characteristic, while more transformative forms of PL take 'enquiry' as their uniting characteristic, 'thereby asserting a much more proactive and conscious approach than is necessarily the case in communities of practice' (Kennedy, 2014, p. 347). I am aware that I am creating a CoP for this research, but there is no intentional output of knowledge to be gained except to gauge participants' sense of belonging to the CoP.

Moving on to the fourth benefit of CoPs is that they can be sustainable, which allows for knowledge and skills to be transferred and for such learning to be reflected upon and evaluated (Jess and McEvilly, 2015). This benefit offers the possibility of changing the culture and context within which principals and teachers might work (Halbert & MacPhail, 2010). However, other researchers disagree and believe that the sustainability of CoPs is a challenge (Hindi, Willis and Schafheutle, 2022). This research aims to sustain the CoP, knowing the challenges.

A fifth and final benefit is that CoPs allow for collaboration and thinking together. Thinking together is a key part of meaningful CoPs, where participants guide each other through their understandings of the same problems in their area of interest, and this way, indirectly share tacit knowledge and bring the CoP to life (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017b). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) indicate that by working together in a learning community, teachers form new visions of learning in the classroom, represented through collaboratively generated knowledge and teaching practices. CoP participants enter ‘a common search for meaning in their work lives’ (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012, p. 294). However, a sense of community appears to be influenced by ‘CoP members’ time spent in the CoP, by their centrality in the CoP, and by their socio-emotional interpersonal knowledge’ (Nistor et al., 2015, p. 264). So, it is essential to have a mutual engagement for the learning community to succeed (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017a, p. 391). Related to this, it is worth noting that members on the periphery may not participate as much, so their valuable thoughts and ideas may be missed. Over a period of time, these members gradually move from observation (periphery of the CoP) towards the centre (participation) (Hindi, Willis and Schafheutle, 2022).

In addition to this, Fendler posits that community seems never to be used unfavourably in educational literature but that it ‘can have unintended effects like excluding diversity, perpetuating the norms of the already privileged, and reducing questions of freedom and liberation to voting procedures’ (Fendler, 2006b, p. 304). She argues that community ‘is advocated on the grounds that it makes people feel welcome and comfortable’ but that this may not actually be the case. Additionally, people may have ‘assumptions about community’, which could be ‘dangerous when they function to perpetuate existing inequalities and censor possibilities for difference’ (Fendler, 2006b, p. 306). The issue of power is fundamental to successful PL within a community of practice (Kennedy, 2014, p. 346). Importantly, for professional learning to take place within this context, it should be neither a form of accountability nor performance management (Kennedy, 2014). This research explores the teachers’ experiences of the CoP and any impact of belonging to the CoP on teachers.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

DuFour and Eaker are the impetus behind PLCs. Professional learning communities (PLCs), as a means of raising the teaching profession, are becoming more attractive in education systems and are seeking to improve school improvement processes and outcomes. (Hairon et al., 2014). Education reformers and researchers view the PLC as a means to enhance teacher learning, competency and practice, leading to improvements in student learning (Hairon et al., 2014). Ultimately, the expectation is that by cultivating PLCs, schools can improve student achievement by making teaching and classroom practices more effective. There is an urgent need to develop a research agenda and framework that can support the claims of PLCs on school improvement and effectiveness (Hairon et al., 2014). The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn (DuFour, 2004). PLCs address group learning that focuses on the student's needs as an outcome, and increasing student achievement and building a culture of collaboration that will eventually lead to school improvement. The leader is external to the community. CoPs are more focused on improving their practice with an internal facilitator (Blankenship & Ruona, 2001). Teacher identity is enhanced by a corresponding enhancement of their professional capacity (Lee and Shari, 2012), which is the ability to achieve better results for their students (DuFour et al., 2010).

Historical view

This section aims to outline the evolution of teacher PL and CoPs from teachers working as silos and a top-down model of PL prevailing in the past to a more teacher-centred, collaborative model that is working towards a transformative model of teacher PL for the future. Regarding terminology, five terms are used in the literature: in-service, lifelong learning, professional development, and professional learning. Career-long professional learning is considered to be the next term. No matter which term is used, the 'sense of history and tradition in teaching can help teachers place their immediate circumstances

against a larger backdrop, one that adds significance to what they perform’ (Hansen, 1995, p.135). Not only is the practice of teaching older than the institutions in which it occurs, but the roots of teaching go back as far as Socrates and Confucius, as teachers lead others to know what they did not know before and to understand more dynamic attitudes and beliefs than previously held ones (Hansen, 1994, p. 219).

Throughout the 1960s, teacher education operated within traditional structures. With increased numbers of pupils in post-primary schools from the mid-1960s, more pressure was placed on the Higher Diploma in Education courses offered, and facilities for a more active research role were made available within the Universities (Coolahan, 2017). After that, in the early 1970s, alongside increasing teacher numbers, the first Teacher Centres were opened on a regional basis for teachers to meet and participate in seminars, lectures, and workshops and to provide resources. During the 1970s, agencies organised short, voluntary in-service schemes which ‘concentrated on the maintenance and development of the professional competence of teachers, updating on subject content and pedagogic techniques’ (Coolahan, 2017, p. 148). Teachers had to pay for and arrange substitutes while they were away from their school for this in-service. A significant policy shift in teacher PL was the linking of the position in the White Paper of the ‘teaching continuum’ (GoI, 1995) to the OECD report (1991); ‘We believe that the best returns from further investment in teacher education will come from the careful planning and construction of a nationwide induction and in-service system using the concept of the teaching career as the foundation’ (OECD, 1991, p. 98). The White Paper on education (GoI, 1995) recognised that the PL of teachers was ‘fragmented’ and suffered because ‘teacher participation is voluntary’ and course content is ‘provider driven’. This paper advocated for professional development that embraces ‘the personal and the professional needs of the teacher, as well as those of the school system’ (p. 87).

After that, throughout the 1990s, the pace of change gathered momentum, and there was a call for lifelong learning for all (Sugrue, 2002). As the notion that all knowledge is tentative and provisional (GoI, 2000). Globalisation and its impact on schools brought uncertainty

and impermanence (Hargreaves, 1994), which led to an abundance of policy documents and attempts to;

alter the structure and organisation of schools and schooling to make them more efficient and relevant, to change curricula and pedagogy to align them more closely with the needs of the marketplace and national economic agendas, to alter assessment procedures to lend greater variety to the process. (Sugrue, 2002, p.101)

However, internationally, the effect of PL in the late 1990s had a poor track record because of its lack of a theoretical base and coherent focus (Fullan, 1995, cited in Guskey & Huberman, 1995, p. 253). While the importance of lifelong learning and PL was recognised, it was also recognised that the provision at the time was deficient, given its scale and complexity (Sugrue, 2002). In the wake of the OECD (1991) report, in Ireland, which reported a lack of funding and infrastructure as restricting teacher PL, the government received a budget from the EU to invest in teacher development. It indicates that the establishment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 1987 was a significant and more recent development of the network of Education Centres for delivering ongoing professional learning. Educational policy was seen, however, by some researchers as an instrument to be used by major power groups and in many countries. It had become an active accumulation of material advantage (Hogan, 1995). Teacher PL would be linked to this. After that, legislation to create a Teaching Council was passed in 2001, including structures in Scotland, Australia and Canada. There was a general welcome for more provision and an awareness of the need for continuous and sustained learning (Sugrue, 2002). The demands of a globalised economy and the perceived need to perform well in international measures of educational effectiveness (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ensure that despite global recession, many governments continue to invest in teachers' PL. Despite the global recession in the last decade and major cuts in public spending, particularly in the education sector, the Irish government continued to invest in teachers' PL (King, 2013). Our government understands that education 'places a very important role in the development of a nation' (Choudhary, 2023, p.7). The focus of education research in Ireland, though, has been mainly on ITE, with some focus on PL and very little, until recently, on induction (Conway et al., 2009;

Smyth et al., 2016). Despite the funding, ‘placing high value *on* something is not the same as engaging *in* it’ (Czerniawski *et al.*, 2018, p.144). Furthermore, as changes in schools are often imposed by senior and middle management in a climate of accountability (Bolam *et al.*, 2005) in a top-down approach, this can make teachers ‘technicians carrying out someone else’s policy’ (Priestley et al., 2011, p.269) instead of being active, creative, self-directed participants in their own PL (King, 2016). It is worth noting at this point that all the denominational churches influenced policy documents and texts in the Irish system over the decades, as they show a large emphasis on values-based education and inclusion of the moral goods of teaching (Simmie & Moles, 2020).

Nonetheless, teacher education in Ireland has been significantly redesigned over the last decade (Vanassche et al., 2015). Recent policy in Ireland has been moving in the direction of school-based PL, as promoted in the ‘school-based collaborative enquiry’ (Teaching Council, 2011) and in the school self-evaluation initiative (DES, 2012), including observation and feedback between colleagues within the same school (De Paor, 2016). Indeed, the Teaching Council’s policy on the continuum of teacher education recommends that ‘effective CPD is constructivist in nature’ (Teaching Council, 2011, p. 20). More recent research has shown that schools have become key sites for providing PL (De Paor, 2016). This research aims to add to this growing literature on in-context teacher PL. The PL framework now being planned can be expected to develop this further and to help schools in their ‘looking in, looking out and looking forward’ (Norris, 2014). For that reason, helping to promote a more open and shared professionalism should not be underestimated (De Paor, 2016).

To conclude, the origins of the Irish education system are firmly rooted in nineteenth-century politics, which continues to cast long shadows in the present (Sugrue, 2002). Globally, education is constantly changing, with international comparisons requiring policymakers to re-examine their education systems (Gray, 2010; European Commission, 2015). However, another important point is that teacher PL has been described as ‘a moving target’ (Sugrue 2002, p. 313), but ‘Ireland is now engaged in the era of lifelong learning’ (Coolahan, 2017, p. viii). To conclude, it is clear from this historical overview that our

island of saints and scholars has had an extensive engagement with education (Coolahan, 2017), and this ‘sense of tradition provides teachers with a standpoint from which to criticise present educational convictions and doings, their own as much as those which are widespread in contemporary society’ (Hansen, 2005, p. 217, p. 47).

The role of the facilitator

The role of facilitators and the characteristics and mechanisms of their interventions have yet to be thoroughly investigated (Zhang and Wang, 2023). Some researchers have offered definitions, for example, to support and guide the collaboration process (Hsieh & Tsai, 2012). It has also been described in the literature as a role of coach, a set advisor and a blended action learning facilitator (Sanyal, 2024). The ‘action learning coach’ aims to open minds to a deeper level, aimed at self-discovery through one’s own experience and critical reflection, maintains the balance of managing the process with the required questioning, enables new insights to complex emotions, unconscious processes through active facilitation and offer advice to enable reflection, learning and action (O’Neil and Marsick 2014, Rigg 2006, Pedler and Abbott 2013, Vince 2004; 2008; Vince and Martin, 1993). Additionally, facilitators are practitioners who take on a leadership role whereby they coordinate and support peers in their setting in developing their dialogic practices within a CoP while simultaneously engaging in and building their own through online TPD (Brugha and Hennessy, 2022). Learning communities are considered safe spaces where teachers can share experiences comfortably (Brennan, 2024). Furthermore, through the moderators’ facilitation, learners can express their ideas while interacting with their colleagues, thus helping them learn about new perspectives and information (Hsieh & Tsai, 2012). In a globalised world filled with standards and competencies, there is a strong need for autonomy in teachers’ practices (Simmie & Moles, 2020). This can come about through the role of the facilitator. In addition, educational dialogue involves co-constructing knowledge where learners build on each other’s dialogue and ideas by asking open questions, reasoning, justifying, and critically evaluating (Alexander, 2008). These skills are thus required of the facilitator. Furthermore, learning, according to Jones and Issroff (2005), can be divided, the cognitive aspect mainly concerns how thinking and problem-solving

processes take place, while the affective aspect concentrates on how emotion, motivation, attitudes and feelings influence learning, then these two strategies should be combined together by the facilitator, to effectively sustain and maintain discussion (Kester and Paas, 2005, Makitalo et al., 2005, Weinberger et al., 2005). Thus, facilitators guide teachers as they construct new knowledge and practices (Borko, 2004), so both the trainers' knowledge and skills (e.g. supporting self-regulation and providing qualitative feedback) are important. Collaborative learning requires external guidance and support, and these interactions in open learning environments are complex and challenging (Zhang and Wang, 2023; Chen et al., 2018). Recent research at the University of Cambridge also supports the impact of teacher-led dialogue (Brugha and Hennessy, 2022).

Merchie et al. (2018) note that the TPL facilitator plays a key role in facilitating effective TPL, referencing the importance of facilitators having sufficient content knowledge and skills (e.g., supporting self-regulation and providing qualitative feedback). Furthermore, Biesta (2013) understands the importance of keeping the 'beautiful risk' in education (p. 1), recognising W.B. Yeats' poem that education is 'not the filling of a pail, but rather the lighting of a fire'. Not only does Cosan recognise the skills and knowledge of facilitators as one of several appropriate criteria for evaluating TPL (ERC, 2023), but it is evident from the literature that the role of a high-quality facilitator in TPL is very valuable (Rawdon et al., 2021), including content knowledge and skills of facilitators (ERC, 2023). In addition, Tannehill et al. (2021, p. 155) recognise that effective TPL is "facilitated with care" and note the importance of listening to the voice of teachers, drawing on teacher insights gained through practice, recognising teacher strengths and promoting engagement in action research projects. However, little clarity exists on how to evaluate PL in general (King, 2014); thus, there are limited examples of assessing facilitator skills and knowledge, although the importance of high-quality facilitating skills is recognised by the CSL as follows: TPL should be provided by high-quality personnel, committed to their own ongoing PL and system improvement (CSL, 2019, p.7). Nevertheless, the Education Support Centres have a detailed process to support high-quality facilitation of TPL, including encouraging commitment from facilitators to engage in ongoing PL and collaboration and partnerships with (social) scientists in setting up and evaluating PL is

advisable (Merchie et al., 2018). Other research supports the idea of collaborative and individual reflection, as teachers may not be able to interpret their practice objectively and could benefit from other teachers' perspectives (Hoban, 1996). This view of collaboration is supported by recent research agreeing that collaborative reflection allows for the identification of real action to improve practice (Brennan et al. 2024).

Parker, Patton and Tannehill (2012) classify the role of the facilitator in three ways: First, a leader is a person who takes care of the organization of the group. Second, a workshop leader is a pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), or content knowledge (CK) specialist hired to deliver a focused workshop. Third, a facilitator is equipped as a workshop leader to deliver content either in the form of PCK or CK, but more importantly, has the skills to help teachers recognise what they know, what they do not know, what they need to know, and what they want to know; not to impose vision, but to listen and hear, gently push and pull (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). Furthermore, some members of the CoP could be educated on the 'pedagogy of facilitation' to aid teachers working within a CoP (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). To this end, the role of the RPF facilitator includes creating the learning agreement, clarity of purpose, safety, voice, resource and timekeeper (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021), in an effort to avoid the CoP becoming a moan fest where participants share their tensions between the expectations of state departments and the context of their school (Halbert and MacPhail, 2010).

Wellbeing, belonging and resilience

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a term that is used frequently in educational discourse, as is evident in both national and international policy developments in current literature (Nohilly et al., 2023). Wellbeing is considered 'an urgent matter to examine' (Buchanan and Moyne, 2020, p.1), and it can be interpreted in many different ways (Miller et al., 2013). And so well-being remains an undefined term in education, confusing efforts to plan for and monitor it constructively (Soutter et al., 2014). Work completed with schools on wellbeing highlights that the topic is open to multiple interpretations (Nohilly and Tynan, 2019), and has been described as a 'wicked' problem (Bache et al., 2016). The globalisation of educational

reform is not without challenges, with wellbeing as an example (Nohilly et al., 2023). Although wellbeing has been described as a difficult concept to define cross-culturally due to dynamic, multifaceted constructs that constitute wellbeing (Dodge et al. 2012), it has, however, been described ‘as the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced’ (Dodge et al., 2012, p.230). The World Health Organization (WHO) defined the concept of positive wellbeing as synonymous with the term mental health, consistently maintaining that ‘mental health is defined as a state of wellbeing’ (WHO 2018). Other definitions define wellbeing as an individual's physical, emotional and psychological health (Ferguson, 2008), requiring an awareness of emotions and motivations (Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). Equally important, the gold standard for measuring wellbeing is flourishing, and the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing (Seligman, 2011, p. 13).

Additionally, definitions related to teacher wellbeing include ‘the ability of teachers to develop a positive though dynamic equilibrium between teachers’ resources and their challenges/ demands (environmental, social, individual, physical, mental, psychological) (Benevene et al., 2020). The Department of Education define wellbeing as follows:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life (DE, 2018, p. 10).

Although wellbeing and our navigation of it is a living, dynamic thing, so it may seem pointless to create a measure for it (Dobutowitsch, 2022), there is, however, a need for some measurement of it. The WHO-5 Wellbeing Index and the WEMWB Scale measure subjective perception of wellbeing, focusing entirely on positive aspects of mental health (Tennant et al. 2007; Topp et al. 2015). The WEWMBS and the WHO-5 have been used previously in the university setting in Ireland (Davoren et al. 2013; Downs et al. 2017; Karwig, Chambers, and Murphy 2015). Professional wellbeing requires the use of specific strategies such as setting boundaries, reflection, goal setting, maintaining work-life balance, time management, and seeking renewal (e.g. Thieman et al., 2012). Despite this,

however, teacher self-care is not an integral part of current professional standards (Mansfield *et al.*, 2016) and teacher retention and attrition are a global concern (Mccallum and Price, 2010), although it is well documented in the literature that teaching is a demanding and challenging profession and (Benevene *et al.*, 2020). It is no surprise, then, that teacher wellbeing has received much attention over the past decades (Benevene *et al.* 2020). Promoting awareness of wellbeing in early career teachers contributes to teacher longevity and productivity, and belonging to a CoP may also impact their wellbeing. Factors that raise wellbeing issues and the ability to transition and cope include the fact that teachers retire, leave the profession prematurely, fewer numbers entering teacher training, and the current workforce of teachers cannot relate to current students' life worlds (Mccallum and Price, 2010). Similarly, the retention of effective and successful teachers should be a focus of research (Thieman, Henry and Kitchel, 2012b), and there are concerns over the role of health and burnout in teacher retention (Ryan *et al.*, 2017). Importantly, 'burnout syndrome represents a factual risk for school teachers during their career' (Buonomo, Fatigante & Fiorilli, 2017, p. 190). Focusing on the impact of belonging to a CoP may address this issue. There is a need to understand better how to enhance teacher wellbeing as a driving source for personal and professional flourishing, which 'can lead to an empowering of teachers to care for their students, create positive learning environments, commit to the role of education, and support a learning society' (Hascher, Beltman and Mansfield, 2021, p.429).

Although teacher stress has been researched internationally, there is still a need for more research in Ireland (Buckley, Abbott, & Franey, 2017). This research aims to address this. Recent research in Ireland, however, suggests designing a mental health awareness programme specifically to address the needs of pre-service teachers in Ireland (O' Brien *et al.*, 2020). Other Irish research suggests that a mentoring programme would benefit every school, formally or informally by supporting new teachers in their profession. (Buckley, Abbott and Franey, 2017). McCallum and Price (2010) suggest that a focus on wellbeing during Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and in the early years of a teacher's career may positively influence and enable NQTs to respond to the demands of their profession productively. Belonging to a CoP may also enhance this. This is a mutually beneficial

endeavour because the best interest of the pre-service teacher's wellbeing, is also in the best interest of their future students' wellbeing (O' Brien *et al.*, 2020). Related to this is that close relationships between teachers and individual students are an essential factor in helping students stay engaged over time (Zee and Koomen, 2020). While several studies have attempted to examine educators' attitudes regarding wellbeing promotion, there still needs to be more research (Byrne, McGuinness and Carthy, 2021).

Additionally, positive interpersonal behaviours may help teachers have more pleasant emotional experiences with their students, resulting in a more positive classroom climate (Zee and Koomen, 2020). By focusing on teachers' skills, rather than students' behaviours and characteristics, the emotional and behavioural engagement of early adolescents could be improved (Zee and Koomen, 2020). Research within the last decade suggests that within Irish school settings, collaboration is invaluable in reducing stress levels and improving teachers' overall wellbeing (Buckley, Abbott & Franey, 2017). In addition to this, teacher wellbeing is a source of professional and personal development for teachers, and a deeper understanding of it could build greater knowledge about strategies to support teachers in dealing with professional demands and, more specifically, working in challenging situations (Hascher, Beltman and Mansfield, 2021). Very importantly, effective teaching encompasses both a pedagogical and an interpersonal dimension. However, despite this, the interpersonal dimension receives little attention in PL programmes because of its tacit, non-conscious, and context-specific nature (Scully, Pitsia & Karakolidis, 2020). Finally, a positive attitude, taking ownership and responsibility, and identifying as a lifelong learner are qualities that sustain teacher wellbeing and identity and that ideas for enabling teacher wellbeing include working with like-minded people in collaborative endeavours as well as the importance of maintaining a work-life balance (Mccallum and Price, 2010). This research aims to bring these strategies to light as it focuses on belonging to a CoP and the impact of that belonging.

In addition to wellbeing, the top four cited protective factors were peer interaction, teacher perceptions, health/wellbeing efforts, and administrative support. Simple acts such as supporting each other, getting along, being willing to collaborate, offering assistance, and

having a positive attitude helped teachers make stress more manageable (Haydon, Leko & Stevens, 2018).

Positive administrator support was a protective factor against teacher stress for all the teachers. Specific practices by administrators that mitigated stress included being trustful, allowing collaborative decision-making, communicating, and having empathy (Haydon, Leko & Stevens, 2018).

Belonging

The concept of belonging acknowledges its roots in the work of Maslow (1954) who situates it as a psychological need within his Hierarchy of Needs model, as a fundamental human need. Belongingness is a sense of feeling secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group (Levett-Jones and Lethlean, 2008). Professional belonging has been defined as ‘the gaining importance of the profession in the life of the individual’ (Greenhaus, 1971). Belonging can deepen teachers’ ongoing commitment to their students and enhance their wellbeing in general (Miller and Gkonou, 2023). Other researchers define belonging as ‘the relative power an individual identifies with his occupation’ (Aranya, Pollock & Amernic, 1981). (Un)belonging is a key link between teacher identity and emotions in that the feeling of belonging typically corresponds to insider identities and unbelonging with peripheral or outsider status. (Miller and Gkonou, 2023) Acknowledging that several definitions exist within the literature, Jena and Prachan (2018) suggest that a common theme regarding belongingness is the individual’s perceptual assessment of relational value in the eyes of others. It is also challenging for teachers to fully fulfil their duties and responsibilities without a high sense of belonging to their profession (Özdogru, 2022). Furthermore, professional belonging is the main factor that increases and sustains the motivation and performance of employees in business life (Özdogru, 2022). Teachers’ belongingness can be described as ‘the extent to which they experience being integrated with institutions, authorities, and learners’ (Yang et al. 2022, p.2). It necessitates feeling acceptance, appreciation and being cherished (Goodenow, 1993). People in a consonant setting are more likely to feel like they belong (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2019).

Teachers can experience challenges which are not a sign of weakness or a message that they are not “cut out” to be a teacher. Instead, teaching is complex, challenging, and stressful; teachers can feel a lack of belonging and feel vulnerable and in need of support (Gray, Wright and Pascoe, 2017). This is echoed in Bloomfield’s research, where pre-service teachers commonly feel loneliness, isolation, and a lack of belonging during practicum (Bloomfield, 2010). Belongingness is a need for (pre-service) teachers to thrive, and there is a growing body of academic literature on this important issue regarding teacher education (Donlon et al 2020). An increased sense of belongingness creates a stronger sense of an evolving teacher identity and increased confidence, and they are more open to approaching and interacting with other staff members within the school (Donlon et al., 2020). There is also a possible linkage between belongingness and teacher wellbeing, which is currently a focus of much attention within Ireland (Buckley, Abbott, & Franey, 2017) and on a wider international stage (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Due to this, it has been suggested that further emphasis could be given to the issue of non-teaching activities for student teachers (Donlon, et al, 2020) and experienced teachers. This research aims to bridge the gap between belongingness and attending a CoP within the post -primary school context. Furthermore, ‘simple acts such as supporting each other, getting along, being willing to collaborate, offering assistance, and having a positive attitude helped teachers make stress more manageable’ (Haydon, Leko & Stevens, 2018, p.103).

Resilience

Although empirical work on resilience in adults, and teachers in particular, is still in its infancy (Gu and Li, 2013), there has been a burgeoning amount of research in the fields of teacher wellbeing and resilience over the past decade (Collie et al. 2015; Day and Gu, 2014; Mansfield, 2021; Rahm and Heise, 2019). However, teacher wellbeing and resilience are frequently used when discussing and researching teachers’ work and are often used interchangeably and without clarification (Hascher, Beltman & Mansfield, 2021). Furthermore, there is some debate regarding the exact meaning of teacher resilience. However, authors have a broad consensus that ‘teacher resilience happens when a teacher adapts positively to an adverse situation’ (Clarà, 2017, p.82). Other researchers posit that

‘resilience supports the maintenance and development of teacher wellbeing’ (Hascher, Beltman & Mansfield, 2021, p.416). Resilience has also been defined as the ability of organisations and individuals to ‘respond productively to significant change that disrupts the expected pattern of events without engaging in an extended period of regressive behaviour’ (Home & Orr, 1997, p. 13). The definition that aligns best with the research question is that ‘resilience supports the maintenance and development of teacher wellbeing’ as they are both connected to and depend on each other. They may be impacted by belonging to a CoP. It is true that to be a good teacher requires resilience and commitment (Gu and Li, 2013), and so, to sustain resilience and quality in teaching, the focus must be placed on school context and school leadership to nurture teachers and their capabilities and collegial relationships, among others (Gu, 2018). Resilience is, then, context-specific. This research focuses on a specific school context and teacher resilience within the school after participating in a CoP. Resilient teachers use personal characteristics and contextual elements to support their management of challenges to develop and achieve job satisfaction and wellbeing in their professional careers (Boon, 2021; Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). Like resilient teachers, resilient leaders are also driven by a strong sense of moral purpose as they care about and focus on the learning needs of pupils and the professional growth of teachers and work hard to enhance the role of the school as an agent of social change (Day and Gu, 2014). Resilience is essential for teacher success, leading to student success through increased retention rates and job satisfaction. (Thieman, Henry and Kitchel, 2012a). However, the teaching landscape is changing and becoming more complex, and there are more and more policy reforms which can guide towards external accountability and workload so there is a need to understand how teachers sustain their resilience against this backdrop (Gu, 2018). However, promoting ‘much needed resilience in times of change remains an overlooked and under researched area’ (Day & Gu, 2014, p.17). There is also a gap in the Irish context regarding career wide resiliency (Fleming, 2022). Much of the existing research about teaching resilience focuses on developing resilience within ITE and for early career teachers (Mansfield *et al.*, 2016). Mid-career teachers also need it. This research aims to address this gap in the literature by researching the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers’ sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience.

The Aligning Wellbeing and Resilience in Education (AWaRE) model has been developed to specify the relationship between wellbeing and resilience (Hascher, Beltman and Mansfield, 2021). This model could have valuable applications in teacher education and professional development situations assisting educators to articulate specific challenges and resources and identify strategies that support wellbeing (Hascher, Beltman & Mansfield, 2021). The process of reflection may also play an important role in teacher resilience, including collaborative reflection (Clarà, 2017, p. 89). This present research uses reflective tools of data gathering.

Measuring the impact of PL implementation

Deep learning is conducive to implementing and sustaining new practices (Bolam et al., 2005). Belonging to a CoP may provide this deep, sustained learning and change, as it is important to build in mechanisms within PL to enable teachers to consider the impact of PL on an ongoing basis (De Paor, 2016). Furthermore, there are calls to measure the impact of PL (King, 2013). King posits that ‘implementation and sustainability of change in schools remains somewhat elusive’ (King, 2016, p.574). Incorporating a focus on impact in PL will become very important in the future as teachers play a greater role in decisions about which PL is undertaken (De Paor, 2016). Some countries now call it ‘career-long professional learning’ (Kennedy, 2014). However, evaluating the impact of school-based PL has its challenges (De Paor, 2016), and implementation of continued innovation is a big problem (Sahlberg, 2012). Research focussing on the impact of belonging to a CoP aims to add to the literature in this area. However, the challenges associated with evaluating the impact of PL are well documented (Guskey, 2000), including creating time for evaluation and establishing cause (Rhodes, Stokes, and Hampton, 2004). It is also recognised that significant challenges surround measuring and evaluating impact, including for example, trying to define what success means (Dowling et al, 2021). However, it is important to build mechanisms within TPL to enable teachers and support professionals to consider the impact on an ongoing basis and use the available evidence to inform planning for TPL.

In recent years, the impact has become an important evaluation metric for other professions, too, such as creative practice researchers, where it is assumed that it will affect change in some form (Boulil and Hanney, 2022). Measuring impact within the education sector becomes more important when there is also an increasing demand for organisations to be held accountable (Dowling et al, 2021). The literature supports the provision for ongoing evaluation of impact as a feature of effective PL (Villegas-Reimers, 2003; OECD, 2005). In addition, effective programmes have incorporated clear measures for assessing effectiveness (Cordingley et al., 2003), the most common methods being observation, interviews, and surveys (Cordingley et al., 2005). Bubb and Earley (2010) endorse the idea of paying attention to evaluation at the planning stage, focusing on products, processes and staff outcomes and through discussions, teachers have a greater understanding of planning and ensuring the success of each student through discussing real-life situations in a practical setting that they can implement immediately (Forster et al., 2021). To that end, this research focuses on the qualitative aspect of the facilitators' role.

Summary

This research focuses on the impact of belonging to a CoP. In this literature review, I have discussed teacher PL, including the impact of teacher PL implementation, teacher leadership and identity, the knowledge-practice gap, teacher PL in context and teacher reflection. The learning theories related to the research question, which included social learning, group learning and workplace learning theories, followed. The historical view of teacher education in Ireland was considered before considering CoPs, weaving their advantages and disadvantages together and discussing CoPs within an Irish context. The literature review concluded with a discussion about wellbeing, belonging, resilience, and their focus on CoPs and teacher PL. It is clear from the literature that there is a need to research the impact of belonging to a CoP within an Irish context. The next chapter, the methodology chapter, will discuss how this was carried out.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

It is important to be clear about one's methodology and the context in which the methodology is employed (Bryman, 2016). The researcher must also identify and define the research problem as precisely as possible (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). The previous chapters provided an overview of the literature relating to teacher professional learning, including CoPs. The research aimed to examine the impact of belonging to a CoP. Data was generated to answer this question and to explain the understanding of these concepts. This chapter describes the approach taken for this research, the techniques used, and provides the context for the activities involved and the explanations for using them. It continues to link back to the literature and the research question. This chapter addressed the following; (1) discusses the researcher's positionality and reflexivity, (2) explains the conceptual framework for the research design, (3) presents the research questions together with the research methodologies adopted in this study, (4) justifies a case study research approach underpinned by a qualitative research design is presented, (5) discusses qualitative data collection methods and ethical issues relating to the study, (6) and, finally, presents the methods for data analysis.

Research questions:

1. Does belonging to a CoP impact teachers' sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience?
2. What impact does belonging to a CoP have on teachers?
3. How can CoPs be sustainable within a school context?
4. What influence could this research have on broader educational policy?

Researcher's positionality

The term 'positionality' refers to my stance as a researcher concerning the study's social and political context (Rowe, 2014). It describes my worldview and reflects my chosen position within this research study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This 'positional

knowing is the ability to understand location, embodiment, and perspective and to recognize that position is partial, locatable, and critical' (Haraway, 1988, p.584). As a novice researcher, I am required to explore and explain my positionality because my ontological and epistemological beliefs influence my research (Holmes, 2020), and readers should know my identity as a researcher (Yazan, 2015). Additionally, self-reflection and a reflexive approach are very important prerequisites for me to identify, construct, critique, and articulate it (Holmes, 2020). There are three main ways that I identified and developed my positionality. Firstly, I located myself about the subject. Secondly, I located myself about the participants, Thirdly, I located myself about the research context and process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I am aware of my race, gender, educational background, geographic location, my first language and where they may be at play in my research. As a maths and science teacher, I lack an understanding of what it is like to teach a different subject and work within a different department. I am aware that I value group learning, I value wellbeing in the workplace, belonging in the workplace, and I value being resilient. I am aware that some staff members may not value these concepts. I have reflected on my own cultural, political and social context as well as that of the school, and I am aware of them to the best of my ability. I considered these main points and realised that producing 'a good positionality statement takes time, considerable thought, and critical reflection' (Holmes, 2020, p. 97). I took time to think and reflect, and I took measures to uncover implicit researcher bias and record and develop personal insights. I spoke with my critical friend and my supervisors regularly, and I kept a reflective journal. Such reflexive processes supported the 'methodological and interpretive rigor of the study' (Waterworth *et al.*, 2016, p.58).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, which informs positionality (Holmes, 2020), is the critical examination of how I see the world, and it is integral to good research (May and Perry, 2017). Reflexivity requires sensitivity to my cultural, political, and social context (Bryman, 2016). Reflexivity is an integral part of research as it involves the constant engagement between the researcher and the topic of research (Finlay, 2002). In this study, I aimed to be reflexive as I researched the impact of belonging to a CoP and my engagement with it. I identified, constructed and

articulated my positionality as I weaved through the research and answered the research questions. It is true to say that engaging in reflexivity is full of ‘muddy ambiguity’ and ‘multiple trails’ as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure (Finlay, 2002). This was true as the process has brought me closer to understanding my real-life perspectives in this research. The methodologies decided upon and the research questions asked are all informed by my prior experiences and knowledge, to name a few (Foote and Bartell, 2011). This research is rigorous as the findings and their interpretation are honest, and I have thought about and been explicit in my stance (Holmes, 2020). I am aware that ‘(t)eaching and learning are marinated in assumptions..... they are boiled in assumptions.....are burnt by assumptions’ (Brabazon, Gribbin & Sharp, 2023, p.232). For this reason, I wanted to reflect on my assumptions and positionality to bring clarity to my research.

Reflexivity has gained important status in qualitative inquiry. It is foremost in debates on subjectivity, objectivity, and the scientific foundation of social science knowledge and research (Hsiung, 2008). It is one of the most essential concepts and practices that differentiate qualitative from quantitative research (Hsiung, 2008). As an early career researcher, I was challenged by these concepts because I am more used to positivist assumptions within society (Roulston and Shelton, 2015). Reflexivity demanded me to explicitly examine how my research agenda and assumptions, my personal beliefs, and my emotions enter the research (Hsiung, 2008). And so, I rummaged through my ‘carrier bag’, filled with my experiences and memories, which form my values and influence my positionality and reflexivity (Le Guin, Yi and Haraway, 2019); O’Connor et al. 2022). I am aware that my values permeate my description of reality (Pring, 2005) and that I am not totally neutral or objective in my research.

I have taken stock of my values, knowledge and views through self-examination. My personal values and experiences as an educator have influenced my choice of topic, the research questions and the research design. I have a great interest in bringing teachers together. I value giving teachers an opportunity to talk, discuss, support, and gain a sense of belonging. I value creating space for teachers to reflect, to learn, to grow, to listen, to breathe, to just ‘be’. I am especially interested in working with established, in-career

teachers similar to myself, where I feel there is a need for support. This study aims to establish the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers. Specific personal attributes help researchers carry out qualitative research (Yin, 2016). These attributes include being a good listener, asking good questions, knowing the topic of my study, caring about my data, doing parallel tasks and persevering (Yin, 2016). I feel I have these attributes. This aligns with my value of making a difference, especially in the support of teachers. I also looked outside of myself at the expectations of my institution, for example, by applying to the research ethics committee for approval to undertake my research. This process enabled me to reflect on my values and those of my institution to understand my research better and to prepare myself to be as neutral as possible to my participants. It grounded me. However, just as education is imbued with multiple and often contradictory purposes, I was also interested in gaining ideas from colleagues as to how they deal with students' behaviour in class and in gaining pedagogical ideas for use in my own classes. I needed to hear that my colleagues share the same issues in their classes.

Insider researcher

Insider research involves '(s)udies conducted by researchers who have privileged connections or real-life roles related to the field settings being studied' (Yin, 2016, p.336). Using a CoP in this study means that the researcher holds an "insider-outsider status" position (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995, p. 182). I am aware that I am conducting the research in my own school, and I am, therefore, an insider researcher. I am also an insider in the teaching profession. I am aware that I have a prior conception of the participants, however, being an insider or an outsider to the culture being studied and both, whether one position provides the researcher with an advantageous position compared with the other, and its effect on the research process (Hammersley, 1993) has been, and remains a key debate. (Darwin Holmes, 2011)

There is a downside to being an insider researcher, including participants knowing me. It can create unwanted complications because I have taken a risk that the research and my school will negatively affect each other (Yin, 2016). There may also be power dynamics between the facilitator and the participant.

Research paradigm/ Theoretical framework

A paradigm is a basic set of beliefs or presumptions that help me make sense of the world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It is the central philosophical frame of reference that guides research (Tuli, 2010). There are many paradigms, namely scientific, philosophical and research paradigms. Here, I discuss the different philosophical paradigms I encountered, making it challenging to decide on the correct methodology (Sefotho, 2015). Justifying my choice of methodology and methods draws on the assumptions about reality that I bring to my research, which drives me to explain my theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998). Research studies generally fall into one of three philosophical paradigms: positivism, interpretivism (constructivism) or pragmatism (Creswell, 2008). While there are many differences between the three, it is interesting to note that researchers are now realising ‘how potentially complementary the paradigms are on the practical level’ (Salomon, 1991, p. 10). Table 2 below provides an overview of each paradigm along with their ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological forms. When I align myself with one of the paradigms then I also align myself with the methodologies of that paradigm (Sefotho, 2015b).

Table 2: Basic beliefs associated with the major paradigms (Mertens, 2015, p.11)

Basic Beliefs	Post positivism	Constructivism	Transformative	Pragmatic
Axiology (Nature of ethical behaviour)	Respect privacy; informed consent; minimise harm	Balanced representation of views	Respect for cultural norms; beneficence is defined in terms of the promotion of human rights and increase in social justice; reciprocity	Gain knowledge in pursuit of desired ends as influenced by the researcher’s values and politics
Ontology (Nature of reality)	One reality; knowable within a specified level of probability	Multiple, socially constructed realities	Rejects cultural relativisms;	Asserts that there is single reality and that all individuals have their own unique interpretation of reality

Epistemology (Nature of knowledge)	Objectivity is important;	Interactive link between researcher and participants; values are made explicit	Interactive link between researcher and participants; knowledge is socially and historically situated;	Relationships in research are determined by what the researcher deems as appropriate to that particular study
Methodology (Approach to systematic inquiry)	Quantitative (primarily)	Qualitative (primarily); contextual factors are described	Qualitative (dialogic); but quantitative and mixed methods can be used	Mixed methods

A methodology is one of three elements of a paradigm. Ontology (reality) and epistemology (the relationship between reality and the researcher) are the other two. The methodology is the method used by researchers to discover that reality (Sefotho, 2015b). Quantitative and qualitative approaches claim different philosophical assumptions (Castellan, 2010). Whether I choose qualitative or quantitative methods depends on what information is being sought (Castellan, 2010). Quantitative research identifies with positivism, the belief ‘that physical and social reality is independent of those who observe it’ (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996, p. 18).

On the other hand, qualitative approaches, which are more in line with this research, are typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and process. I wanted to explore concepts and feelings of wellbeing, so the research aligns with qualitative methods. As a researcher, I made methodological choices based on my assumptions about reality and the nature of knowledge that I must acknowledge (Mertens, 2015). However, ‘the paradigm wars that raged concerning the incompatibility of quantitative and qualitative research have largely subsided’ (Bryman, 2007, p. 111). Regarding ontology, which is ‘the study of being’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 10), I consider myself to be a social constructivist (Hartas, 2010). I started with a real-life issue that needed to be addressed, a question that needed to be answered (whether belonging to a CoP impacted teachers’ sense of belonging and, if so, how so, and

I planned my research in terms of that question (Crotty, 1998). My research questioned the impact of belonging to a CoP and how the CoP could be sustainable.

Constructivism is a world view 'in which knowledge or mental images are seen as the creations of the observer interacting with the environment' (McNamara, O'Hara and Rousi, 1998, p. 19). It is a learning theory which explains how people might acquire knowledge and learn. The theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences (Bada and Olusegun, 2015, p.66). The constructivist theories of learning include community of practice. The community of practice creates a conducive environment for the successful implementation of action learning, and different organisational cultures impact on the implementation of action learning (Bwegyeme and Munene, 2015). Constructivism 'asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors' (Bryman, 2016, p. 33). The actors in my research are the participants of the CoP and are always making sense of their social world, in their classrooms, in the school and in the relationships with their students and colleagues. Regarding epistemology, which 'bears mightily on the way we go about our research' (Crotty, 1998, p.9), I hold a subjective interpretivist approach. Interpretivism is a contrasting epistemology to positivism (Bryman, 2016). It requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman, 2016, p 30). For these reasons, this research aligns with constructivist theories.

Methodological approach: Qualitative research

Research 'is the art of the possible' (Patton, 2002, p. 32). However, the ways that the methodologies and methods relate to more theoretical elements can be left unclear and a little hazy (Crotty, 1998), perhaps because researchers are often puzzled at the many possible methodologies and methods that can be used to answer their research questions (Crotty, 1998). There were several approaches available to me to select my methodological position. The research question determined the appropriate approach to use. My research question involved the impact of belonging to a CoP. This research question falls into the category of qualitative research because 'qualitative studies can attend to the contextual richness of (these) settings' (Yin, 2016, p. 3). I wanted to better understand the wellbeing

of our teachers in our school. I wanted to find out if belonging to our CoP had an impact on these. I believe

Having an interest in knowing more about one's practice, and indeed in improving one's practice, leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design. (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, p 1)

While consideration was given to a mixed methods approach using participant observations and focus groups in conjunction with interviews, the study's focus on the impact of belonging to a CoP meant that using reflective journals and semi structured interviews was more appropriate. Researchers have been using qualitative methods for decades; anthropologists and sociologists were asking questions about people's lives and the ways in which they understood their lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and in the field of education, Piaget studied his children. Although historically, in the 1930s, research from 'qualitative data was either not theoretical enough or the theories were too 'impressionistic'' (Glaser and Strauss, 2017, p. 15). More recently, some argue that qualitative research is of 'poor standard' and of 'uncertain quality' (Hammersley, 2007, p. 287). However, the research approach considered most appropriate for this research was a qualitative case study approach. Qualitative data 'are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts' in which 'one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequence, and derive fruitful explanations' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.9). These qualities link to the research because they capture the concepts of wellbeing and belonging, giving rich descriptions within a post-primary school context and over time, I could see if the participants' sense of belonging changed or altered after being part of a CoP as they described why/ why not. This data would eventually lead to a shared understanding of belonging to a CoP within the school. Qualitative research is designed to explore the human elements of a given topic, while specific qualitative methods examine how individuals see and experience the world. A qualitative data collection design allowed for rich, deep data to be collected, illustrating the contextual nature of this research (Berg, 2004). Educational inquiry can also improve public discourse and understanding (Jones, 2000). Qualitative research usually addresses research questions that require (a) an exploration where little is

known about the problem and (b) a detailed understanding of a main phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). Little is known about the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers, so qualitative research was an appropriate approach to use to explore this impact and to gain a deep understanding of the sense of the main phenomena or key concepts of belonging and its impact on teachers from the participant's viewpoint. Although there is a 'messiness' that enters into research when you research people (Mertens, 2015), I used qualitative methods to explore them. Further, I did not know the variables (what will change) in the research (Cresswell, 2008), and the literature contributed to the research question and in justifying the importance of the research (Creswell, 2008) and so qualitative research was the most effective approach to use to explore the phenomena of the study.

Table 3: Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies (adapted from Bryman, 2016)

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model; positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructivism

Case study

There are twelve specialised types of qualitative research: namely action research, arts-based research, autoethnography, case study, critical theory, discourse analysis, ethnography, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, oral history and phenomenology (Yin, 2016). Each type uses different methodological approaches and preferred techniques within the broad umbrella of qualitative research and outlines the many qualitative data approaches I could have used.

The value of a case study lies in the fact that 'it deals directly with the individual case in its actual context', involves observation 'in natural settings' (Bromley, 1986, pp. Xi & 23), and is an approach that builds knowledge that informs professional practice (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). After considering all the qualitative approaches, I decided that a case study was

the most appropriate. The use of the term ‘case study’ can be traced back to social workers’ case histories and case work, in the 1920’s (Platt, 1992) and the study of cases occurs across professions, in law, political science and health science also (Swanborn, 2010). Case Study is a ‘strategy in which a researcher explores in depth a programme, an event, an activity, a process or one or more individuals’ (Creswell, 2003, p. 33). This approach also builds knowledge which can inform practice (Stake, 1995). The activity being explored in this research is the CoP and the sense of belonging that the participating teachers feel from being part of this CoP. In the field of qualitative research methodology, a case study is discussed as a significant qualitative strategy or tradition along with phenomenology, ethnography, biography, and grounded theory (Crotty, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

A case study is a very useful approach to employ when a deep appreciation of an issue in its natural, real-life context, is being acquired (Crowe et al., 2011). This choice is also directed by the research question, the impact of belonging to a CoP. The participants in the research were being researched within their natural school context. Although the teachers already form a community within the school, and we talk in the staff room about various issues, we do not often share learning practices nor do we share, in detail, pedagogies for the classroom for example. This is true for my career stage. Furthermore, the case in this study is a Catholic school which recognises the unique worth of every student. The school’s ethos aims to provide an education focused on the values of faith, hope and love, to develop the whole person. The school’s ethos is reflected in each classroom, in the corridors and in communication between students and staff. The ethos of the school was a part of our CoP. It is peppered through staff interactions and our school day. The ethical rules of the CoP were negotiated as I facilitated the CoP modelled the school’s ethos, while balancing the needs of the group. We followed a reform-minded approach to current questions in relation to self-improvement, researching novel pedagogical practices and engaging in written reflection.

Case study research was also considered more appropriate for qualitative research because of its foremost strength - the in-depth study of complex issues (Brown, 2008). Wellbeing and belonging are complex issues. I wanted to understand and appreciate teachers’ sense of belonging in this research, so the case approach seemed appropriate. Interpretive

subjective aspects of educational phenomena, which I align myself with, are best explored through case study (Cohen & Manion, 1997).

Case study enabled me to research a “bounded system” (Creswell, 1998) or case, utilising informative and contextual data to interpret my findings about the phenomenon being explored (Brown, 2008), which is belonging. It gave me a ‘deep understanding of the actors, interactions, sentiments and behaviours occurring’ (Woodside, 2010, p. 6). It is important to be focused on defining the ‘case’ (Yin, 2014). A defining attribute of case study research ‘lies in delimiting the object of study: the case’ (Merriam and Merriam, 1998, p.27). The case is a unit, entity, or phenomenon with defined boundaries that the researcher can demarcate or “fence in” (Brown, 2008, p. 27) and, therefore, can also determine what will not be studied. The case in this research are the teachers attending the CoP in the bounded context of the school (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Brown, 2008, p. 27). It may be the limit on the number of people to be interviewed, a finite time frame for observations, or the instance of some issue, concern, or hypothesis. I was challenged to fully understand and articulate the unit under study (Merriam, 1998). As the research was carried out in my workplace, and being aware of my bias and reflexivity, I felt I understood the unit under study as much as possible. Case study researchers observe the characteristics of an individual unit, in this case, the participants of CoP in a post-primary school (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). The participants participated in six CoPs over a school term and were interviewed about their experience afterwards.

The case study provides descriptive details about how our workplaces function and can increase understanding of a particular phenomenon (Brown, 2008). It seemed a natural approach to use since the focus of my research is on the concept of belonging, and it is a significant strategy to use within the field of qualitative study (Browne, 2008). To determine which case study to follow, and because methodologists do not have a consensus on the design and implementation of a case study (Yazan, 2015), I focused on the works of three prominent methodologists, namely Robert Yin, Sharan Merriam, Robert Stake (Yazan, 2015). Although their viewpoints diverge and converge on different aspects of the

case study, they provided procedures I could follow as a road map to utilise the case study design (Yazan, 2015).

Yin describes a case where the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context. In contrast, Stake describes it as ‘an integrated system’, and Merriam describes a case as a person, a program or a group. Connecting these three descriptions to my research, I have control over my context and the participants, and the case in this research is a group of teachers participating in a CoP. Regarding analysing the data, Yin believes case study data analysis ‘consists of examining, categorising, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study’ (Yin, 2016, p.20), which is different from what this research aligns with. This research links more with Merriam’s idea of analysing data and making sense of the data by making meaning from the data gathered.

However, there are disadvantages of using case study too. The case study will be at a disadvantage when the purpose of the research is to provide explanation, propositional knowledge, and law (Stake, 2000). A corresponding disadvantage often cited is the difficulty of generalising from a single case (Simmons, 2006; Cohen & Mannion, 1994; Brown, 2008). However, this research does not aim to generalise the data, except to generalise it to the literature, and the approach can provide rich and significant insights (Brown, 2008) which overcome the disadvantages. Other disadvantages of case studies include the possibility that the researcher can be biased (Cohen et al., 2011). Measures were taken to overcome bias, which will be discussed later. I am aware that unless I fully understand the case study and its place in the research process, its merits will obscure the strength and direction of the research endeavour (Brown, 2008).

In qualitative research, and in case study, an important point to keep to the fore is the emphasis on interpretation, the interpretations of the participants being studied. The researcher observes the workings of the case and must ‘maintain vigorous interpretation’ (Stake, 1995, p. 9). A good case study is patient and reflective and requires discipline and the designing of good research questions ‘that will direct the looking and the thinking enough but not too much’ (Stake 1995, p.15). Interpretive research issues concern meaning, choice, and ‘issues of improvement in educational practice’ (Erikson, 1986, p.11). Erikson (1986) posits that everyday life is invisible to us because it is so familiar. Therefore,

research on teaching ‘helps to make the familiar strange and interesting again’ (Erkison, 1986, p.8). What is happening can then become visible.

Data collection

Data is the foundation for a research study (Yin, 2016, p. 137). In this research, data was collected using reflective journals, semi-structured interviews and the researcher’s fieldnotes, as described in the following sections.

Interviews

Interviews in qualitative research are conversations that facilitate "an exchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest" and emphasise "the social situatedness of the research data" (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 409). Relating the literature to this topic, the mutual interest in this research was the CoP and the topic decided upon by the participants within the school context. An interview is a ‘two-person conversation initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation’ (Cannell, no date). The researcher and the participants of the CoP were the two people in the conversation, whereby the researcher obtained research-relevant information, after attending the CoPs, about the impact of belonging to the CoP and how that impacted (if it did) on the participant’s sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience. This approach facilitated a rich narrative of participants’ sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience in the school. A characteristic of interviews for qualitative enquiry is that they do not restrict the view of the participants (Creswell, 2008). This was important for this research so that I would gather true, authentic data. Interviews can be structured or semi-structured.

Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to gain insight into the teachers’ experience within the CoP. The semi-structured nature of this interview type enables the interviewer ‘to modify the sequence of questions, change the wording, explain them or add to them’ (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.271). This type of interview was chosen instead of structured interviews because structured interviews carefully script the interaction between

the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewer's behaviour and demeanor are also scripted to conduct the data collection as uniformly as possible. This type of interview and scriptedness does not align with the research, that aims to discover teachers' sense of wellbeing and belonging. I wanted a sense of flow and ease within the interview so that the interviewee would feel relaxed and (s)he would talk more freely. The semi-structured interview aligns more with my values of ease and flow and being comfortable so that the conversation grows and develops organically. The concept being explored in this research (belonging) requires this data gathering mode. Interviews are appropriate when a researcher wants a form of one-to-one communication to probe deeply into the participant's experiences, understandings, attitudes and perspectives. I am aware that good interviewing involves much more than just asking questions (Patton, 2002). Interviews can be used to go deeper into the interviewee's motivations and their reasons for responding as they do (Kerlinger, 1970). The probing of interest here was to dig deeper into the themes that emerged from the participants' reflective journals. These themes formed the basis of the interview questions. Involvement and learning in a CoP are ongoing, collaborative and 'guided by shared inquiry' (Vanderlip Taylor, 2023, p.170). I wanted to find deeper answers about the participant's experience of the CoP and the knowledge they shared about their practice. One of the main reasons for using interviews is that in an interpersonal encounter, people are more likely to disclose aspects of themselves, their thoughts, their feelings and values than they would in another form of data collection (Kitwood, 1977). Generating conversation helps the interviewee feel at ease, brings a sense of humanity to the data collection process, and adds to its validity. The research aimed to discover a sense of belonging from the participants, and I felt that this form of conversation would create the appropriate environment in which to do that. The interview questions came from literature and from participants' answers in the reflection journals where I wanted more detail.

Addressing bias

Researchers posit that bias stems from the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer, the interviewer tending towards seeing the interviewee in her own image, the

interviewer probing for answers that support her opinions or the answers she wants, misinterpretations of the questions being asked, and the answers being said (Cohen & Manion, 1997). Hales states that ‘reporting bias is key as removing bias is not possible’ (Hales, 2015, p. 83). To mitigate the risk of unconscious bias, I chose a data gathering and data analysis approach consistent with the philosophical paradigm (McMillan and Jones, 2022). I took the following steps to reduce bias: questions were clear in their meaning, I listened carefully to the answers to avoid misunderstanding them, and I reflected on my positionality and biases through writing this chapter, so I was aware of them. Invariably, though, the research will have bias as nothing is foolproof. All data was analysed and reported. I included all of the data and no data was excluded. I transcribed all of the interviews even if a participant disagreed with the researcher’s beliefs (Yin, 2016). It is true that the

conversational nature of qualitative research interviews...can create a grey area whereby contrary but seemingly casual remarks or observations may be ignored because they were not considered to be part of the ‘formal’ data. (Yin, 2016, p. 42)

During the data collection, analysis and interpretation, I mitigated bias by discussing topics with my supervisors, being reflexive, writing in my research journal and being constantly aware of possible areas of bias. Regarding the practical details of the interview process, these semi-structured interviews lasted for approximately 45 minutes. An Interview Guide with questions was developed prior to participant interviews. I asked all the participants the same series of open-ended questions. I tailored the follow-up questions to the individual participant’s responses, with the purpose of clarifying and expanding on areas revealed to be of most interest or concern to the participant. I created a semi-structured interview guide (Bryman, 2016; Mertens, 2015) listing areas to be covered and more specific questions that I asked. The interviews were conducted on school grounds. All participants were informed of their anonymity and right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

There are, however, some problems associated with interviews, validity being one of these problems (Cohen & Manion, 1997). An example of validity in this research may include

‘whether the questions asked look as if they are measuring what they claim to measure’ (Cohen & Manion, 1997, p. 281). The cause of invalidity may be bias, and a way of achieving more validity may be to reduce the bias as much as possible. Bias may stem from the interviewer’s or the interviewee’s characteristics. Steps taken to reduce bias include the interviewer considering the extent to which a question might influence the interviewee to show themselves in a good light or answer questions in a way that the participants think the interviewer might want to hear (Cohen & Manion, 1997). I took further steps to reduce this bias, which are discussed further in the positionality section. Another disadvantage of interviews is that they are prone to subjectivity (Cohen & Manion, 1997). I reflected on this and discussed it with my supervisors.

I considered using questionnaires as a form of data collection as they are reliable (due to their anonymity), honest answers can be obtained, and questionnaires take up less time, to name a few (Cohen and Manion, 1997). On the other hand, the return rate of the questionnaire can be low, and if there are questions about the purpose or any misunderstandings, then the participants cannot ask for clarification (Cohen & Manion, 1997).

One of the main uses of the interview is that it ‘may be used in conjunction with other methods in a research undertaking’ (Cohen & Manion, 1997, p. 273). This leads to the following two sections, in which the use of reflective journals and researcher’s field notes will be discussed.

Reflective Journals (RJs)

Data was also generated through the use of reflective journals by the participants. Initiated by Dewey (1960) and developed by Schön (1983), reflective practice is an important component of teacher education, and it brings numerous benefits to teachers (Yee, Abdullah and Mohd Nawi, 2022). Reflection journals (RJs) have been recognised as a vital tool in promoting learning, as they facilitate critical thinking and self-engagement and push participants to overcome challenges (Draissi et al., 2021). Workplace involvement in reflective dialogue is a successful method for the professional learning of teachers (Van

Kruingen, 2013). Reflection ‘entails the observer’s deliberate scrutiny of his/her own interpretive point of view’, including ‘culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal value commitments’ (Erikson, 1986, p.125). There are three models of reflection in the Teaching Council’s policy (Rolfe, Gibbs and Brookfields), one of which was used to aid reflection for the participants. I decided on the Rolfe et al. (2001) framework as it seemed to be a good fit for my context, and it encouraged the participants to develop their writing style, and recognising the difficulties of such reflection (Giot, 2002). Rolfe et al. (2001) framework for reflection enabled participants to reflect on how they could implement what they had learnt from the CoP into their classes and to future plan their professional learning. The framework consists of three elements as follows:

1. What? What happened in the learning activity? What did the participants discuss?
2. So What? The participants make sense of their learning, including the professional impact of the learning on the participant and the students.
3. Now What? What will the participants do next? What might the consequences of this be?

The participants reflected at the end of the CoPs for ten minutes during quiet time. Guiding questions, included in the RJs, guided the participants' reflection. The RJs focused on the interview questions. The researcher set up a ‘Microsoft Teams’ group for the participants to foster reflection and collaboration between workshops. In conclusion, the data collection tools for this research on the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers’ wellbeing, belonging and resilience were the participants’ reflective journals, the semi-structured interviews and my field notes. The combination of multiple data sources reinforced the validity and richness of the data (Phan and Pham, 2022).

CoP workshops

Communities of Practice (CoPs) are well documented in the literature (Wenger, 1998; Nistor et al., 2015; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). They involve groups of people sharing a concern or a passion for something they do, and they learn how to do it better as they collaborate regularly, over a long period, and engage in common activities (Nistor *et*

al., 2015). Wenger *et al.* (2002, p.2) defined CoPs, saying that CoPs ‘are groups of people who share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (p. 4). The participants in this study were a group of passionate teachers who came together six times over a semester, decided on the topics for discussion at each CoP session, engaged in conversation and activities, shared knowledge and practice, and, in so doing, deepened their expertise in the identified areas. The data analysis shows this. CoPs are founded upon three dimensions: Domain, Practice and Community. They were two hours in duration and were held in the school library. The first CoP was an introduction to the research and the literature related to a CoP. We set our boundaries and rules. Throughout the remaining five CoPs, I facilitated while the participants engaged in the topic for the session. Members of CoP were attracted to discussions that they will gain immediate value from, such as engaging discussions, new working relationships, the ability to share their views, solutions to their problems, opportunities to see what others are doing, and some tools, documents or techniques that they could use in their work’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017).

Table 4: An overview of the topics discussed at each of the CoP sessions

Session no.	CoP topic
1	Introduction/ brainstorm ideas/ setting boundaries
2	Student wellbeing
3	Kinaesthetic learning methodologies
4	Movement breaks for students during class
5	Student wellbeing
6	Teacher wellbeing

Between the CoP workshops, participants engaged and collaborated with me and with each other via Microsoft Teams. They had the opportunity to try something out that they had learnt from the CoP or to reflect and share ideas with others. When participants returned to the CoP, they discussed and shared their experience and knowledge and moved it along further.

The CoP sessions occurred in a classroom near the staffroom for easy access. I arranged the tables in a circle for each session, with a table in the centre with a candle and flowers as a centrepiece. I sat in a different seat each session, being aware not to sit towards the top of the classroom in case participants viewed me as a teacher or in a leadership position. I supplied tea/coffee and biscuits for all participants. The sessions started with participants talking naturally about their teaching day. When people were ready, I welcomed everyone and started our session. I reminded participants of what we had discussed during the previous session and what we had agreed to focus on since our last meeting. Participants shared how that had gone for them.

Conversations mainly flowed, and I was aware of allowing for silence and not filling in gaps. It was important to be aware of my role as a facilitator during the CoP. I invited quieter members to share their stories as I balanced the voices in the room. The participants made a decision towards the end as to what to focus on in our practice, in our classrooms, until the next meeting. This ensured the CoPs were participant-led. With five minutes left, the participants reflected in their RJs while listening to mindful music playing quietly in the background. The literature guided these questions. They focused on TPL and belonging.

Recruitment of sample

I understand that ‘(s)ampling is crucial for later analysis’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.27). Purposeful sampling, also called qualitative sampling, was used to gain participants. I had a choice of deciding one from nine different strategies, based on whether the sampling occurred before or after the data gathering and on the research question (Creswell, 2008). I chose homogeneous sampling because I selected certain people with similar traits (Creswell, 2008). The participants of the CoP were members of a subgroup or community that had defining characteristics, namely that they attended the CoP, used the RJs for reflection and had an interest in progressing their professional learning within the school. I identified my participants based on people that could best help me to understand my main phenomena (Creswell, 2008). This research sample was ten teachers working in a post-primary school in Dublin. They ranged in their years of teaching experience from 3 to 20 years. Their gender was both males and females.

Qualitative researchers work with small samples ‘nested in their context’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.27) and ‘study a few individuals’ (Creswell, 2008, p.217). I emailed all the teaching staff (n=60) from the school and invited them to participate in the research. Eight teachers agreed to participate in my research, which is considered a small sample. I chose this sample as it was easy to gain participants as I work in the school. Taking this qualitative approach into consideration, my aim was not to generalise to a population but to gain a deep exploration of the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers’ sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience (Creswell, 2008).

Sampling involved two actions: (1) setting boundaries to determine aspects of my case that I could study within my timeframe and (2) creating a frame to enable me to reveal the basic processes underlying my study (Miles & Huberman, 2004). To this end, I set my boundaries to research the participants within my school context between September and December 2023, and I created the CoP within which I gathered my data. All 60 teachers working in the school were invited to participate in the research, by an email stating the purpose of the research and what their participation would involve. I was eager to get participants with varying years of teaching experience, not just newly qualified teachers (NQTs) or Professional Master of Education (PME) students.

Piloting

Piloting increases the validity and practicability of research instruments (Oppenheim, 1999). The participating teacher semi-structured interview questions were piloted by teachers who were not participating in the study, as advised by Cohen et al. (2011). This process maximised the data collection instruments’ validity, practicability and reliability (Oppenheim, 1999). Pilot studies help test and refine the design of a final study and the research questions (Yin, 2016). I conducted a pilot test of the interview and reflective journals. This was to ensure that I could make changes to the instruments based on feedback from a small number of participants (n=8) who evaluated them (Creswell, 2008). It was made clear to the participants that they were participating in a pilot study (Yin, 2016), and these participants were then excluded from the final sample for the study. The results of these pilot studies showed that one question was omitted from the interview questions.

Triangulation

Triangulation, credibility and trustworthiness strengthen the research findings (Yin, 2016). Triangulation is an ‘analytic technique, used during fieldwork as well as later during formal analysis, to corroborate a finding with evidence from two or more different sources’ (Yin, 2016, p. 340). Triangulation supported my findings ‘by showing that independent measures of it agree with it’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 266). Triangulation relates to the goal of having at least three ways of verifying a piece of data (Yin, 2016). I collected data through RJs, interviews and field notes. I continually sought opportunities to triangulate my research throughout the process, and I tried to develop ‘converging lines of inquiry’ (Yin, 2016, p. 87). Researchers must also be assured that the work they have carried out is honest, well-judged, done effectively, and with little error (Hammersley, 2007).

Validity is a large problem that I was faced with as a qualitative researcher (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Validity depends on how my conclusions relate to reality and is proven through evidence, not methods (Maxwell, 2013, p. 121). This study was valid because I interpreted the data properly, and the conclusions accurately reflect the real world in which the research was studied (Yin, 2016). To further ensure validity, I considered if another study given the same lens would have collected the same evidence and whether it would have drawn the same conclusions as those in my study (Yin, 2016). I engaged Maxwell’s eight ways of addressing validity (Maxwell, 2013).

Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns in educational research can be very complex and subtle (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). Researchers ‘must conduct research in an ethical manner’ (Yin, 2016, p. 27). My University obliged me to submit a research proposal for ethical approval before I gathered data (Creswell, 2009). This form gave structure to my research, and it encouraged me to reflect on ethical issues that were pertinent to my research, throughout my research (Creswell, 2008). I gathered the data sensitively to the ethical issues of gathering data face-to-face and in the participants’ workplaces (Creswell, 2008). Ethics are primarily concerned with what researchers ought to do and ought not to do (Williams, 2023). One example of a dilemma requires the researcher to strike a balance between the demands of being a

professional scientist seeking truths and their participants' rights and values being potentially threatened (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). To respect the site where the research took place, I gained permission from the gatekeepers of the school (Creswell, 2008)-the Board of Management (BOM),- seeking permission to carry out my research within the school. I emailed a copy of the plain language statement to the participants. I emailed the consent form to all participants to sign before collecting the data. This explained what the participants were consenting to. They understood the research they were consenting to if they signed the form. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions for clarity, or if anything was unclear to them. Upon signing the form, they understood that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research anytime.

I made every effort to communicate the practical significance of my research to the participants and stakeholders involved. Ethics was a 'primary consideration' in this research and not an afterthought (Creswell, 2008, p. 13).

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2008), to show respect to readers and users of the information, it was important to report the data honestly (Creswell, 2008). As a result, I applied thematic analysis to the collected data from the semi-structured interviews and the reflective journals. In contrast to other approaches to qualitative data analysis, such as grounded theory (Glaser, 1992) or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2015), reflexive thematic analysis values 'a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a *reflexive* researcher' (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 5). I focused on reflexive thematic analysis because it allowed me to determine the outcome of my research, which aligns with my interpretivist approach, instead of being bound to a specific theoretical framework (Campbell et al., 2021). Thematic analysis is a well-cited method for analysing qualitative data, grounded in qualitative philosophies, and an interpretive method firmly situated within a qualitative paradigm (Campbell *et al.*, 2021). The thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data in rich detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this analysis, 'the subjectivity of the researcher is recognized and viewed not as problematic but instead valued as integral to the analysis process' (Campbell et al.,

2021, p. 2011). This led to the emerging themes and understandings being ‘the fruit of qualitative inquiry’ (Patton, 2002, p.5).

Transcription is a ‘process of converting audiotape recordings into text data’ (Creswell, 2008, p. 246). I transcribed the interviews myself. As interviews and RJs ‘yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge’ (Patton, 2002, p.4), I wanted to develop a sense for the data first, then code descriptions and themes about the main ideas emerged (Creswell, 2008). The data was analysed after I had organised and transcribed it. A qualitative data analysis computer programme, NVivo, stored and organised my data, enabled me to assign labels and codes to the gathered data, and provided structured data exploration. I used coding strips to code the interviews and the RJs. Figure 1 shows a flowchart showing the links between a sample of the codes, the 12 categories and the three themes that emerged from the research.

A challenge encountered by Nvivo was that it was time-consuming. It took a long time to attend training and to understand how to use it. I found it challenging not to miss anything that the participants said or to misinterpret the data. I did not want to code incorrectly, and so I took my time transcribing and coding the data. I also discussed topics with my supervisors and my critical friends.

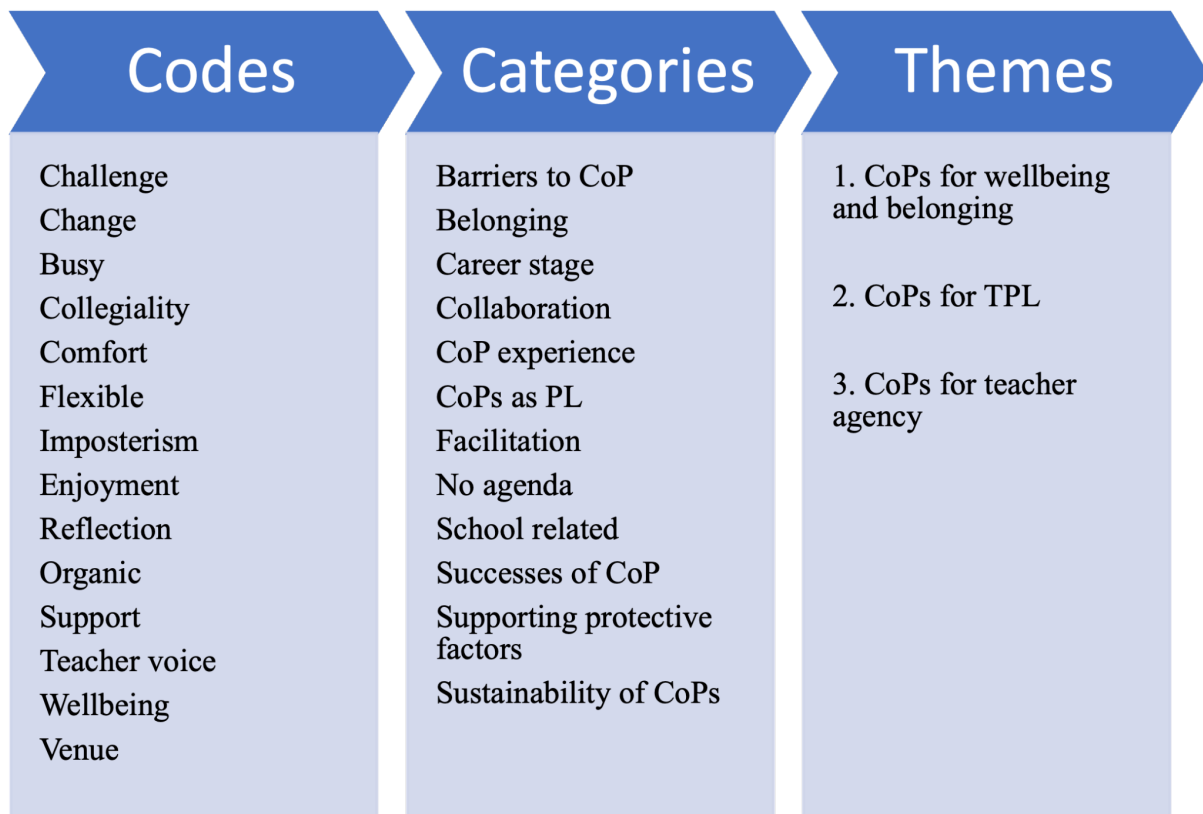
Phase 1 involved ‘developing deep and intimate knowledge of (the) dataset’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 42), where I immersed myself in the data. I read and reread the data to become very familiar with it. Transcribing the interviews and RJs enabled me to immerse myself fully in the dataset. In phase 2, I created codes which are ‘the building blocks’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 52) of the analysis. Coding is an organic and evolving process, and the codes evolved as I worked through the data. Examples of these codes include ‘collegiality’, ‘change’ and ‘calmness’. I was aware that coding ‘is never completed, because meaning is never final’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 71). These codes led to initial themes, phase 3, which is

The point at which you shift the scale of your focus, back out from the micro detailed scope of the coding process, towards exploring, at a more macro scale, for

connections and alliances that might develop into broader patterns of meaning.
(Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 76)

Key decisions in reflexive thematic analysis include deciding what counts as a theme. ‘Belonging’, ‘career stage’ and ‘collaboration’ are examples of initial themes in the research. Considering the ‘keyness’ of a theme can be judged on whether it is essential to address the overall research question (Campbell et al., 2021). Ideally, there will be numerous occurrences of a theme across the data set, but higher prevalence does not necessarily equate to higher importance. I also took an inductive approach, as opposed to a theoretical approach, as the themes were derived straight from the data and may bear little resemblance to the questions asked of the participants or the researcher’s theoretical interest in the topic (Braun & Clarke). Phase 4, a recursive phase, led me to review the themes. It extended the initial themes from phase 3 through re-engagement with the coded data and all the dataset. This explored the possibility of improvement in pattern development (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Phase 5 involved naming the themes, and a ‘good theme will be informative, concise, and catchy’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.111), which was the heart of my analysis. In the final phase, phase 6, I reported the results of the analysis, and the story was told. It can be argued that the most important part of the enterprise is processing the data, analysing results and drafting reports (Cohen & Mannion, 1994). Some researchers ‘fail to provide a clear description of the strategies applied to make sense of their data’ (Campbell et al., 2021, p.2012). To avoid this, I explicitly explained my strategies. Generating credible qualitative findings requires discipline, knowledge, creativity, practice and hard work (Patton, 2002), and data analysis requires much more than just ‘reading to see what’s there’ (Patton, 2002).

Figure 1: Flowchart showing the links between a sample of the codes, the 12 categories and the 3 themes



Summary

The aim of this research was to examine the impact of belonging to a CoP on teachers. The research questions, together with the research methodologies adopted in this study, were presented in this chapter. I justified a case study research approach underpinned by a qualitative research design. Qualitative data collection methods, researcher's positionality, reflexivity, addressing bias, piloting, triangulation and ethical issues relating to the study were discussed. Finally, I presented the methods for data analysis. Chapter 4 will discuss these findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

In this chapter, the research findings are presented and explored. I present the analysis of data collected from the participants' reflective journals and the semi-structured interviews and explored to answer the research question. I collected data through participants' reflective journaling at the end of each session and through semi-structured interviews completed at the end of all six CoP sessions. There were seven participants in the CoP after the pilot interview. These participants attended six CoP sessions, four Monday lunchtime sessions for half an hour and two Wednesday afternoon sessions for an hour after the half day at school. The themes that emerged from phase five of data analysis are explored using the research questions. The chapter begins by examining the theme of CoPs for belonging and wellbeing. It then moves on to CoPs for teacher PL. The final theme to be discussed is CoPs for teacher agency. I will discuss each of these themes, their sub-themes, and how they relate to the research question in the following sections.

1. Belonging and Wellbeing

1.1a Belonging

At the beginning of the data collection, I asked participants what belonging meant to them. Their responses explored their understanding of belonging. Responses from the data include that belonging meant being with people who supported their aspirations and who shared their knowledge as they shared their experiences. The data highlighted that the CoP allowed the sharing of practice, as evidenced in the following quote:

I do feel a stronger sense of belonging today. I feel comfort in knowing that I feel heard in the group. I feel supported in the decisions I make and feel confident that we can approach this issue together as a team. It's nice to all be on the same page.
(Case B RJ)

The data highlighted that it felt ‘good to belong and to be in the group sharing with others’ (Case D RJ). Belonging to the CoP gave participants a sense of purpose towards something more significant and a belief to be able to carry thought out; ‘I feel a deeper connection with my colleagues as we are working together for a goal we are passionate about..... (I) feel confident that we can approach this issue together as a team. It’s nice to all be on the same page’ (Case B RJ). This response also highlights that belonging involved knowing that everyone in the group was doing something the same and was trying to do it better. Similarly, this data observes that belonging is about having a purpose, voice and involvement in a safe environment. Participants valued the sense of belonging, especially in teaching which can be an isolating career; ‘I hope that shared difficulties would reduce the sense of isolation and ‘imposterism’ I feel’ (Case A RJ). One participant observed that many teachers wear many hats throughout the week in school, depending on their subjects, the number of years teaching and the roles they have in the school, as follows:

I have a lot of different hats, a few different hats in different subjects and so I always feel a little helter-skelter sometimes but ...taking away all of that, it didn’t matter your subject, it didn’t matter how long you were there, there was comfort in it and a belonging from being part of it that way. (Case D interview)

However, in the CoP, none of that seemed to matter, and that brought comfort and a sense of belonging, which was important to them. For teachers who are relatively new to the school, feeling this sense of belonging was important to them.

1.1 b Wellbeing

Findings of the research through the data collection tools of semi-structured interviews and RJs show that a feeling of belonging was very important for maintaining mental health and wellbeing. The following quote explains this:

In relation to my own wellbeing, I think I’m just delighted that I took part in it and as I was saying I always felt a little bit like ‘aww’ after coming out. That was nice. And it is good to ...it sets off you know. But even on the Wednesdays when we had

to stay it wasn't like 'ahhh I have to go to this now'. I really enjoyed it and it was something I really enjoyed being part of It's all positive. (Case C interview)

We discussed the importance of our wellbeing as teachers and how we need to look after ourselves to look after our students; 'I felt very happy with the choice as it will improve the wellbeing of both my pupils and me if effective. I also felt it was manageable and that small changes could be affected easily' (Case A RJ). Some ideas as to how they could improve in this area were discussed. '...once we started talking about teacher wellbeing and everything, you realise 'right well a few little ideas just kind of sprung up in my head maybe I'm going to leave them there for the new year' (Case C interview). Participants mentioned that their wellbeing increased because they felt they had people to go to to talk about things. Members of the CoP knew that if they tried out a certain pedagogy in their class, they would have the opportunity to speak about it during the CoP, as opposed to trying something in class. If it didn't go well, then they wouldn't want to mention it to any of the people in the staffroom. But when participants knew that others were trying these strategies out in their classes, they were more likely to feel more comfortable trying these other things out. This enhanced their wellbeing. This is evidenced in the following quote.

I would say that my wellbeing increased because I felt I had people to go to, I had people to talk about things to. I knew that if I tried this certain thing in my class, I would definitely have a chance to speak about it. As opposed to I might try this thing in my class, I think it didn't go so well let's say, and then I don't want to mention it to any of the people in the staffroom because I'm like 'oh that went terribly' or something like that. (Case G interview)

Taking part in the CoP brought participants enjoyment, increasing their wellbeing. Participants mentioned that teaching is a busy, demanding and sometimes stressful job with many reports and corrections. Teachers were quite stressed, and they reported that this affected their wellbeing. The CoP balanced the busy time in school of assessments and reporting. With the recent reports and corrections teachers were quite stressed and I was thinking well this isn't good wellbeing for the teachers' (Case C interview).

Participants found the CoP workshops to be a type of stress reliever after school time and enabled colleagues to discuss their common struggles; ‘I really was looking forward to today’s CoP.... I find it a relaxing time to sit back and chat with other teachers.’ (Case C RJ)

These all affected their wellbeing. This theme of belonging and wellbeing will be discussed through the following sub-themes:

- Atmosphere of the CoP
- Connection
- Collegiality

1.2 Atmosphere of the CoP

This section will explore the findings of the theme of belonging and wellbeing under the subtheme ‘atmosphere of the CoP’ and how it relates to the impact of belonging to a CoP. The data suggests consensus about the ‘the dynamics (being) calm and controlled’ (Case C RJ) in the CoP and a feeling of community was felt. This feeling of community led to people feeling safe to contribute and ‘everyone is free to express their opinions’ (Case B RJ). Feelings of contentment and an engaging environment were described. Participants got a sense of everyone being in the same boat as they shared problems, a sense of ‘it’s not just me’ (Case B interview). I have learnt that I am not alone, and I feel supported by others in the group. (Case B RJ). According to the participants, the CoP ‘definitely makes me feel more included’ and (I’m) really enjoying the experience so far (Case B RJ). There was an open and inclusive atmosphere in the group; ‘it was nice that it was informal’ (Case F interview). The timing of it, at lunchtime, allowed it to be organic; ‘the lunchtime, it was a bit more organic.... in its own good time’ (Case F interview). It was an organic process. It was a relaxed, welcoming, friendly and enjoyable atmosphere; ‘what I really did like about it was the fact that it was a very relaxed environment.... it was really fulfilling’ (Case H interview). They felt safe in the conversation and close to others. The group dynamic was enjoyable. There was a purpose to the group; ‘I feel today's CoP was very good. It was

enjoyable due to the relaxed atmosphere and the feeling of community between the group members' (Case G RJ).

The fact that some sessions were held during lunchtimes added to the informality and relaxed nature of the CoP. Teachers largely looked forward to the CoP and enjoyed being part of something by being involved in it. 'It's ok if things didn't work out and how we were all so open and honest with each other about that' (Case B interview). It was noted that the circular structure of the seats allowed for discussion and inclusion of everyone. Latecomers were welcomed. There were no correct or incorrect answers; it was an open discussion. The mix of departments was enjoyed, and it brought a host of different people, personalities and different points of view together, which was beneficial, teachers remarked. The following excerpt demonstrates the atmosphere of the CoP and the impact of belonging to the CoP.

I certainly am enjoying the group. The dynamics are calm and controlled, but yet lots of discussion and ideas take place. It is interesting to hear the group's opinions and thoughts. You always learn something new. (Case C RJ)

The duration and spacings of the CoPs were considered good. Enough time was given to the CoP, and there was sufficient time between sessions to try out the new ideas, but not too much time so that the members might forget what was discussed; 'Timings/ spacings has been good. I feel it was discussed well with all members' best interest in mind' (Case G RJ) and 'I find the timings of the sessions effective. It's not as if we have sessions every day or twice a week. There is plenty of room for self-reflection and how we use our discussed strategies in groups and bring it to the classroom' (Case H RJ). It is evident from the data that some participants found it difficult to make the lunchtime meetings due to other lunchtime commitments. One member forgot to come to one of the CoP sessions, and another member found it hard to remember to try out the ideas in class. 'When I was there, I remembered to go. I didn't mind Lunchtimes are tough as I'm busy most lunchtimes' (Case F interview).

It was not possible to try out the ideas during school assessment times either. Most members preferred to have the sessions during school hours rather than after school. However, one

member did not mind attending after school hours. At the end of every meeting, everyone quietly reflected and wrote in their journals, with gentle background music, which was an enjoyable wind-down. Some members thought the reflections might have been rushed at the end, though, so a little more time might have been given here.

This section explained the research findings on the effect of ‘atmosphere’ on belonging to a CoP. The next subtheme that will be discussed under this theme of belonging and wellbeing is ‘connection’ and how it relates to the research question.

1.3 Connection

The subtheme of connection and how it relates to the research question will be discussed here. In sharing and listening to ideas and experiences, a connection was felt that teachers share the same difficulties in their classes. This led to a feeling of connection because they felt a strong connection with others in the room. It opened teachers' eyes to different areas and encouraged sharing of ideas. The data suggests that teachers loved that they were all talking about the same topic and sharing ideas within that same topic; ‘It made me feel like something I had in my head actually makes sense’ (Case C RJ). They were here for a common purpose, which enabled further connection. Participants felt that belonging is very important for human connectedness, and in that belonging, they felt a strong connection to people in the group. ‘Belonging means being with people who support your endeavours and share their wisdom and with whom I share any insights or experience I might have (Case A RJ). It is worth noting that teachers who had fewer years of teaching experience had a greater sense of belonging to the CoP.

Support from colleagues was important for most teachers. When they tried new ideas, they felt supported in their successes or failures. ‘Being part of the group definitely encourages me to try out new things in the classroom as it is giving me ideas, I wouldn’t have thought of, and confidence to carry them out knowing that others are doing it too’ (Case D RJ).

This brought a connection to members. They didn’t feel like they were on their own, they were part of a group like they were on the same page, and they belonged to the group. They could share their experiences and felt supported in their endeavours. They enjoyed chatting

with other colleagues whom they don't see very often, as well as getting to know members who were new to the school or just new to them. 'It's nice to meet teachers who are not in my discipline. It's team building with them, and I do think that's really important; and I felt valued, respected, and I felt we shared collegial challenges (Case A interview). They saw commonalities between each other as they all had the same struggles in their teaching. Knowing that the other teachers were trying the same strategies with their classes made it real and honest. This honesty and comradery brought connection and closeness to members, which is evidenced in the following excerpt.

Having that tight group of people who you then see outside the CoP meetings, you kind of....you give them a little look or something or some kind of non-verbal communication happens. So, it does increase that sense of belonging (Case interview).

This extract demonstrates that connections were made between members in between the CoP sessions. These connections increased their sense of belonging and wellbeing. The teachers who have less than five years experience recorded an increase in their wellbeing following being part of the CoP.

Collegiality

This section explains the findings in relation to the subtheme of collegiality under the theme of belonging and wellbeing. Most participants felt it was good to meet teachers from different departments at the CoP as it created a mix of colleagues and a variety of learning possibilities from these different departments; 'the comradery in a sense between the different members was nice' (Case G interview).

It was a form of team building with them which was considered really important, as follows:

I saw it as an opportunity to get to know other people, to get to know other people that I wouldn't necessarily have spoken to, let's say, in the staffroom. You know, we are creatures of habit. We tend to gravitate towards the same people, towards the same area of the staffroom so you don't necessarily get to speak to all the

different personalities, all the different kinds of people, in the room, so I found it as an opportunity to get to know those people, to see things from their point of view.
(Case G interview)

It is clear from the data that members felt valued, and respected and felt they shared collegial challenges, shared stories, experiences and opinions across the board, i.e. cross-curricular challenges. They got to know people a little more and become involved in their subjects, which doesn't often happen. This point is demonstrated in the following excerpt.

I wouldn't have necessarily grabbed a chair and been around that group, so it was good to meet teachers from different groups or just a different 'mix up' you know. Like it was a mix of different teachers, wasn't it, from different subjects so that was kind of good. (Case F interview)

There was comfort in 'knowing' the same as their colleagues, the same challenges and the same successes. That in itself fostered an atmosphere of belonging. The data suggests that members have learnt that they are not alone and they feel supported by others in the group. They got the chance to talk and discuss things with people they might not have spoken to that day in the staff room. They considered it an opportunity to get to know those people, to see things from their point of view.

Some participants' motivation for taking part in the research was to help a colleague in her study. These participants valued the importance of helping colleagues as this makes the workday easier for everyone, one participant reported. This excerpt demonstrates this point; 'My motivation for being here is to help a colleague in her study. It's important to help people, I feel, especially those who you work with, as this makes the workday easier for everyone' (Case G interview).

This extract reflects the sense of connection and belonging felt by this participant as they worked as part of a team to work towards the team's goal.

This section explored the research findings on the effect of 'collegiality' on belonging to a CoP, which was the final subtheme under the theme of CoPs for belonging and wellbeing.

The next section will describe the findings related to the second theme, which is CoPs for teacher PL.

2. CoPs for Teacher PL

2.1: Sharing ideas

This section describes some of the findings related to the sharing of ideas from the participants and how this relates to the research question. Participants enjoyed the exchange of ideas and learning how other teachers ask pupils, for example, to reflect on the teaching and learning in the classroom and giving movement breaks to students. Teachers tried out new ideas that were shared with them during the CoP and came back to the next CoP session and shared their experience with this, including what worked and what didn't work. 'I'm enjoying sharing with the group and appreciate hearing about other teachers' practice. It keeps it near to the forefront of my own work' (Case A RJ). CoPs allow space for collaboration between teachers, sharing and learning from each other, within the malleable category of TPL.

Teachers appreciated and found it exciting to hear about other teachers' practices in their classrooms. They appreciated the willingness of teachers to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences. 'I learnt different techniques of how to help my students more by each teacher willingly sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences' (Case B RJ).

They felt it was important to share and that the ideas shared could be applied to their classes. This brought creative thought into their practice, which they enjoyed. One member mentioned that things change so quickly in education, so it was good to have many ideas ready. This sharing and listening to other ideas led to cross-checking. They felt like they belonged to the CoP because they were amongst colleagues with the same experience and were comfortable sharing their opinions and current experiences. 'It is so important as a community of teachers to talk and share our ideas with each other' (Case B RJ). This sharing of ideas led them to feel like they belonged. Sharing ideas continued outside the CoP between department members also. The experience was very engaging, and collaborative ideas were shared. 'It opened members' eyes to different areas and also

encouraged me to share my ideas and opinions’ (Case C RJ). The organic environment of the CoP lent itself to learning and sharing. Participation was on each teacher’s own terms; there was nothing forced; ‘I am a bit more open to trying different strategies within my class being part of this group.’ The CoP was like a refresher course; it kept them on their toes and ‘it gave a platform to rethink how to make your class more beneficial’ (Case H interview).

Through the sharing of practice, most of the teachers realised that they had the same challenges, for example, trying to get through the course and challenges with assessment. The following quote reflects this.

I feel like I belong to the group because I am sharing ideas and being heard, and I am learning from others. I feel I belong because I am doing similar things on a day to day as my colleagues, and I am facing the same challenges and successes as they are. I feel like I ‘know’ the same. It feels good to belong and to be in the group sharing with others the same as me. It feels comforting. (Case D RJ)

The variety of career stages of members was important as those teachers with more years of teaching experience gained newer ideas from newly qualified teachers. These newly qualified teachers gained mentorship, affirmation and support from more experienced teachers. Members expressed a feeling of contentment about being part of something and being able to share ideas. Teachers heard about other subjects and techniques that could be used in their subjects, and they could collaborate that way. Hearing what other teachers were doing and finding out where fellow colleagues were at with their classroom activities was greatly valued and enjoyed by participants.

I love that when we are talking about a similar topic, how much you learn about different methods, and you can share ideas. It makes me feel like something I had in my head, actually makes sense, when acknowledged by others. I’m very grateful to be able to share and take on board what others have to say. (Case C RJ).

However, barriers may include insecurities about sharing ideas or experiences and how others may receive them. The conversation may not always be proportionate, and a

participant mentioned that they would like the input to be more representative of everyone and that some people may need to be invited to contribute; ‘I did find the conversation was not proportionate and would like the input to be more representative of everyone-some people may need to be invited to contribute, I don’t’ (Case A RJ).

2.2: Reflection

This section on reflection will discuss two aspects of reflection based on the research findings, as an impact of belonging to a CoP: the use of reflection journals (RJs) and reflection on teachers’ own practice.

Reflection Journals

This section explores the findings of the research related to RJs. At the end of each CoP session, the teachers were asked to reflect on their experience of the CoP in RJs, which were collected at the end of each session and used as a data collection tool. The participants answered three questions on average about their experience of the session that day. These questions related to their PL, their sense of belonging to the group and their experience in general. There was space for feedback to the facilitator and general reflection. The questions related to the research question, which is: What is the impact of belonging to a CoP? The questions were intended to prompt reflection and be a starting point for the participants’ reflection. They were asked if they had suggestions for further discussion in the group.

Participants valued the creation of space and time to reflect and engage with reflection during the CoP. Reflection journals were used as a data collection tool but also as a form of PL. Participants also reflected on their practice throughout the discussions in the CoP as they shared their practice and listened to other teachers share their experiences. Participants agreed that the RJs embedded the session, it solidified what was spoken about and created connections. ‘I liked it at the end because when we were sitting there, it actually allowed me to sit and think ‘ok how has this benefitted me?’ (Case B interview). It gave them time to concentrate on what had been discussed during the CoP and time to narrow it down, and ‘that was more likely to go on with me than just the chat’ (Case A interview) and to figure

out what they could actually take from the session. I also loved writing in the reflective journals at the end. That kind of pulled everything together for me' (Case C interview). They reflected on questions that they would not usually reflect on, for example, the importance of a CoP; 'Reflecting on the CoP is good as it allows me to think of the real benefits of the practice. To see just how important it is' (Case B RJ).

Some participants have started reflective journaling at home because of their involvement in the CoP, which demonstrates how beneficial the journaling has been for them, as the following excerpt explains.

That realisation for me of 'ok this has actually been beneficial here', I've actually started doing it at home. Yeah. Genuinely. And I can see the difference in myself of putting my day just down in words, how I acted, what I did whatever, just from doing it in that, I've started doing it. (Case B interview)

The RJs had a mixture of questions to answer and a free space to journal and reflect. The participants preferred the pointed questions as they thought they were more relevant and prompted them to think. They avoided repetition and sparked thoughts rather than being a black canvas. They reflected on questions they wouldn't have usually reflected on. Sometimes, the same question creates different answers each week. It started a pattern of thinking about the CoP afterwards.

Sometimes, when you're writing something, you're not necessarily thinking about it but then it comes out, I was like 'oh yeah ...that kinda was the case. So it lasted and I am a bit of a journaler anyway, I prefer to write anyway, so yeah, I definitely found it useful. (Case D interview)

They thought the RJs were useful. They appreciated that time and space were given to the reflective piece and engaging with it. This time supported them as reflective practitioners. Reflection was an important aspect of the course during teacher training, and a lot was learnt then. However, one participant says it can be neglected due to busyness. It is also good to have the reflections to look back over and to see the progression in your work. Participants emphasised the importance of reflection in their work. It pulled everything

together, embedded the session, and enabled them to remember the material better rather than getting up at the end of the CoP and walking away. 'I think when you write something ... I definitely, when I write some down, I tend to remember it better as opposed to just trying to read and read and read. I'm a doer and a writer and it sticks in my head better' (Case C interview). It stuck in their head better, and they were more likely to try the ideas in class. Participants didn't have to take it home and do it as homework which they liked. It was done at the end of the session while it was fresh in their minds. It helped them to take a step back and reassess because it's so easy to go from day to day. Participants would have liked a little more time at the end to reflect. According to the data, it was sometimes a little rushed. 'Sometimes I felt like we were rushing the reflection a little bit' (Case B interview).

Reflecting on practice

This section explores the data in relation to teachers reflecting on their own practice. As teachers shared ideas, they reflected on their practice and what they could learn or change. Teachers wanted to learn how to improve their teaching and support their students in their learning and wellbeing. Some examples of these are provided here. Participants learnt how other teachers ask pupils to reflect on the teaching and learning in the classroom and how they provide sensory/movement breaks to students in the hour-long classes. Teachers tried this between sessions. 'I think I would like to try this over the next 2 weeks' (Case A RJ). Teachers tried, for example, class box breathing and reflected that while it worked for one class of senior students, it didn't for another class. One participant pointed out that a big advantage of a group like this is that they came away from the CoP session encouraged to try again after getting some pupil feedback instead of 'abandoning' the ideas they had worked on' (Case A RJ). Participants mentioned learning tricks of the trade from colleagues in the same department, sharing what they used for that investigative work or new videos from college as examples. These examples show that they have learnt strategies to help students and felt that the CoP contributes to their PL as a teacher. Participants learnt about their style and the style of others.

The findings highlight that members of the CoP learnt new methodologies during the sessions. They spoke about how worthwhile it was even though they learnt just one small thing or one small level intervention. Sometimes, you must put a lot of time in to learn just one thing, but that it's worth it:

Did it impact my PL? Absolutely. Was it equivalent to seven hard hours, or whatever length of time? No, but I accept that at this stage, for any of those improvements you have to put in a disproportionate amount of time. (Case A interview)

While reflecting on their practice, they felt open to trying more methods as they see how they have worked for others and their classes. 'It encourages trying out new things' (Case F RJ). Members felt supported by others in the group as they took their ideas on board, and they took theirs. It was nice to get new ideas from my colleagues and to share my own. Attending the CoP regularly kept an interest in becoming a better practitioner at the forefront. It helped them to avoid getting sucked into the day-to-day administration and corrections.

Participants felt the changes were manageable and that small changes could be affected easily. They took from it what they wanted and rejected what they didn't want. Teachers PL was affected by being part of the group as they became more aware of different practices and approaches their colleagues are taking and how it is affecting their own classroom routines and subject content (Case D RJ), which is evidenced in this quote.

Effective PL to me, looks like the discussion, sharing and listening to collaborative information, which each person will benefit from in their own area. If one person can take something/ idea/ situation away from it, it is effective. (Case C RJ)

Participants also valued collaborative reflection as part of reflecting on their individual practice. They enjoyed sharing, creating innovative ideas and reflecting on what worked effectively in a classroom environment. This engagement placed the student at the focus of learning, which was important for the members. It was noticed that the more ideas the teachers have, the better and the more enjoyable the classroom will be for the students.

However, a challenge identified by participants is a willingness to be open and vulnerable and to be able to say; ‘I don’t do that so well’ (Case A). Other barriers included colleagues with different viewpoints who are not open to sharing or to learning. Other barriers related to the sustainability of change; ‘do you kind of stick to them and take them on board or after a year do you not bother? I don’t know’ (Case F interview). This opinion is explained in the following quote.

These courses and things like this, I don’t expect them to be game changers. Maybe one thing I’d get out of it and take something away, and think about it, maybe absorb it then, reject it, or affirm that I don’t need to be doing it (laughing). (Case F interview)

However, taking the benefits and the barriers into consideration, it is clear that the benefits outweighed the difficulties and that overall, the members of the CoP found it very beneficial to their PL. It made them think more about their role as teachers and how they can improve their teaching practice.

2.3. Affirming practice

This section discusses how belonging to the CoP affirmed the teachers’ practice. Teachers spoke about sharing ideas, and they gave examples of these ideas. This sharing of practice and hearing new ideas affirmed their own practice and enhanced their enjoyment of the group. They appreciated hearing about other teachers’ practice, ‘it keeps it to the forefront of my own work’ (Case A). Attending the CoP, participants learnt about their own style and the style of others. It brought many new ideas to life, and it reaffirmed existing practices in the classroom. This point is highlighted in the following excerpt; ‘It’s good to know that I’m not the only one who doubts my practice.’ (Case G Interview)

On the other hand, one teacher mentioned that a barrier could be an unwillingness to share. There can be a ‘this is mine’ attitude (Case B RJ). Teachers mentioned an insecurity that teachers may feel about sharing or experiences in how they may be received by others. Some teachers may not be open to sharing, for whatever reason, or may need encouragement to share ideas. This can be evidenced in the following quote.

I know that it was very short, and we only had a few classes but I ...the short period that it was, I actually felt a bit more confident in the classroom...even though it was so short, we did discuss so much within that time. And the fact that we got to reflect on our ideas, that gave me a little bit more confidence going back into the classroom to try the ideas as well, so I suppose the confidence was a big thing. (Case H interview)

The extract demonstrates how belonging to the CoP affirmed this participant's practice and gave them more confidence in the classroom.

3. CoPs for Teacher Agency

3.1 Facilitation

This section explores the research findings on 'facilitation' as an impact on belonging to a CoP. I facilitated the CoP throughout. According to the data, members felt that the role of the facilitator was not so much to lead but to let flow; 'the facilitator's role has been very helpful in not putting forward ideas too strongly but, i.e. directing conversations subtly....so to encourage or facilitate contributions' (Case A RJ), and to allow the group to happen organically and to unfold in its own time, to arrange the CoP and keep people up to date. The facilitator kept the wheels spinning (Case G interview). 'You've been amazing Sharon. You allow the group to talk and jump in when you feel necessary. It was all very fluid' (Case B RJ). Participants felt like they were guided through the CoP and allowed to decide as a group as to the topic of discussion. They liked that they were not told what they had to discuss, it wasn't too direct. It was group-driven, which was valued; 'It felt nice. It felt constructive to be discussing topical points, but in a casual way that did not mean it had to be forced into a situation by the end of the meeting together' (Case D RJ). Similarly, participants thought it was great to get the chance to sit and talk and not to have an agenda or an outcome. It was an interactive process; 'I really enjoyed CoP. The conversation really flowed from member to member, and there were plenty of laughs along the way. Everybody inputted their thoughts and opinions (Case C RJ). The topic was organic and allowed to happen. All members very much valued this. This allowed space and a little bit of creative

thought, and it encouraged enjoyment of the CoP; 'I think we were very supported Sharon. Genuinely. Internally, I think it worked very well' (Case D interview). The fact that this space was valued and given time was considered a bonus for teachers. The facilitator allowed this to happen by guiding the group but not telling the group what to discuss. As a result, the group dynamic and the discussion flowed, and the topics were allowed to unfold. It created a nice atmosphere. The facilitator let the communication flow, asked very relevant and interesting questions and made it easy for them to have the discussions. Participants knew it was ok not to contribute if they didn't want to at times. But participants felt it was a balanced conversation. The facilitator allowed the group to talk and jumped in when necessary. It was all very fluid, which is evidenced in this quote.

If you have a good group and there's a bit of nattering, sometimes it can move off task so you can move to the agreed topic which was agreed consensually if it drifts, and then to value all contributions which I think you did. (Case A interview)

Most members of the group preferred an internal CoP facilitator rather than an external facilitator coming into the school to facilitate the CoP. There was a general consensus that with people they are more familiar with, it was more fulfilling and more rewarding because you gain more from the CoP and they felt more of a sense of belonging and a sense of security.

I think being facilitated internally kind of keeps that sense of well this is ourselves and keeps that community... yes definitely being facilitated internally. If you were to have an external maybe for something but not on a regular (basis). (Case D interview)

Schools have their own ecology. The participants valued the fact that the facilitator was a practising teacher.

When you do have a good facilitator, you do enjoy it. When the facilitator completely understands your point of view, I think that makes it better...as opposed to talking about things that have no relevance or that you think have no relevance. Because maybe the facilitator hasn't been in your shoes for 20,30,40 years and that

I think is one of the big challenges that schools have with regards to training; they don't yeah, the facilitators don't know what it's like to actually be teaching day in, day out. But when you do get a facilitator who does, I think it's very evident, I think it's very clear that they are, someone is seeing things in your shoes before and they know exactly what it feels like. (Case G interview)

3.2: Teacher-led Agenda

This section will explain the research findings on 'teacher-led agenda' as an impact on belonging to a CoP. CoPs are positioned in the malleable category of TPL, where teacher-led agendas are valued, along with teacher autonomy. The fact that the CoP had no agenda as such allowed it to be teacher-led, and this was valued greatly by the participants; 'It felt nice. It felt constructive to be discussing topical points, but in a casual way that did not mean it had to be forced into a situation by the end of the meeting together' (Case D RJ). It was the group itself which drove it. Teachers thought about how they could support students, discover what their needs are, and decide how they could address that. Nothing was forced upon the participants; they didn't have to do anything, only what they wanted to do, which suited them.

There was no like 'oh we need to talk about these points' or we need to talk about x,y,z or.... you sit there for 30 minutes and listen to me, if that makes sense. It was just a flowing conversation that was dragged from one place to another, quite fluidly so I think that was good. (Case G interview).

With this engagement, the participants had the opportunity to voice their opinion which is demonstrated in this quote.

You know, it was teacher-led as opposed to the Department of Education saying we have to do this, you know, we all have to be doing this and documenting it and monitoring it, you know that kind of way. It was a bit more loose, a bit more organic. It felt nice. It felt constructive to be discussing topical points, but in a casual way that did not mean it had to be forced into a situation by the end of the meeting together. (Case F interview)

Teacher agency was largely evident in the findings of the research. It was important for teachers to have their voice heard; ‘we got to actually have the voice, to voice your own opinions and talk so in that regard I actually, it was really fulfilling’ (Case H interview). Teachers enjoyed the fluidity and looseness that this brought.

In a holistic kind of way, it is good to see other teachers there as well, you know. It wasn’t just like a one to one or it wasn’t a dictat ‘ok let’s all try this, here do this or everybody has to do this now’ So it was good, it was kind or organic like that. It was good to see ideas develop out of that. I suppose yeah it makes me more open to approaching teachers then in future about what they would do, what their thoughts are and stuff like that. (Case F interview)

3.3 Sustainability

This section explores the subtheme of ‘sustainability’ under the CoPs theme for teacher agency. The data evidence that members' voices were heard and their thoughts and opinions were listened to. They valued the time and space put aside for people who liked or needed the time and space for this PL. The small intimate size of the CoP was valued and enjoyed by members. These encouraged discussion and voices to be heard, as is evidenced in this quote.

I wouldn’t really like it to be much bigger. I think it would change the whole feel of it. I don’t know how that would work then, with such large amounts of staff. That had an impact definitely, the number or the size compared to some of the whole school (CPDs).... (Case D interview)

These led to the sustainability of the CoP. For members who are starting, for people who are nervous, one participant felt that it would work better if it was kept as a small group; ‘in a small group, in person, I found that ... I definitely think I gained more from that experience (Case H interview). The CoP has continued since the data was collected. It is worth noting that four of the eight original participants have continued with the CoP and one new member has joined too. When asked if they would continue with the CoP after the data was collected, participants reported:

I would yeah. I would. Like I said, I've enjoyed it. And there's more to learn, there's always more to learn. It's great to be involved. It's a community, it's great to be a part of what's happening so yeah I would yeah definitely. (Case D interview)

School management values or culture can impact the sustainability of the CoP. The school that this case study was based on, supported the CoP for data collection and for the CoP to continue after the data was collected. However, another school may not have been. One participant felt they would only continue with CoP if it was timetabled; However, of the participants who did not continue, they said, 'I feel I need every minute and would only continue with CoP if it was part of timetabling (Case A RJ). Time is a major challenge and can be a large barrier towards the sustainability of the CoP. Many participants mentioned that time isn't always there for PL; 'barriers to CoP being successful...I suppose the time is a big one. Yeah, the lunch times were tough like just trying to squeeze that in' (Case F interview). Schools are very busy places and there is always something going on at lunchtimes. So, finding the time to come along to a CoP can be difficult. This is evidenced in the following responses; 'So I have three barriers.... Time, time and time!.... A teachers' career is lovely, but it is time poor' (Case A interview) and 'I think, it's not even just for this school it's for every school but it's just finding the time to actually sit down and do it' (Case B interview). Time may not be allocated for TPL either; 'I think for PL there isn't really a regular intimate space at all put aside, for people who would like it, for people who might need it, you know, and having had the opportunity to... (Case D interview). As a facilitator, it was challenging to find times and days that suited every participant so that they could all attend the CoP sessions. To overcome this, I gave a lot of notice about the dates of the sessions, and I decided on two separate days, Mondays and Wednesdays, to get maximum attendance. I sent reminder emails the day beforehand, too.

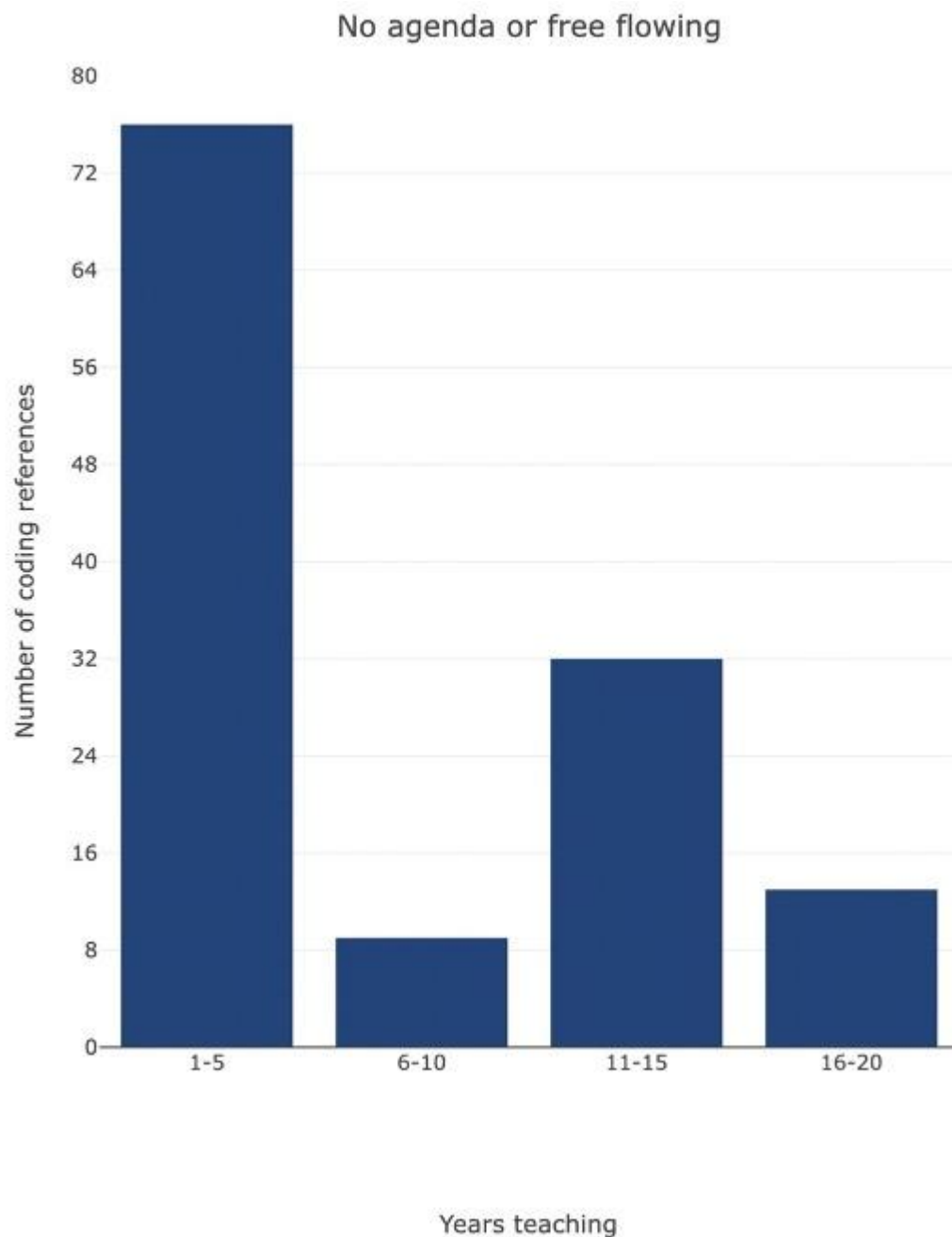
However, although people are busy, they made the time for the CoP because they enjoyed and learnt from it. Another reason that supports the sustainability of the CoP is the atmosphere of the CoP, which members described as relaxing, inclusive and safe, to name a few; 'Engaging in a CoP makes me feel more professionally included' (Case D RJ). This atmosphere encouraged members to return to the next session as they know their voices are heard, their opinions are listened to, and ideas are taken on board; 'I think it was a whole

host of different people, personalities, different subjects, different demographics, which was good. It was beneficial. It was good to see from everyone's point of view' (Case G interview). Choice was there too, they could choose whether to come or not, it isn't a thing they have to do. This encourages attendance. The following excerpt demonstrates the value of sharing practice, coming together as colleagues and being collaborative, which may enable the sustainability of the CoP.

By the end of it I was actually really shocked and surprised by how beneficial it was to see people discussing, I suppose their own experiences with teaching and it ranged from people who are newly qualified to people with 15-20 years even more experience so to have ...for experienced teachers and to teachers who are only fresh, to work together as a team, definitely changed my own attitude in that sense, in that belonging. (Case H interview)

On the other hand, a teacher who teaches many senior classes felt that the senior students were not very interested in new teaching methodologies, and so they may not be inclined to attend over a period of time; 'the 6th years are very motivated to complete work and feel less ready to break the academic session' (Case A RJ). It is mainly the more experienced teachers who teach senior classes, too. Therefore, the career stage can also be a barrier to the sustainability of a CoP. Teachers with a lot of years of teaching experience decided not to continue with the CoP. Reasons for this mentioned time as a factor at the stage in their career. It is worth noting that no members of middle management (except the researcher) attended the CoP. They may be too busy; they may not value PL opportunities as much as junior teachers do; and may not need support or their practice to be affirmed. Teachers with a good few years of teaching experience were tired of courses; 'I've done my time' (Case F RJ), according to one member, and so the CoP filled this gap, and his voice was heard in this smaller, intimate group (See Figure 2 below). Regarding sustainability, new teachers to the profession attended the CoP and continued with it since the data was collected. Even though 'the little tricks of the trade, particularly from the new ones (teachers) coming in, you know do you have a video that's a good exemplar' (Case A interview), were valued by teachers teaching senior classes, they were trying out the new methodologies with their junior classes rather than with their senior classes.

Figure 2: References to 'no agenda' versus 'years teaching'



This CoP was a starter for some participants, and they are very keen to continue with it now that they understand what it is and have experience with a CoP.

I actually would genuinely love to continue, I think it was almost like a taster what we had in the last few weeks. I think there is so much more that we could explore. I suppose our main focus really was looking at the ideas, the teaching ideas that we

could have in a classroom, but you could branch out into so much more. (Case H interview)

Another participant wanted to see the longer picture and longer outcomes of what might happen if she worked with the same classes next academic year to see if there would be change with her teaching methods.

Just be with my classes and see how... to have the classes to implement whatever comes out of this and also to be teaching the classes so I can give feedback and give you know what it needed to the CoP because if you don't have the classes, and you're not teaching groups of people, you know different subjects, you're gonna know what to say, you're not really gonna have something to contribute so I think going forward if I have the same timetable and the same amount of work and I'm dealing with the same classes you know, the same amount of classes I definitely feel I'd have ...be able to contribute if it was going ahead. (Case C interview)

Summary

This chapter explored the research findings on the impact of belonging to a CoP under three themes and nine sub-themes. The first theme is CoPs for belonging and wellbeing, which included atmosphere, connection and collegiality as sub-themes. The second theme was CoPs for teacher professional learning, which included sub-themes under sharing ideas, reflection and affirming practice. The final theme in the findings chapter was CoPs for teacher agency. The sub-themes discussed under this theme were facilitation, teacher-led agenda and sustainability. The next chapter will discuss these findings and their link to the literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

This thesis aimed to explore the impact of belonging to a CoP for post-primary teachers in a school in Leinster, Ireland. Prompted by the literature and the researcher's interest in teacher PL, it was deemed a topic needing exploration. Fundamentally, the study attempts to understand the impact it has on teachers to be part of a CoP. Chapter two set an important context for the study's focused topic examination. The relevant national and international literature presented in this chapter shows a need for teacher PL that is participant-led, context-driven, based on discussion and reflection of practice rather than a top-down model of PL driven by outsiders. To answer these probing questions on the impact of belonging to a CoP, data was collected from seven participants through RJs after attending each CoP session and from semi-structured interviews conducted after all six of the CoPs had been completed. From this data collection, three themes emerged: (1) CoPs as places of belonging and wellbeing, (2) CoPs as places for teacher PL and finally, (3) CoPs for teacher agency. This chapter aims to bring the findings and the existing literature into dialogue and to bring the contribution of this research to the fore. There are gaps in the literature in relation to teacher PL and CoPs in the Irish context. This research has highlighted five main themes regarding the impact of belonging to a CoP, each of which will be considered in light of pertinent literature as follows: (1) creating a connection between non-department colleagues, (2) affirmation of teacher's practice in the classroom, (3) a reflective space (4) it is a comfort blanket and, finally, (5) the impact of the role of the facilitator. In this research, significant effects were identified regarding supporting teacher PL, enhancing a sense of belonging and empowering teacher agency. This is a case study by design therefore the findings are context specific. It is a preliminary study.

Creating connections with colleagues

Socio-cultural theories strongly emphasise fostering communities of learners (FCL) and emphasise that learning is a social act (Conway, 2002, p.80). Subsequently, teachers' interpersonal skills are becoming increasingly important in establishing relationships with colleagues and parents (Stemler *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, it is increasingly important to capitalise on the emotional and relational dimensions of teacher professional learning

(Kennedy, 2021). Additionally, teachers with good emotional regulation skills have higher job satisfaction and increased feelings of personal accomplishment (Brackett et al., 2010). Data analysis in this research revealed consistencies across participants regarding feelings of connection. This connection led to feelings of belonging within the CoP and, further, to increased wellbeing for members. Furthermore, this connection enabled professional learning, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In sharing and listening to ideas and experiences, a connection was felt that teachers share the same difficulties in their classes. It opened teachers' eyes to different areas of pedagogy and encouraged the sharing of ideas. The accumulated data suggests that participants benefited from discussing the same topic and sharing ideas within that same topic and underlines the need for discussion.

They were there for a common purpose, which enabled further connection. In light of the data, it is clear that participants felt belonging is paramount for human connectedness, and in that belonging, they felt a strong connection to people in the group. This is in line with Vygotsky's work, as processes, or problems, that a learner needs to deal with and solve independently in the social context/environment, such as an educational setting originate initially, in social dialogue. CoPs highlight communities' role in the social experiences that create knowledge formation (Novak and Tucker, 2021). This connection felt by members towards their colleagues may then transfer to connection with parents of the school. It is worth noting that participants who had fewer years of teaching experience had a greater sense of belonging to the CoP. Furthermore, participants with less than five years' experience recorded an increase in their wellbeing from being part of the CoP.

Simultaneously, support from colleagues was pertinent for the majority of participants. When they tried out new ideas, they felt supported in their successes or failures. This brought a deep connection to members. They could share their experiences and felt supported in their endeavours. In addition, they enjoyed meaningful conversations with colleagues they do not see very often and getting to know members who were new to the school or new to them. They saw commonalities between each other as they all had the same struggles in their teaching. This sentiment is equally apparent in the literature where Wenger *et al.* define CoPs as 'groups of people who share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). The data shows evidence of this, where participant after participant noted that knowing that the other participants were trying the same strategies with their

classes made it real and honest for them. This honesty and comradery brought connection, safety and closeness to members. This is in line with literature regarding CoPs as the goal of individuals participating in a CoP is to deepen their learning in a process of collective learning (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger 2010a, 2011b). Literature in the area distinguishes between two views of teacher learning (Shields, 2010). A transformational view and a transformative view. The data is aligned with the latter view, a holistic, relational view, concerned with the organic development of community, the school as a community, a care-based and holistic community of learners. This form of person-centred education (Michael Fielding, 2007) shines through in this research, between both teachers and between teachers and their students. These connections increased the sense of participants' belonging. This was identified as a significant impact of belonging to the CoP.

Collegiality

The school is increasingly emphasised as a site for teachers' PL (OECD, 2014). Full-time classroom teachers are very well situated to test theoretical solutions in an immediate laboratory of practice (Harris and Muijs, 2003; Frost, 2014), while at the same time working to develop new perspectives and solutions to improve their schools and their own individual practice. Most participants in this research felt it was good to meet participants from different departments at the CoP as it created a mix of colleagues and a variety of learning possibilities from these different departments. They felt that the comradery between the different members was effective as it brought a sense of team building with them, which was considered not only very productive and worthwhile, but it also brought a sense of collegiality to the participants in the group. These findings relate to the literature as positioning teachers as the leaders of job-embedded professional learning activates their individual development as leaders among their colleagues, which in itself is a worthy outcome of professional development (Alexandrou & Swaffield, 2014).

Furthermore, the enactment of leadership by these teachers leads to further individual and community professional growth as they guide collaborative, contextualised learning opportunities for their colleagues (Poekert, 2012). The participants felt a palpable sense of collegiality as they led the CoP, decided on the topic for discussion, supported each other's endeavours in the classroom and congratulated them on their learning and progress. There is an overall clear sense from the data that members felt valued and respected, they shared

collegial challenges, stories, experiences, and opinions across the board, i.e., cross-curricular challenges, which brings this collegiality to the fore. They got to know their colleagues a little more and became involved in their subjects as they embraced their collegiality together. This once again highlights the importance of in-school PL, where teachers have the opportunity to get to know their colleagues at a deeper level. There was comfort in ‘knowing’ the same as their colleagues, knowing the same challenges and the same successes. That fostered an atmosphere of belonging. Through their responses, the participants confirmed that they have learnt that they are not alone and feel supported by others in the group. Participants got the chance to talk and discuss things with people they might not have spoken to that day in the staff room. They considered it an opportunity to get to know those people and to see things from their point of view. One by one, each of them articulated their need for the same. Some participants’ motivation for participating in the research was to help a colleague in her study. Unsurprisingly, these participants valued the importance of helping colleagues as this makes the workday easier for everyone, according to the data. This participant felt a sense of connection and belonging as they worked as part of a team to work towards the team's goal. This leads to a sense of collegiality over time. This is in line with contemporary mainstream literature on CoPs which posits that in order for a CoP to be successful, it needs to bring value to its members, and it requires leadership, trust and respect amongst members (Hindi, Willis and Schafheutle, 2019) and CoPs ‘come to life from peoples’ trans-personal processes of thinking together’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017b, p. 389). It is further interesting to note that, if the CoP is created to address teachers’ interests, then it also has a higher chance of being successful because one of the key characteristics of CoPs is the teachers themselves—their commitment to the community and to improving their craft (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012). This section explored ‘creating connection between non-departmental colleagues’ as an impact of belonging to a CoP, and it will form a key recommendation in the next chapter.

Affirmation of teachers’ practice

Sharing ideas

Some researchers believe that ‘professional learning *in context* is the only learning that ultimately counts for changing classrooms’ (Fullan, 2007, p. 153). Echoing the

recommendations of the literature, the findings from this study show that participation was on each participant's own terms, there was nothing forced, and it enabled participants to be a bit more open to trying different methodologies in class after being part of the group. There was a palpable sense of keeping participants on their toes and, 'it gave a platform to rethink how to make your class more beneficial' (Case H interview).

This research highlights both the importance of and the need for CoPs as well as the success of it. This data is in line with the contemporary literature on CoPs as a group engagement that offers a safe space for learning and sharing ideas (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). The malleable category of TPL is an important category, as it acknowledges that one particular type or model of CPD can be used to different ends depending on the intended purpose (Kennedy, 2014, p. 692). Kennedy positions CoPs in the malleable category for PL because in order to be in the transformative category, the CoPs would have to combine with action research. This could be done, blending CoPs in schools with action research. Through the sharing of practice, the participants collectively proffer that they had the same challenges, for example, trying to get through the course and challenges with assessment in the school. They had the feeling of carrying out similar practices each day in school as their colleagues and facing the same challenges, a feeling of 'knowing the same' as their colleagues and enjoying the same successes. Analysis largely reinforced that this provided participants with feelings of both comfort and contentment about being part of something and being able to share. This is in line with the literature on CoPs, which is a social system, a group of individuals who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion for a specific topic. The goal of individuals participating in a CoP is to deepen their learning in a process of collective learning (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). In this research, participants heard about other subjects and techniques that might be used in their own subjects, and they could collaborate in that way. In essence, hearing what other participants were doing and finding out where fellow colleagues were at with their classroom activities was greatly valued and enjoyed by participants.

If learning involves gaining new understanding, knowledge, behaviours, skills, values and attitudes (Gross, 2010) then this research has highlighted this. The data shows that participants learnt new skills, values and attitudes during the research and by being part of a CoP. To succeed, PL must consider how teachers learn and be intentionally designed to

enhance and foster that learning (Cohen and Hill, 2000). Coinciding with this recognition is the belief that the role of the teacher includes that of a learner rather than merely a technician providing knowledge.

This research has also provided some thorny issues regarding barriers to CoPs and the literature explains why. Whilst the data from research in the area shows that CoPs are a very popular idea, how they operate in organisations has proved challenging to understand (Waring and Currie, 2009). In Ireland, although researchers and the Teaching Council (2016) promote the development of CoPs, school management and teachers have not put adequate support and structures in place to develop CoPs in schools (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017). These may include insecurities about sharing ideas or experiences and how others may receive them, and that conversation may not always be proportionate. A participant in this research mentioned that they would like the input to be more representative of everyone and that some people may need to be invited to contribute. This consistency between the literature and the findings is reassuring as it is paramount to remember that teacher PL and the sharing of ideas can be difficult to manage and may not suit all teachers. However, it is important that attending a CoP supports rather than adds to the workload (King and Logan, 2022) for participants. Participants regretted the fact that they were busy at lunchtime and could not make all the sessions due to other commitments.

A related consideration arising from the research is what Kennedy believes that the purposes of PL can vary along a continuum from transmission of knowledge and skills to transformative practice at the other end, where teachers are encouraged to work collaboratively in a constructivist manner to change their practices to better meet the needs of their students, in context (Kennedy, 2005, 2014). Some teachers may need support and guidance to move through the spectrum. Kennedy positions CoPs in the malleable category as she believes that the malleable category is the most important because it recognises that one particular model of CPD can be used for different results, depending on what result is required (Kennedy, 2014). Furthermore, in order to be in the transformative category, the CoPs would have to combine with action research. CoPs could be used in schools and combined with action research in classrooms to move this PL into the transformative category. Moreover, if successful CoPs are active, ongoing, driven by participant need and interest, situated and collaborative (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012), then researchers

cannot ‘just add facilitators and stir’ (Abbott et al. 2011, p.1). Rather, it is important that attention be paid to how groups of teachers are structured and designed if we are to support them in maintaining their efforts (Parker, Patton & Tannehill, 2012). The range of topics can also be defined in too general terms, making it difficult to relate to more specific problems of particular interest.

For one thing, members of CoP are attracted to discussions that they will gain immediate value from, such as engaging discussions, new working relationships, the ability to share their views, solutions to their problems, opportunities to see what others are doing, and some tools or techniques that they could use in their work (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017). Recent research suggests that continuous engagement and collective learning can occur more frequently when teachers work together to develop further their own professional growth (Taylor, 2023). CoPs are ‘groups of people who share a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). Furthermore, supporting teachers to work collaboratively, share their expertise, and take risks together (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2005) may lead to greater capacities for change and school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002) and measuring the impact of belonging to the CoP becomes more important when there is also the increasing demand upon organisations to be held accountable (Dowling et al, 2021). The data in this research is consistent with this literature. Data analysis proved that participants had near universal enthusiasm regarding exchanging ideas and learning from each other, and participants strongly communicated their learning from the collaborative discussions in the CoP. Regarding the holistic nature of education, teachers and communities need a variety of ways to address current issues in education and imagine new possibilities for education for the future (Farrell *et al.*, 2021). Research will require many different ‘perspectives in the conception, design, and implementation of inquiry efforts. It will need to involve a variety of research approaches that honor different ways of knowing and creating knowledge’ (Farrell et al, 2021, p. 2). Long-term engagement with a variety of stakeholders is also essential to sustained and systemic change (Doucet, 2019; Kirkland, 2019). Research-practice partnerships are a strategic way to pursue locally driven, collaborative approaches to research in support of educational equity. This research has, thus, responded to the call for an exploration of collaborative PL, especially in the Irish context where individual practice still reigns (O’Sullivan, 2001; Eivers and Clerkin, 2013). This section explored ‘sharing ideas’ as an impact of belonging to a CoP.

Affirming teachers' practice

The 'phenomenon that is teacher learning' (Kennedy, 2014, p. 689) is arguably a complex system rather than a single event of changing practices (Opfer and Pedder, 2011b). This complex system involves systems within systems made up of individual teachers, interactions between teachers, school-level systems and interactions between teachers and school-level systems (Opfer and Pedder, 2011b). To conceptualise Kennedy's model here, with transformative models of PL, teachers can be supported to work collaboratively in a constructivist manner to change their practices to meet the needs of their students in their contexts (Kennedy, 2005). This could be done in Ireland. The transformative category allows teachers to be trained in implementing policy (Kennedy *et al.*, 2020). This could be done with collaboration between schools and Universities. Collaboration between these systems needs management's time and support, which can be difficult to find given the busy dynamics of schools. Despite these challenges, unstructured, organic, school-led contact that allows time for teachers to develop, discuss and practice new knowledge (Opfer and Pedder, 2011) is needed. There is a need to move beyond a quick -ix approach and to involve teachers in sustainable PL that is more participative, collaborative and situated (Jess and McEvilly, 2015). However, there is a dearth of evidence on how to support teacher PL in bringing about change (King, 2016). Because of this, it is important that teachers are provided with PL opportunities where learning is aligned, coherent, and sustained (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). This section explores how belonging to a CoP affirms teachers' practices and gives teachers confidence to try new things in the classroom.

In this research, participants noted a variety of experiences and career stages of members. Participants with more years of teaching experience gained newer ideas from those newly qualified, while the recently qualified participants gained mentorship, affirmation of practice and support from more experienced colleagues. Members expressed feelings of contentment about being part of something and able to share ideas. Participants heard about other subjects and techniques that could be used in their own subjects, and they could collaborate that way. Hearing what other participants were doing and finding out where fellow colleagues were with their classroom activities was greatly valued and enjoyed by participants. The literature offers plausible explanations as to why; for example, influences from multiple internal and external sources form teachers' perceptions of how they view themselves as teachers (Olsen, 2016). A teacher's professional identity depends on an

individual's knowledge of the profession but equally important on the confidence to successfully undertake a particular professional role (Sachs, 2001). Additionally, the strength of one's professional identity has also been linked to the strength of belongingness and attachment, which positively impacts career success (Slay & Smith, 2011). The data from this research agrees with this.

The findings of the research dovetail with key policy papers in the teacher PL space, including a major policy shift in teacher PL and the linking of the position in the White Paper of the 'teaching continuum' (GoI, 1995) to the OECD report (1991). The White Paper on education (GoI, 1995) recognised that the PL of teachers was 'fragmented' and suffered because 'teacher participation is voluntary' and course content is 'provider driven'. This paper advocated for PL that embraces 'the personal and the professional needs of the teacher, as well as those of the school system' (p. 87). Affirming teachers' practice and giving teachers the confidence to try out new ideas in class is a move forward in teacher PL, and it is in line with best practices in the literature. Although belonging to the CoP was voluntary, it was participant-driven rather than provider-driven. The group decided on the topic of discussion and so the needs of the participants were addressed, which included areas in which the participants needed affirmation and confidence. Examples included ideas on teaching pedagogies and ideas on supporting student wellbeing. Their practice was affirmed by knowing that other participants have similar difficulties in their classes. Members felt supported by others in the group as they took their ideas on board, and they took theirs. It was effective in getting new ideas from colleagues and to sharing their own. Attending the CoP regularly kept an interest in becoming a better practitioner at the forefront. The data suggests it helped participants avoid getting absorbed into the day-to-day administration and corrections assessment. In their 2017 study, Buckley, Abbott and Franey suggest that a mentoring programme would benefit every school to support new teachers in the profession on a formal or informal basis. This research concurs with this suggestion.

To date, much of the focus of education research in Ireland has been on ITE, with some focus on PL and very little, until recently, on induction (Conway et al., 2009; Smyth et al., 2016). Despite the funding, 'placing high value *on* something is not the same as engaging *in* it' (Czerniawski et al., 2018, p 144). The perception that changes in schools are often imposed by senior and middle management in a climate of accountability (Bolam et al.,

2005) in a top-down approach can make teachers feel as if they are ‘technicians carrying out someone else’s policy’ (Priestley et al., 2011, p.269) instead of being active, creative, self-directed participants in their own PL (King, 2016). This research has shown that belonging to a CoP has positively impacted affirming teachers' practice and giving them the confidence to try new methodologies in their classrooms. Participants engaged with the CoP and thus with their PL, and the improvements and developments they made to their teaching came from the group rather than from school management. This adds to the existing literature in the area of teacher development, which posits that competency increases over time in the profession (Veenman, 1984) and that improvements in the areas of professionalism, communication skills, classroom management, and inclusive practice are strongly related to an increase in teacher identity and experience (Fitzsimons *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, simple acts such as supporting each other, getting along, being willing to collaborate, offering assistance, and having a positive attitude helped teachers make stress more manageable (Haydon, Leko & Stevens, 2018).

A reflective space

Teacher PL

Vygotsky (1978) developed a theory of socio-cultural development in which learning in a social context (for example, an educational setting) forms the basis for the acquisition of higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1981). For Vygotsky, processes, or problems which a learner needs to deal with and solve independently in the social context/environment, such as an educational setting, originate, initially, in social dialogue. They involve groups of people sharing a concern or a passion for something they do, and they learn how to do it better as they collaborate regularly, over a long period of time, and engage in common activities (Nistor *et al.*, 2015). This section discusses TPL as an impact of belonging to a CoP and how it relates to allowing space for teachers to think, reflect and take stock. CoPs are a group engagement which offers a safe space for learning and sharing ideas (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). A CoP is a social system and is defined as a group of individuals who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion for a specific topic (Wenger, 2010). Furthermore, the goal of individuals participating in a CoP is to deepen their learning in the process of collective learning (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger 2010a, 2011b). However, while teachers may engage in PL experiences this may or may not lead to teacher PL or growth (King, 2014; 2022).

PL is, therefore, an outcome of engagement in PL (Liou and Canrinus, 2020) and not something that is 'done' to teachers (Timperley, 2007, p.33). This research explored the impact of belonging to a CoP for teachers in a post-primary school when they engaged in a CoP over a period. Participants enjoyed the exchange of ideas and learning how other participants asked pupils, for example, to reflect on the teaching and learning in the classroom and give movement breaks to students. The teachers' experience in this study aligned with Wenger's vision of the CoP. Participants tried out new ideas that were shared with them during the CoP and came back to the next CoP session and shared their experiences with this, including what worked and what didn't work. They felt it was important to share and that their ideas could be applied to their classes. This brought creative thought into their practice, which they enjoyed. One member mentioned that things change so quickly in education, so it was good to have lots of ideas ready to go. This sharing and listening to other ideas led to cross-checking. They felt like they belonged to the CoP because they were amongst colleagues with the same experience and because they were comfortable sharing their opinions and current experiences. The malleable category of TPL that CoPs are positioned in involve teachers collaborating and sharing ideas. Relating the research to literature, although 'some learning is best done in groups and some learning is best done by oneself' (Wenger, 1998, p. 226), we learn from each other within a group because a certain amount of learning takes place beyond the confines of the individual mind (Salomon and Perkins, 1998, p. 1). Furthermore, recent research in the area of teacher PL posits that the general level of NQTs teaching quality at the start of their career is 'just sufficient' and there is a call for better preparation during ITE for quality teaching (Fitzsimons et al., 2024, p. 15). Belonging to a CoP during this stage in their career could answer this call.

Continuing from this, workplace learning is a wide, contested, multi-disciplinary and relatively new field of inquiry (Livingstone, 2012). There is a social ecology of workplace learning based on multi-level, interdependent social relationships in work environments (Evans, Guile and Harris, 2011). The learning characteristics and dimensions of a CoP are conducive to 'a special kind of potential' (Hogan et al., 2007, p.8) and CoPs are a form of situated learning whereby;

Consistent with situated learning perspectives, as groups of teachers move toward the CoP end of the continuum their distinguishing characteristics become

apparent....the farther to the right of the continuum, the deeper the learning, more focused the direction, and stronger the growth. Groups with shared facilitation showed the most growth, empowerment, and seemed able to reflect on their growth and its impact on teaching practice and in many cases student learning. (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012, p. 101)

This is true for this research. Participants appreciated and found it exciting to hear about other teachers' practice in their classrooms. The variety of career stages of members was important as those participants with more years of teaching experience gained newer ideas from newly qualified participants. These newly qualified participants gained mentorship, affirmation, and support from more experienced participants. Hearing what other participants were doing and finding out where fellow colleagues were at with their classroom activities was greatly valued and enjoyed by participants as this quote shows; 'I learnt different techniques of how to help my students more by each teacher willingly sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences' (Case B RJ). Although there are challenges around measuring and evaluating impact, including for example, trying to define what success means (Dowling *et al*, 2021), it is important to build in mechanisms within TPL to enable both teachers and support professionals to consider together the impact on an ongoing basis (Dowling *et al*, 2021). Universities and schools have a long history of partnering with one another to achieve a range of educational goals (Walsh and Backe, 2013). Universities have typically partnered with schools for trainee teachers to learn on site or for university staff for research participants. For decades, these partnerships were driven primarily by the needs of the universities. In recent years, broader recognition of the needs of schools has begun to shift that balance (Brabeck and Walsh, 2003). Effective school–university partnerships require 'a shared conceptual understanding, mutuality in roles and relationships, sound operational strategies, and evaluation of both the partnership and its outcomes' (Walsh and Backe, 2013, p. 599). These partnerships could be considered for TPL in schools, for teachers to learn and for universities to provide sustainable research opportunities. This research answered the call in literature for answers to questions regarding work processes and the interrelations between work and learning (Livingstone, 2012).

Reflection

Reflective practice is an important component of teacher education, bringing numerous benefits to teachers (Choo Yee et al., 2021). Critical reflection is a key principle of PL (Clarke and Hollingsworth, 2002; Liou and Canrinus, 2020). King, Poekert and Pierre (2023), offer a meta model on PL which showcases the relevance of reflective inquiry for sustained professional growth. At the meso level, school contexts are pivotal in supporting teachers' learning via leadership support. At the micro-level context, there are individual teacher-related factors, such as teacher characteristics and motivation to engage in PL, to name a few. It is based on Dewey's practical inquiry model. Dewey defined inquiry as 'the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole' (Dewey, 1938, p. 108). This definition brings up three essential points about inquiry. Firstly, the constructs that are accounted for in PL models, everything from antecedents to teacher reactions to teacher knowledge to teacher practice to school culture, are highly entangled and indeterminate. It is not easy to see where one construct ends and another begins because they exist in relation to one another. Secondly, the inquiry process transforms the situation under investigation to resolve it. Thirdly, reflection controls inquiry (King, Poekert and Pierre, 2023).

Reflection journals (RJs) have been recognised as a vital tool in promoting learning, as they facilitate critical thinking and self-engagement and push participants to overcome challenges (Draissi *et al.*, 2021). In the same way, workplace involvement in reflective dialogue is a successful method for the PL of teachers (Van Kruingen, 2013). In this research, at the end of each CoP session, the participants were asked to reflect on their experience of the CoP in RJs, which were collected at the end of each session and were used as a data collection tool. Reflection 'entails the observer's deliberate scrutiny of his/her own interpretive point of view', including 'culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal value commitments' (Erikson, 1986, p.125). Participants in this research valued creating space and time to reflect and engage with reflection during the CoP. Participants also reflected on their practice throughout the discussions in the CoP as they shared their practice and listened to other participants share their experiences. Participants agreed that the RJs embedded the session, solidified what was spoken about and created connections. This remains a valid description of how the participants perceived it. It focused on their

collaboration and how they learn together within a CoP, because when done well, teacher PL can be transformative for teachers. CoPs, like any enquiry community, can lead to teacher learning because teacher learning is most likely to occur when teachers have opportunities to collaborate with professional peers (King and Newmann, 2001). This is further related to the transformative view of education and learning, the holistic and relational view, concerned with the organic development of community, the school as a community, a care-based and holistic community of learners (Shields, 2010). The reflection after the CoP sessions in this research, according to the participants, gave them time to concentrate on what had been discussed during the CoP and time to narrow it down, and as one participant observed, ‘that was more likely to go on with me than just the chat’ (Case A interview) and enabled participants to figure out what they could take from the session. It embedded the session and the learning for them and pulled everything together for them at the end. This was powerful.

While learning communities have been shown to have some transformative potential (Dogan et al., 2016), more recent literature calls for further research to substantiate effects on teacher learning (Hairon et al., 2017). As noted by Van Kruiningen (2013), despite the potential of CoPs, the interactional processes of CoPs and how they support growth are under-researched. This research has narrowed this theory gap by focusing on the impact of belonging to a CoP. The findings have shown that being part of the CoP has indeed increased the teachers’ learning, and the reflection afterwards in the RJs enabled this learning. Participants agreed that the RJs embedded the session, solidified what was spoken about and created connections; ‘I liked it at the end because when we were sitting there, it actually allowed me to sit and think ‘ok, how has this benefitted me?’’ (Case B interview). Deep learning is also conducive to the implementation and sustainability of new practices (Bolam et al., 2005) and belonging to a CoP may have provided this deep sustained learning and change as it is important to build in mechanisms within PL to enable teachers to consider the impact of PL on an ongoing basis (De Paor, 2016). This is evident from the data, as the participants enjoyed writing in the RJs at the end of each session. This confirms Kennedy’s research where, depending on the role played by the teacher as a member of the CoP team, learning within such a community could be either a proactive or a passive experience (Kennedy, 2014, p. 345). Participants played different roles within the group, but writing in the RJs embedded what they learned during the CoP. It was a proactive experience, and it embedded the learning; ‘Reflecting on the CoP is good as it allows me

to think of the real benefits of the practice. To see just how important it is' (Case B RJ). The time spent in the group supported them once again as reflective practitioners. This skill had importance during pre-service teacher training but has been neglected due to the busyness of the job, according to the data. Participants emphasised the importance of reflection in their work.

The ideas and the learning stayed with them, and they were more likely to try them in class. Participants rated the reflections highly at the end of the CoP session, while it was fresh in their minds, 'creating space and time to actually reflect and engage with reflection' (Case C RJ). It helped them to take a step back and re-assess their learning and participation in the CoP. However, 'sometimes I felt like we were rushing the reflection a little bit (Case B interview)' and participants would have liked a little more time at the end to reflect. This data aligns with the literature in the area where reflection 'entails the observer's deliberate scrutiny of his/her own interpretive point of view' including 'culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal value commitments' (Erikson, 1986, p.125). However, the literature is silent on the issue of duration and frequency of TPL and asks teachers what type of PL they require. Once again, an obvious consideration for recommendations becomes apparent.

A comfort blanket

Sustainable PL

While acknowledging that traditional PL courses have a role in teachers' PL, there is a need to involve teachers in sustainable PL that is more participative, collaborative and situated (Jess and McEvilly, 2015) and needs to be sustained and continued over time (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). Sustainability is the first topic to be discussed when exploring the impact of belonging to a CoP. There are calls for research exploring how CoPs can be sustained over time (King, 2011). The PL in the CoP was participative as the participants drove the selection of topics being discussed; it was collaborative as ideas of practice were shared, and it was situated within the school's context. This research hopes to have made progress towards answering this call, and much of the interview data supported this finding, which openly shows how participants enjoyed it, learnt from it and got value from it.

Although no participant went as far as to make a suggestion that they lacked ideas or were not confident in their teaching approach, this research has shown that CoPs offer this space, as well as a PL space (Stoll et al., 2006). This research has shown that participants wanted to continue with the CoP and sustain it going forward. They enjoyed the CoP and learnt something from it; 'I've enjoyed it. And there's more to learn, there's always more to learn. It's great to be involved. It's a community, it's great to be a part of what's happening...I would definitely (continue)' (Case D interview).

Improvements in the profession vary amongst teachers and do not necessarily occur in a linear manner (Fitzsimons *et al.*, 2024). This adds to the argument, for example, of sustaining PL within a CoP, amongst other arguments. Deep learning is conducive to implementing and sustaining new practices (Bolam et al., 2005). This research has shown that participants implemented new ideas of practice into their classes between the CoP sessions, discussed how well the ideas worked, and collaborated on how to improve them. They listened to each other and shared their experiences. Although this CoP took place over three months, the data suggest that this could become a source of deep learning for these participants. Literature posits that an impact of belonging to a CoP may provide this deep sustained learning and change, as it is important to build in mechanisms within PL to enable teachers to consider the impact of PL on an ongoing basis (De Paor, 2016).

In addition, the LAOS quality framework considers schools as dynamic learning organisations where teachers are supported to learn individually and collectively to improve their professional capacity (DE, 2022). The framework 'views career-long professional learning as central to the teacher's work and firmly situates reflection and collaboration at its heart' (DE, 2022, p. 9). These policies are essential regarding teacher PL for now and the future as teachers' learning is ongoing and is required in order for us to empower students to be the best that they can be (Teaching Council, 2016). Collaboration needs time and support from management, which can be difficult to find given the busy dynamics of schools. The issue of time, echoed by Sugrue, needs to be addressed as a significant structural issue limiting PL (Sugrue, 2002). Relating the literature to the data, although the participants are busy, they made the time for the CoP because they enjoyed it, valued it and learnt from it. However, participants did lament the laborious issue of time. The school's management values or culture can also impact the sustainability of the CoP. The school that this case study was based on, was supportive of the CoP for data collection and for the

CoP to continue after the data was collected. However, this may not be the case in every school, given the competing demands on teachers' time. The sustainability of the CoP in the school may be impacted by time. However, the CoP continued into the next academic year after this research was conducted. Another CoP has also started to include middle leaders in the school. Collaboration with a neighbouring school also is on the horizon.

Sustainability involves implementing change over time, and King posits that 'implementation and sustainability of change in schools remains somewhat elusive' (King, 2016, p.574). This research gives an insight into ways of sustaining change in schools through learning in a CoP. Allowing time for the CoP, enjoying the atmosphere of the CoP, and sharing stories, and PL, to name a few. Critical reflection is a key principle of PL (De Paor, 2016). Some countries are now calling it 'career-long professional learning' (Kennedy, 2014). However, implementing continued innovation is a big problem (Sahlberg, 2012). This research which focused on the impact of belonging to a CoP, aims to add to the literature in this area.

Little evidence exists as to whether and how teachers implement and sustain new practices (Baker *et al.*, 2004; Priestley *et al.*, 2011) and thus narrow the knowledge–practice gap (King, 2016). However, this research suggests that teacher PL within a CoP can be sustainable over time, given the correct factors such as an internal facilitator, lunchtime meetings and an informal, friendly and no-pressure environment. This atmosphere encouraged members to return to the next session as they knew their voices were heard, their opinions were listened to, and ideas were taken on board by participants. The choice was also a significant factor with regard to sustainability; participants could choose whether to attend or not. Sharing practice, coming together as colleagues and being collaborative may enable the sustainability of the CoP. This research could be furthered by looking at sustainable changes made over a longer period of time. In conclusion, while early literature on CoPs focused on learning and exchanging information and knowledge, recent literature has moved towards CoPs being used to improve clinical practice and implement evidence-based practice (Ranmuthugala *et al.*, 2011). The data collected in this research concurs with this literature as the participants engaged in PL and methods to improve their teaching. They reflected on their learning in the RJs, which provided evidence of their learning. This section explored 'sustainability' as an impact of belonging to a CoP. This will form a cornerstone of the recommendations.

Participant led agenda

Teacher agency was largely evident in the findings of the research. This form of PL highlights Kennedy's (2014) Spectrum of the CPD model. CoPs fall into the malleable category in the continuum in Table 5 below, where although there is an increase in professional autonomy and teacher agency compared to the transmissive model, it is not at the transformative stage yet. With transformative models of PL, teachers are supported to work collaboratively in a constructivist manner to change their practices to meet the needs of their students in their contexts (Kennedy, 2005). This research highlights areas of focus that could lead CoPs into the transformative model over time. These include internal facilitators and regular and long term in- school CoPs for teachers, including teachers from a range of departments, creating time for reflection on practice and sharing ideas and problems of practice. See Table 5 below.

Table 5: Spectrum of CPD Models (Kennedy, 2016)

Purpose of model	Examples of models of CPD which may fit within this category
Transmissive	Training models Deficit models Cascade models
Malleable	Award-bearing models Standards-based models Coaching/mentoring models Community of Practice models
Transformative	Collaborative professional inquiry models

Increasing capacity for professional autonomy and teacher agency is gained as you move down the table. The fact that the CoP agenda was participant-led was valued greatly by each of the participants as it was important to participants to have their voice heard; 'my voice was heard. I gave my opinion and others reflected and contributed to it also (Case D RJ)'. Data analysis revealed consistencies across all participants that participant-led agenda was valued. Participants thought about how they could support students, discover what their needs are, and decide how they could address these. With this engagement, the participants

had the opportunity to voice their opinions. Teachers are playing an increasingly important role in the decisions about what PL is undertaken (De Paor, 2016), and this research has shown that teachers did this by leading the agenda of the CoP in their school context. Furthermore, the data from this research shows the impact that this ownership can have on teachers. This leads the discussion on teacher agency and greater leadership within schools. As teachers lead their PL within a CoP, teacher agency is developed and enhanced, which forms part of teacher leadership. This is in line with the literature. If teachers are positioned as leaders, it raises their voices in continuous reform, and it develops the knowledge, skills, and character necessary for support within and beyond their schools (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Levenson, 2014).

Furthermore, if a teacher's professional identity is dependent on an individual's knowledge of a profession and on the confidence to successfully undertake a particular professional role (Sachs, 2001), belonging to a CoP can impact this identity. The strength of one's professional identity is then linked to the strength of belongingness and attachment, which positively impacts career success (Slay & Smith, 2011). Although teachers were positive towards leading the agenda of the CoP, recent Irish research posits that some teachers often desire tangible, actionable learning outcomes when engaging in PL (Brennan and Gorman, 2023). Vahasantanen *et al.* (2008) posit that for a teacher to develop their professional identity, opportunities to continuously refine their individual professional orientations by actively negotiating and renegotiating what is important and meaningful in their work is very important. This negotiation can come about within a CoP.

However, there is a gap related to leadership development processes (Poekert *et al.*, 2016) and an absence of literature on teacher leadership and models of PL to empower teacher leadership (Nuguyen *et al.*, 2019). This research answers this call as it shows the empowerment of teachers in their learning, on their terms, in an inclusive, informal learning circle that is warm, supportive, calm and friendly. Further research is required in the area, and the subsequent conclusions and recommendations will draw from these consistent literature--supported findings.

Impact of the facilitator's role

Facilitator's role

Some researchers have offered definitions for the role of the facilitator, including supporting and guiding the collaboration process (Hsieh & Tsai, 2012), coach, a set advisor and a blended action learning facilitator (Sanyal, 2024) in the arsenal of the facilitator. However, not only does the facilitator enable new insights into complex emotions and unconscious processes through active facilitation (Vince 2004; 2008; Vince and Martin 1993) and offer advice to enable reflection, learning and action (Pedler and Abbott 2013) but they also create the learning agreement, clarity of purpose, safety, voice, resource and timekeeper (Sanyal *et al.*, 2021). Among the miscellany of roles and responsibilities of the facilitator, it is important to note that facilitators are also practitioners who take on a leadership role whereby they coordinate and support peers in their setting in developing their dialogic practices within a CoP while simultaneously engaging in and building their own through online TPD (Brugha and Hennessy, 2022). According to the data in this research, members felt that the role of facilitator was not so much to lead but to let flow, to support in directing conversations subtly and to help with ideas, if needed and to encourage contributions from participants. The data also highlighted the role of the facilitator as one that allows the group to happen organically and fluidly, to unfold in its own time, to arrange the CoP, and to keep people up to date. The facilitator kept the wheels spinning. Participants felt like they were guided through the CoP and allowed to come to their own decisions as a group regarding the topic of discussion. They liked that they were not told what they had to discuss, it wasn't too direct. It was group-driven, which was valued. This data is in line with the literature because positioning teachers as leaders elevates their voice in ongoing reform and develops the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for advocacy within and beyond their schools (Katzenmeyer and Moller, 2009; Levenson, 2014).

The facilitator's skills include not imposing vision, but listening and hearing, gently pushing and pulling (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). Teacher facilitators can lead this PL. Some members of the CoP could be educated on the 'pedagogy of facilitation' to aid teachers working within a CoP (Parker, Patton and Tannehill, 2012). Participants in the research knew it was ok not to contribute if they didn't want to at times. However, participants felt it was a balanced conversation. The facilitator allowed the group to talk and guided only when necessary. This is in line with literature that posits that positioning

teachers as leaders of job-embedded professional learning activates their individual development as leaders among their colleagues, which is a worthy outcome of PL (Alexandrou & Swaffield, 2014). An internal CoP facilitator was preferred by most members of the group rather than an external facilitator coming into the school to facilitate the CoP. There was a general consensus that with people they are more familiar with, it was more fulfilling and more rewarding because you gain more from the CoP, and they felt more of a sense of belonging and a sense of security. Schools have their own ecology. The fact that the facilitator was a practicing teacher was valued by the participants, as was the fact that I was an internal facilitator who ‘keeps that sense of well this is ourselves and keeps that community...’ (Case D interview).

Participants greatly appreciated the time to sit and talk without an agenda or an outcome. It was an interactive process. Everybody’s voice was heard. The topic was organic and allowed to happen. The fact that this space was valued and given time was considered a bonus for participants. The facilitator allowed this to happen by guiding the group but not telling the group what to discuss. As a result, the group dynamic and the discussion flowed, and the topics were allowed to unfold. The facilitator let the communication flow, asked very relevant and interesting questions and made it easy for them to have the discussions. Although it is recognised that there are big challenges around measuring and evaluating impact, including for example, trying to define what success means (Dowling et al., 2021), it is important to build mechanisms within TPL to enable both teachers and support professionals to consider together the impact on an ongoing basis, and to use the available evidence to inform planning for TPL. This research has answered this call. This section explored ‘the role of facilitator’ as an impact of belonging to a CoP and an obvious consideration for the recommendations becomes apparent.

Atmosphere

One of the aims of the Teaching Council is ‘to foster a culture of “powerful professional learning” based on teachers’ active engagement in their own learning, for their benefit and that of their students’ (Teaching Council, 2016, p. 3). Furthermore, Cosán recognises the many ways that teachers learn (Teaching Council, 2022), and it values learning processes such as engagement in professional conversations, engaging in collaborative reflection, and facilitating school-based learning events, among others. Analysis of the data in this research aligns with this and highlights the potential of teachers’ learning in these circumstances.

The research suggests consensus about the dynamics of the CoP being calm and controlled and the feeling of community felt by the participants. This feeling of community led to people feeling safe to contribute and ‘everyone is free to express their opinions’ (Case B RJ). Participants described feelings of contentment and an engaging environment. Participants got a sense of everyone being in the same boat as they shared problems, a sense of ‘it’s not just me’ (Case B interview). Participants learnt that they were not alone, and they felt supported by others in the group, they felt included within the group, and this led to feelings of enjoyment of the learning experience. The data revealed the group’s warm, open, intimate, and inclusive atmosphere. This was fulfilling for the participants. The timing of the CoP, at lunchtime, allowed it to be organic and informal. It was a relaxed, welcoming, friendly and enjoyable atmosphere, as is evidenced in the following quote; ‘there were no right or wrong answers, it was a very open discussion’ (Case H interview). Participants felt safe in the conversation and close to others. The group dynamic was enjoyable. There was a purpose to the group. Participants largely looked forward to the CoP and enjoyed being part of something by being involved in it. It was very positive, and the time flew by. Some participants noted that the circular structure of the seats allowed for discussion and inclusion of everyone. We welcomed latecomers, we enjoyed the mix of departments and the CoP brought together various people, personalities and different points of view, which was beneficial, teachers remarked.

Suppose teachers are a central resource in the education system and the system depends on the quality of teachers (Coolahan, 2017). In that case, it is important that teachers enjoy their PL and that PL occurs in a safe, warm, inclusive environment. The duration and spacings of the CoPs were considered good. The participants felt that they had enough time in the CoP, and there was sufficient time between sessions to try out the new ideas, but not too much time was given so that the members might forget what we discussed. Data analysis revealed there was plenty of time and space for self-reflection and learning how to use the strategies discussed in groups and bring them to the classroom. Most members preferred to have the sessions during school hours, rather than after school. However, one member did not mind attending after school hours. At the end of every meeting, everyone quietly reflected and wrote in their journals, with gentle background music, which was an enjoyable wind-down. Some members felt rushed at the end while reflecting, so a little more time could have been given here. The gap between theory and practice relating to collaborative PL must be explored, especially in the Irish context where individual practice

still reigns (O’Sullivan, 2001; Eivers and Clerkin, 2013). This research has responded to this call.

Summary

This discussion chapter has focused on the five impacts of belonging to a CoP that this research discovered. CoPs play a very important role in teacher PL and has many benefits to teachers. This research has highlighted five main themes regarding the impact of belonging to a CoP, each of which was considered in light of pertinent literature as follows: (1) creating a connection between non-department colleagues, (2) affirmation of teacher’s practice in the classroom, (3) a reflective space ,(4) it is a comfort blanket and, finally, (5) the impact of the role of the facilitator. This research identified significant effects regarding supporting teacher PL, enhancing a sense of belonging and empowering teacher agency and leadership. The next chapter, the conclusion, will focus on how this research can affect policy in teacher education.

Chapter Six: Conclusion Chapter

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of the research question. It first summarises the study and its approach, followed by a discussion of the main findings. The study's contribution to research, policy, professional practice, and new knowledge are outlined. I discuss the study's recommendations for future research and outline limitations of the study, towards the end of the chapter.

This research set out to answer the following questions: (1) Does belonging to a CoP impact teachers' sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience? (2) What impact does belonging to CoP have on teachers? (3) How can CoPs be sustainable within a school context? (4) What influence could this research have on broader educational policy?

Summary of the study

This thesis explored the impact of belonging to a CoP for post-primary teachers in a school in Leinster, Ireland. It focused on data collected from seven participants through RJs after attending each CoP session and on semi-structured interviews conducted after all six CoPs had been completed. This research aimed to fill the research gap relating to teacher PL, from which emerged three themes as follows:

1. CoPs as places of belonging and wellbeing
2. CoPs as places for teacher PL
3. CoPs for teacher agency

In Ireland, education policies and circulars derive from many sources (for example, the DE, NCCA, OIDE and TC, among others). Policies from these agencies include Looking At Our School (LAOS) 2022, A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2022) and 'Cosán - Framework for Teachers' Learning' (Teaching Council, 2016), to name a few. The contents of these policies guide teacher education in Ireland. Teacher PL in the past has involved teachers working in silos, and a top-down model of PL prevailed in the past to a more teacher-centred, collaborative model that is working towards a transformative model of teacher PL for the future. The Teaching Council (TC) has focussed on the

professional status of teaching (Sexton, 2007) as it is the professional standards body for the teaching profession, which regulates and promotes professional standards in teaching. It upholds and enhances standards in the profession. One of the many aims of the TC is ‘to foster a culture of “powerful professional learning” based on teachers’ active engagement in their own learning, for their benefit and that of their students’ (Teaching Council, 2016, p. 3). Supporting teachers to work collaboratively, to share their expertise and take risks together (Stoll and Fink, 1996; Sergiovanni, 2005) may lead to greater capacities for change and school improvement (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). In many countries, including Ireland, the focus of PL has traditionally been placed on the support offered to teachers, for example, Continual Professional Development (CPD), but now there needs to be more consideration made for the ‘learning experiences and activities of teachers as they put that support to work’ (Cordingly 2016, p. 53). The OECD noted that teachers in Ireland are not required to partake in professional learning, but that many choose to do so (OECD, 2020). It identified that a teacher PL system of appraisal linked to career progression could help improve satisfaction among the educational workforce (OECD, 2020). However, there is not much evidence regarding how to support teacher PL to result in change (King, 2016). Recent Irish research also calls for research on capitalising on the emotional, relational dimensions of teacher professional learning (Kennedy, 2021). This research aims to add to the literature in these areas.

The discussion chapter linked the findings with the existing literature and to explore the new perspectives that my findings bring. To recap, this research aimed to explore the impact of belonging to a CoP. The literature review related to the research topic explored teacher PL, teacher leadership, learning theories, CoPs, the role of the facilitator in CoPs and finally, belonging. There are gaps in the literature in relation to teacher PL and CoPs in the Irish context.

Analysis of the data in this research revealed that the impacts of belonging to a CoP include the following: (1) creating a connection between non-department colleagues, (2) affirming teacher’s practice in the classroom, (3) a reflective space, (4) a comfort blanket, (5) impact of the facilitator’s role.

Summary of the research approach

This research aimed to examine the impact of belonging to a CoP. To answer these questions, the researcher generated data to explain the understanding of these concepts. The methodology chapter described the approach taken for this research, along with the techniques used. The methodology chapter also provided the context for the activities involved and the explanations for using them because it is important to be clear about one's methodology and the context in which it is employed (Bryman, 2016). The methodology chapter (1) discussed the researcher's positionality and reflexivity (2) explained the conceptual framework for the research design (3) presented the research questions together with the research methodologies adopted in this study (4) justified a case study research approach underpinned by a qualitative research design is presented (5) discussed qualitative data collection methods and ethical issues relating to the study (6) and, finally, presented the methods for data analysis. There were several approaches available to me to select my methodological position. The research question determined the appropriate approach to use. My research question involved the impact of belonging to a CoP. This research question falls into the category of qualitative research because 'qualitative studies can attend to the contextual richness of (these) settings' (Yin, 2016, p. 3). I wanted to better understand the impact of belonging to a CoP in our school.

After considering all the qualitative approaches, I decided a case study was the most appropriate approach. The use of the term 'case study' can be traced back to social workers' case histories and casework, in the 1920s (Platt, 1992), and the study of cases occurs across professions, in law, political science and health science also (Swanborn, 2010). Case Study is a 'strategy in which a researcher explores in depth a programme, an event, an activity, a process or one or more individuals' (Creswell, 2003, p. 33). This approach also builds knowledge which can inform practice (Stake, 1995). Data analysis involved transcribing the interviews and the RJs. Transcription is a 'process of converting audiotape recordings into text data' (Creswell, 2008, p. 246). I transcribed the interviews myself. Although it was time-consuming, it allowed me to engage deeply with the data, and so I got a deep understanding of it. As interviews and RJs 'yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge' (Patton, 2002, p.4), I wanted to develop a sense for the data first, then code descriptions and themes about the main ideas emerged (Creswell, 2008).

Summary of the key findings in relation to the research question

The themes that emerged from phase five of data analysis were explored using the research questions. These themes are as follows:

1. CoPs as places/sites for/of belonging and wellbeing
2. CoPs as places for teacher PL
3. CoPs for teacher agency

Each of these themes, their sub-themes, and how they relate to the research question were discussed. The flowchart shows the links between a sample of the codes, the twelve categories and the three themes that emerged from the research.

Each of these themes and how they relate to the research question on the impact of belonging to a CoP were explored in this findings chapter and I linked them to the research question. Their sub-themes are outlined below:

1. CoPs for Belonging and Wellbeing
 - 1.1 Atmosphere
 - 1.2 Connection
 - 1.3 Collegiality
2. CoPs for Teacher Professional Learning
 - 2.1 Sharing ideas
 - 2.2 Reflection
 - 2.3 Affirming practice
3. CoPs for Teacher Agency
 - 3.1 Facilitation
 - 3.2 Teacher-led agenda
 - 3.3 Sustainability

Recommendations and Future Research

As anticipated, this research has given rise to several related areas worth further research. All areas merit further research, however, the researcher has identified a few such areas.

Policies from these agencies include Looking At Our School (LAOS) 2022; A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools (DE, 2022) and ‘Cosán - Framework for Teachers’ Learning’ (Teaching Council, 2016) to name a few. The contents of these policies guide teacher education in Ireland. Teacher PL in the past has involved teachers working in silos and a top-down model of PL prevailing in the past to a more teacher-centred, collaborative model that is working towards a transformative model of teacher PL for the future. The Teaching Council’s framework requires support, guidance, and monitoring to help teachers with the PL. It is timely. Following this research, more comprehensive in-school and context-specific PL could be provided for teachers. Teachers could have input on the areas they require more assistance within their school context. CoPs could form part of this. Principals also need support and guidance in this. CoPs are a comfort blanket for teachers so teacher wellbeing can be affected by participating in a CoP over time.

Time allocation for non-departmental colleagues to create connections between each other and their pedagogical approaches to improve their teaching and allow further enjoyment of the PL. Following the research, a framework could be developed to aid this collaboration. Formulation, piloting and appraisal of such a framework are areas for further research in this study. CoPs should be sustained over time and include teachers from different departments within the school. Collaboration through CoPs could also occur between schools, whereby teachers could attend CoPs and share ideas and problems of practice within similar school contexts. CoPs could also be set up between practising teachers and trainee teachers within the school. This could aid a sense of belonging and support as well as sharing ideas and problems of practice.

To allow for reflective spaces for teachers. Time should be allocated for teachers to reflect within a CoP and to discuss this reflection with like-minded colleagues. The researcher expects a gradual increase in the amount of research in this area in the future. Irish researchers lie behind international research in reflective practice for teachers, as evident in the literature review. Related to this is a need to promote space and time for CoPs, which can support teachers in coming together in a welcoming environment to share ideas. As

CoPs affirm teachers' practice in the classroom, CoPs should occur regularly in the school context and involve a range of years teaching experience, including NQTs. This could be monitored and evaluated over time.

More research is needed regarding the role of the facilitator. Teachers need to be trained in the pedagogy of facilitation. This could be done on a national level or within school contexts. Collaboration between academics and school practitioners could be beneficial in creating a successful facilitator. This represents fertile ground for future research in this area.

Given the importance of teacher PL in the school improvement process, schools should focus on measuring the impact of teacher PL on schools and their students' learning. This could be done using a framework for the evaluation of teacher PL. It could vary in the levels of evaluation from teacher beliefs to student learning to teacher skills and knowledge and the impact on the whole school community. Teacher PL should be planned, organised, and documented. There could be an Assistant Principal post in teacher PL to aid this. CoPs require informed facilitation, and so facilitators should be trained in the pedagogy of facilitation for in-school facilitation.

CoPs could be used in conjunction with action research within schools. School - University partnerships could be strengthened to enable this. CoPs can be made sustainable by engaging in partnerships between universities and schools to facilitate CoPs. This would bring a higher-order level of thinking and understanding to the CoP. As a result of these ongoing partnerships, CoPs could move from the malleable category into the transformative category of TPL. This would result in more teacher agency and teacher autonomy in their PL.

Contribution to Knowledge, Policy and Practice

The value of CoPs for teachers has been a contribution to knowledge for this research. It is clear from this research that teachers value CoPs as it has had a positive impact on their wellbeing, their sense of belonging, their connection with colleagues and the opportunity to reflect and learn. A second contribution to knowledge is that this research has shown teacher leadership as a finding. Teachers have shared knowledge, facilitated their TPL within their schools context. Thirdly, teacher agency is a contribution to knowledge from

this research. Collaboration by teachers through the CoP enabled teachers to learn, connect, feel a sense of belonging and it impacted their wellbeing.

Contributions that this study can bring to national policy include the recognition of the need for a more comprehensive 'in school context' form of TPL. CoPs could form part of this. Teachers could have input into areas that they require. Contributions to school/local policy include the development of a framework to allow for time allocations for cross departmental colleagues to create connections. To allow time for reflective spaces.

The CoP for teachers in my school has continued and will continue into the future. An AP post could be created to allow leadership and management of the CoPs. Furthermore, Le Cheile, the schools' governing body, suggests that middle leaders in schools require more reflection. This leads to the creation of a CoP between middle leaders (post holders) in schools. This has been another contribution to my practice in my school. Thirdly, the Feilte bursary could enable collaboration between schools-CoP between teachers from local schools could occur in the future, this contributing to practice. Finally, subject teachers could continue to attend CoPs in education centres, thus sharing knowledge between teachers from different schools attending the same education centre.

Limitations of the study

The sample size in this research was relatively small. I collected data from seven teachers in total, and I used one additional teacher as a pilot study. This small number may have impacted the findings. Further research could involve a larger sample size. However, this is a preliminary study.

Data was collected during one term in one academic year. This timeframe is relatively short and may have impacted the findings. Future research could involve collecting data over a longer period, whereby participants could attend many more CoPs sessions, trial more ideas in their classrooms and see differences in their teaching approaches over a longer period of time.

Concluding remarks

Motivated by the researcher's professional experiences, this research highlighted the impact of belonging to a CoP for post-primary teachers. The review of the literature showed a gap related to the topic and, indeed, a need for research to be carried out within the Irish context. All the recommendations arising from the research are based on acknowledging the importance of teacher PL and the potential to transform education in our schools and teachers' career enjoyment. It is the responsibility of policymakers to enable these changes and recommendations. Personally, and professionally, I have gained a lot from this study. I have learnt about facilitating CoPs, about learning within a CoP. I have grown in confidence in the classroom as a teacher in front of the young women I teach. I hope to pass this on to them. My colleagues and I have learnt together, within a community, and I hope to continue to learn, every day, and to have the confidence to try new things in the classroom throughout the rest of my career. I hope that this research makes a small contribution to the lifelong learning of my profession. The following excerpt gives me hope.

I suppose I remember the phrase they always used in college.... 'Teaching is a lifelong skill'. It's only really now that I'm actually realising that it is a lifelong experience. There are things that I've learnt today, last week, last year, last month, and I know I'm only at the start. I know I'm only ten years at this and I know I've so much more to learn and I'm looking forward to it! (Case H interview)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

- Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview which will greatly facilitate my research.
 - I wish to inform you that while full anonymity cannot be guaranteed, I will act professionally and do everything in my power to protect the identity of participants, e.g. by not reporting data given by the participants which might render them identifiable. Data collected will be kept confidential, subject to legal limitations, and all notes and recordings will be kept secretly under lock and key or password protected and destroyed or deleted after five years.
 - Before proceeding, may I check that you have completed the consent forms?
 - May I ensure that I have your permission to record the interview before we commence?
- Please be assured that you may ask me to cease recording at any time and withdraw from the interview.
- The interview will be no longer than 45 minutes in duration.
 - The questions will relate to the impact of belonging to a CoP.
 - You have received a schedule of the questions already which will guide our discussion.
 - I look forward to hearing your opinions on this subject. However, I do have some key areas that I hope we will cover, so I will check my prompts from time to time to make sure we address all areas.

- State date, time, place and interview with.....

A. Starting questions:

- How long have you been teaching?
- Have you experienced being part of a CoP before?
- What was your overarching experience of the CoP?

B. Main questions

Professional Learning questions, including reflective practitioner:

- Why did you choose to participate in this study?
- What did you expect to gain from participating in this study?
- Having engaged in a CoP what did you think of this type of professional learning?
- How did this form of PL compare to other forms of PL that you have engaged in?
(me as a facilitator, frequency of meetings, duration, venue, lecture style)
- Can you describe the successes/challenges of the school relating to professional learning of teachers?

Reflection questions

- How did you find reflective journaling? Was it useful? Did it impact your professional learning in any way?

Community of Practice questions:

- Has being part of the CoP impacted your professional learning?
- Has being part of the CoP impacted you in any other way? Eg your professionalism, your identity, your wellbeing, your sense of belonging?
- What are the barriers to CoP s being successful, in your opinion?

Sustainability

- Can you see yourself continuing with a CoP in the future?
- What support would you need in order to continue? Could it work internally, does it need an external leader/facilitator?
- Can you see teachers who were not part of this study engaging in a CoP? Why/why not?

Organisational, Cultural and Pedagogical levels

- Has this study impacted your learning as a teacher? If so, in what way?
- What were the challenges in engaging in this study?

Facilitator questions:

- What is the role of the facilitator in a CoP, in your opinion?
- How was the role in your experience?
- Is there anything you would change about this role?

Belonging questions:

- Has engagement in the community of practice impacted your belonging? If so, in what way?
- Has your thinking (attitudes/beliefs) about belonging changed since you engaged in this study? Why/How?
- What were the benefits and challenges to this type of collaboration ?
- Did participation in the PLC foster collaboration with colleagues?
- Were there any challenges?
- Do you think it important to feel that you belong to a CoP? Does that sense of belonging make it easier for you to fulfil your teaching duties and responsibilities?

C. Wrap-up: Is there anything you would like to add that you didn't feel you had the opportunity to say during the interview?

Expression of gratitude to the participant.

Appendix B: First CoP

Date: Autumn 2023

Location: Room 249

Time: 13:00 - 13:30

Main focus: Welcome and decide on topics for next meetings

Topic	Time	Description
Introduction to my research and general rules	5 minutes	Tea / coffee / water and cake on arrival Explain my research / explain protocols/ confidentiality agreement/ reminder about trust within the group.
Participant introductions	5 minutes	Participants introduce themselves /why are you here/what to you hope to gain from being here
Goal Setting	15 minutes	Discuss what the group would like to achieve from the CoP.
Reflection	5 minutes	Participants write their reflections from today's first session into their reflection journals. Gentle music playing the background.

Total time: 30 minutes

Needed:

- Tea, coffee, water, cakes
- Candle, stones and centre pieces
- Reflective journals x10
- Pens, colour pencils

- Data projector
- IPADs

Appendix C: Informed consent form

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form

‘The Impact of Belonging to a Community of Practice’

School: XXXX.

Principal Investigator: Sharon Cunningham

I am aware that my involvement in the research will involve two Community of Practice workshops of 1 hour duration and four lunchtime meetings. The workshops will occur on Wednesday afternoons and during lunchtime. I am aware that I will then be invited to participate in an audio-recorded one to one interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. The interview schedule will be provided 48 hours in advance to ensure you have had adequate time to reflect on my experience attending the workshops. I am also aware that my participation will involve the use of a reflective journal which will be used as a source of data in this study.

The information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored for five years, until 2028. The interview recordings will be deleted immediately. I am aware that while confidentiality is guaranteed the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). My participation in the research is voluntary and as such I can withdraw at any point during the research. I am aware that if I wish to receive more information regarding the research, I can contact the researcher at 087-9941895 or by email at sharon.cunningham37@mail.dcu.ie. I am aware that if I have concerns about the research outlined above and wish to contact an independent person, I can contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

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

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) Yes/No

I understand the information provided Yes/No

I understand the information provided in relation to data protection Yes/No

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study Yes/No

I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions Yes/No

I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped Yes/No

I am aware that I am required to keep a reflective diary Yes/No

Signature:

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

Participants Signature:

Name in Block Capitals:

Witness:

Date:

Appendix D: PLS to participants

Plain Language Statement

Dear Colleague,

You are invited to take part in an important study into how a Community of Practice works within a schools' context. The research is being conducted as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education, Institute of Education, in Dublin City University and its title is:

The Impact of Belonging to a Community of Practice

Your involvement in the research will involve two Community of Practice workshops of 1 hour duration and three lunchtime meetings. The workshops will occur on Wednesday afternoons. You will then be invited to participate in an audio-recorded one to one interview of approximately 45 minutes in length. You will be provided with the interview schedule 48 hours in advance to ensure you have had adequate time to reflect on your experience attending the workshops. Your participation will also involve the use of a reflective journal. It is hoped that the process of reflection will provide opportunity for personal learning for you as well as providing rich data for the research.

The information disclosed in the research will be coded and confidentially stored for five years, until 2028. The interview recordings will be deleted immediately. It is important to note that while confidentiality is guaranteed the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). Upon publication of the research, participants and other interested parties will be invited to a presentation and discussion of the findings of the research. Your participation in the research is voluntary and as such you can withdraw at any point during the research. If you wish to receive more information regarding the research, please contact me at 087-9941895 or by email at sharon.cunningham37@mail.dcu.ie. If you have concerns about the

research outlined above and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

I hope you look favourably upon my proposal.

Kindest Regards,

Sharon Cunningham

Appendix E: PLS for BOM

Plain Language Statement

Dear Chairperson of the Board of Management,

My name is Sharon Cunningham, and I am a Science, Maths and resource Maths teacher in your school. I am also currently in my third year of study for a Professional Doctorate in Education in Dublin City University. I am in the process of completing my doctoral thesis entitled: ‘The Impact of Belonging to a Community of Practice’. My research supervisors are Dr. Elaine McDonald, School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University and Dr. Nicola Broderick, School of STEM Education, Innovation and Global Studies, Dublin City University. The principal aim of this research is to explore the impact, if any, of belonging to a community of practice on teachers’ sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience.

It is my intention to conduct two workshops of one hour duration and four lunchtime meetings between September and December 2023. Each workshop will comprise approximately ten school staff members. There should be a mix of staff from different subject areas. I will facilitate these workshops, as an observer. It is also my intention to conduct semi-structured interviews in the school after the workshops, in December/January, with six teachers, which will be audio recorded for transcription. These interviews will last approximately 45 minutes. The subject matter of these interviews will be the impact of belonging to the CoP on the teachers’ sense of wellbeing, belonging and resilience. The interviews will be recorded on two devices, an iPhone and Ipad and transcription will be aided by software. The participants will also be invited to keep a reflective journal of their experience, which will be used as data.

I am writing to request the Board’s approval to undertake this study in XXXXX School from September 2023 until January 2024. I am aware of the importance of ethical

considerations with this type of research. When selecting participants for the Community of Practice workshops and semi-structured interviews it is my intention to comply with the informed consent procedure. All participants will be made fully aware of their right to withdraw from participating at any stage of the research process. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants' data will be in accordance with the DCU guidelines. It is important to note that while every effort will be made to protect the identity of the participants, the data is subject to the same legal requirements as other research data, including those under the Freedom of Information Act (2014). The participants' responses will be anonymised and will remain unidentifiable to the Board of Management. The identity of the school will also be protected as the school's name will not feature in the research.

All transcripts and interview notes will be coded. Data will be securely stored on a password protected computer and in a private cloud storage facility until the publication of the research in September 2024. After five years (2028) all hard copy data will be shredded by me and I will electronically delete all digital files and their backup files from the private cloud storage facility. This study has been granted ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the DCU.

If you have any questions or clarifications regarding my proposed research, please do not hesitate to contact me at sharon.cunningham37@mail.dcu.ie or on 0879941895. If you have concerns about the research outlined above and wish to contact an independent person, please contact: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie.

I would like to thank you for your consideration of my request. Should permission for this research to be conducted within the school community be granted, a letter of approval will need to be issued to furnish to the Research Ethics Committee in Dublin City University.

Yours sincerely,

Sharon Cunningham

Appendix F: Rolfe et al. (2001) framework

1. What? What happened in the learning activity? What did the participants discuss?
2. So What? The participants make sense of their learning, including the professional impact of the learning on the participant and on the students.
3. Now What? What will the participants do next? What might the consequences of this be?

Appendix G: Research question and corresponding data gathering method

Research question	Data gathering method
1. What impact does belonging to a CoP have on teachers?	● Reflective journal ● Interview
2. How can CoPs be sustainable within a school context?	● Interview
3. How can CoPs be sustainable within a school context?	● Interview
4. What influence could this research have on broader educational policy?	● Reflective journal ● Interview

Appendix H: Types of Qualitative Research (adapted from Yin, 2016)

Table 6: Types of qualitative research (adapted from Yin, 2016)

Type of qualitative research	Brief description
Action Research	Participants involved in all phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting
Arts- based Research	Arts as a mode of inquiry and a methodology for performing social activism
Autoethnography	Research, writing and story that connects the autobiographical and personal to the social and cultural
Case Study	Deals directly with the individual case within its context
Critical Theory	Explores the relationship between race, gender and class with the aim of understanding society more deeply
Discourse Analysis	Concerned with the analysis of the process of communication
Ethnography	Investigates diverse people interacting in their natural environments to communicate meaning
Ethnomethodology	Focused on how people accomplish the interactions taken for granted every day
Grounded Theory	A rigorous set of steps to produce in depth theory of social phenomena
Narrative Inquiry	Interested in the life experiences told by those who live them
Oral History	Gains understanding of the past through individuals
Phenomenology	Studies the everyday life and experiences from the participants viewpoint

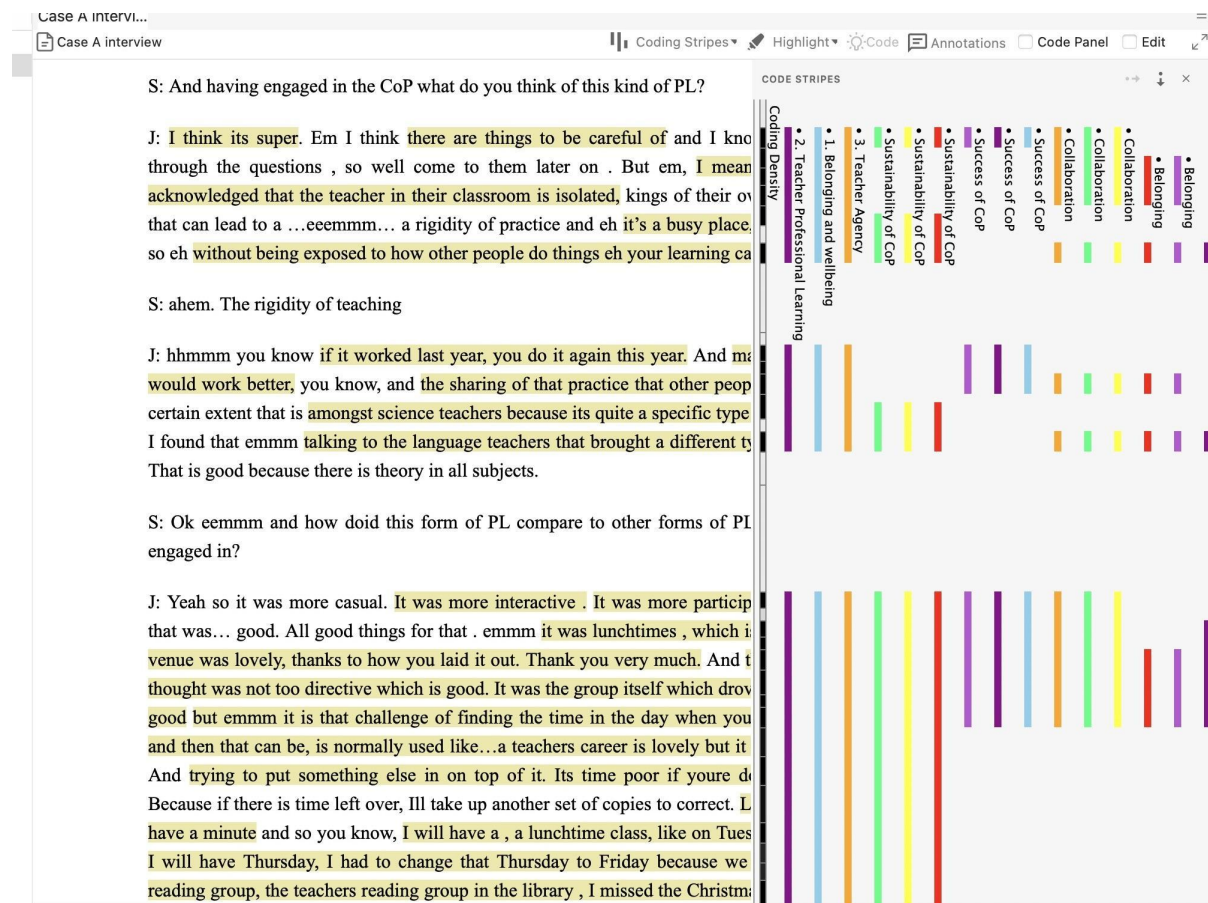
Appendix I: Table contrasting Yin, Stake and Merriam's viewpoints on case study (Adapted from Yazan, 2015)

Table 7: Contrasting Yin, Stake and Marriam's viewpoints on case study (adapted from Yazan, 2015)

Dimension of interest	Yin (2002)	Stake (1995)	Merriam (1998)
Epistemology	Positivism	Constructivism and existentialism	Constructivism
Defining 'case'	Case is “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13).	Case is “a specific, a complex, functioning thing,” more specifically “an integrated system” which “has a boundary and working parts” and purposive (in social sciences and human services) (p. 2).	Case is “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27) and it can be a person, a program, a group, a specific policy and so on.
Designing case study	Design refers to “the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately, to its conclusions” (p. 20).	Flexible design which allows researchers to make major changes even after they proceed from design to research. Researchers need a set of two or three sharpened issue questions (research questions) that will “help structure the observation, interviews, and document review” (p. 20).	Literature review is an essential phase contributing to theory development and research design. Theoretical framework emerging from literature review helps mold research questions and points of emphasis.
Analysing data	Data analysis “consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (p. 109).	Data analysis is “a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71).	Data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data... [which] involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning” (p. 178).

Appendix J: An example of coding stripes

Figure 3: An example of coding stripes



Appendix K: Timeframe for interviews

Table 8: Timeframe for interviews

Date of interview	Participant
13/12/23	A
14/12/23	B
18/12/23	C
14/12/23	D
12/12/23	E (pilot interview)
15/12/23	F
20/12/23	G
18/12/23	H

Appendix L: CoP workshop date, topic covered and attendance

Table 9: CoP workshops date, topic covered and attendance

Session no.	Date of CoP	Duration	No of participants	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	26/9/23 (lunchtime)	30mins	7	P	P	A	P	P	P	P	P
2	11/10/23 (after school)	1 hour	5	P	P	P	P	A	A	A	P
3	23/10/23 (lunchtime)	30 mins	6	P	P	P	P	A	P	P	A
4	15/11/23 (after school)	1 hour	6	P	P	P	P	A	A	P	P
5	4/12/23 (lunchtime)	30 mins	6	P	P	P	A	A	P	P	P
6	11/12/23 (lunchtime)	30 mins	5	P	P	P	A	A	A	P	P

Appendix M: Relating Maxwell's 8 strategies to the research (Maxwell, 2013)

Table 10: Relating Maxwell's 8 strategies to the research (Maxwell, 2013)

Strategy	Related to / examples from my research
1. Intensive field involvement	CoPs undertaken
2. 'Rich' data	Gained from interviews and RJs
3. Respondent validation	I solicited feedback about the data from the participants
4. Intervention	None was required for this research
5. Search for negative cases	Discrepant data (if any) was identified analysed
6. Triangulation	Interviews, RJs, fieldnotes and critical friend
7. Numbers	A small sample size was used in this case study
8. Comparison	Multisite studies were not possible for this research.

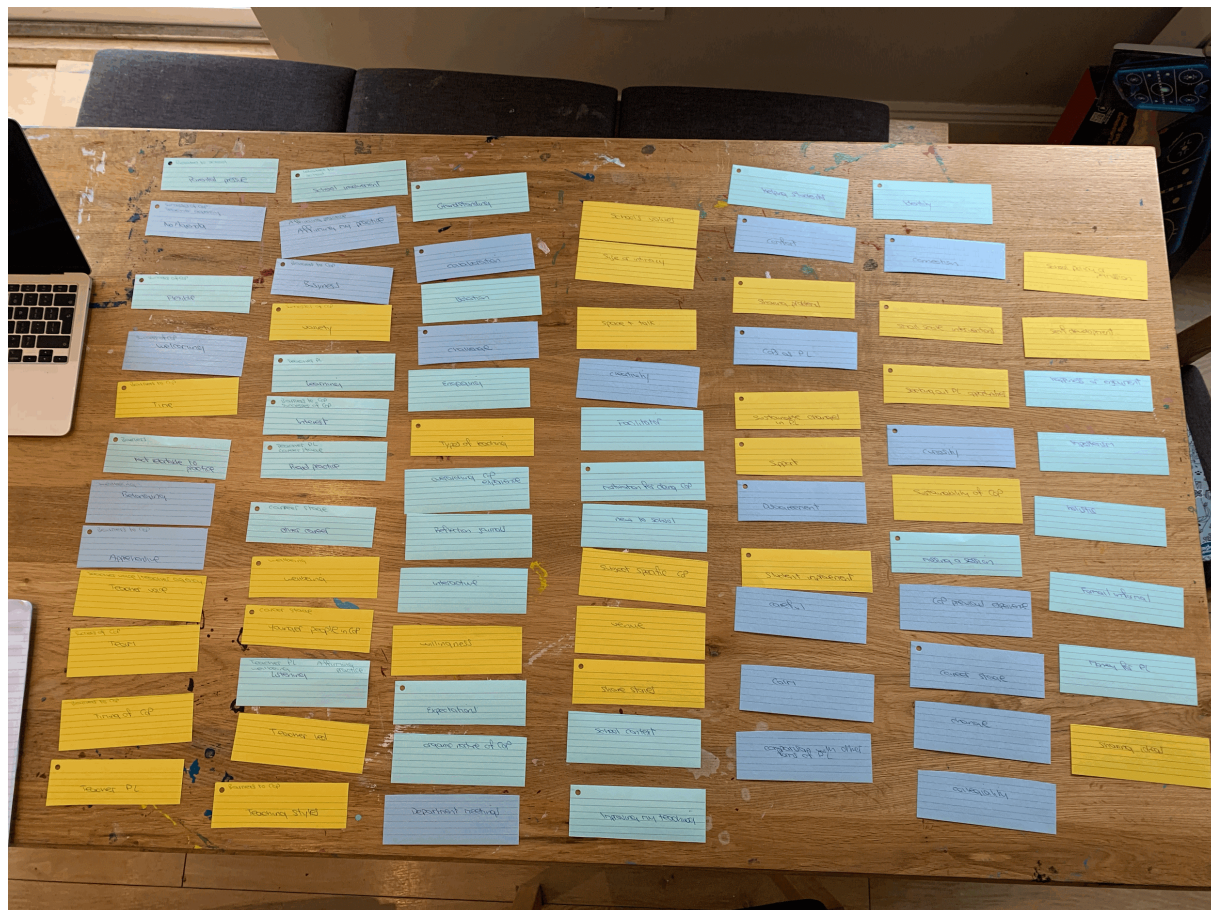
Appendix N: Changes made to interview questions due to pilot study

Table 11: Changes made to interview questions due to pilot study

Interview question	Original question	Reframed question
Section B	What were the benefits and challenges to this type of collaboration?	Question excluded

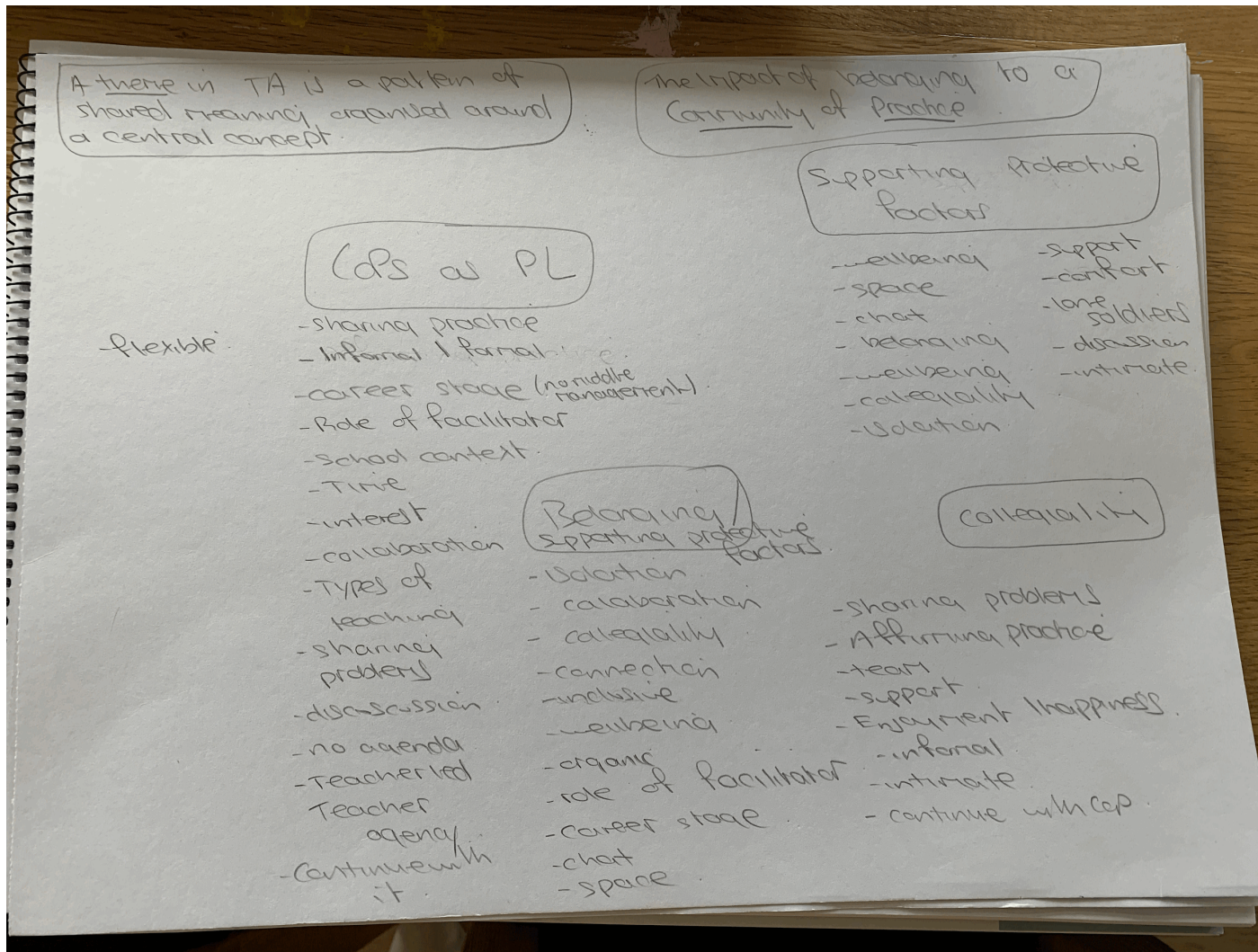
Appendix O: Codes from TA phase 2

Figure 4: Codes from TA phase 2



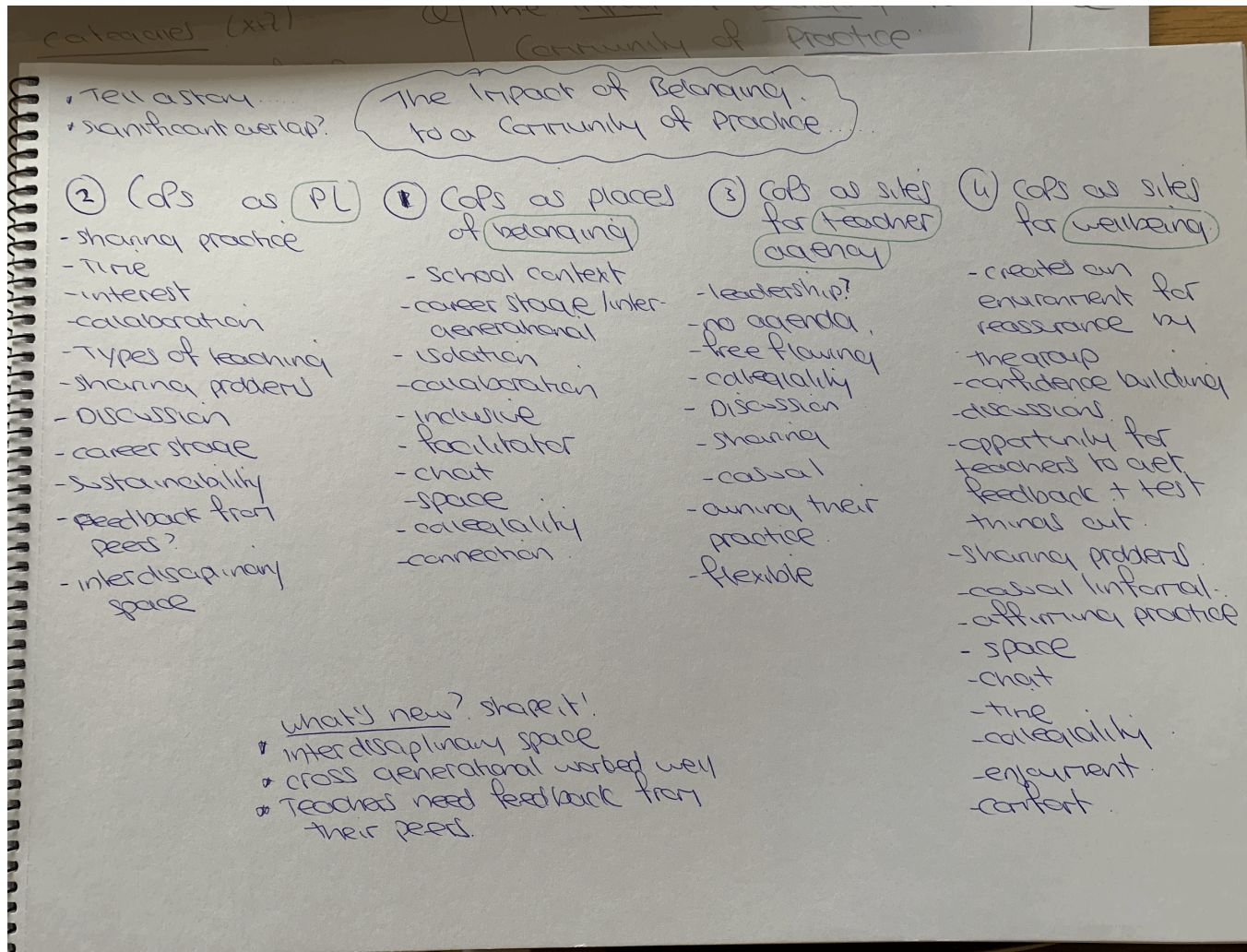
Appendix P: Picture showing the early stages of categories

Figure 5: Picture showing early stages of categories



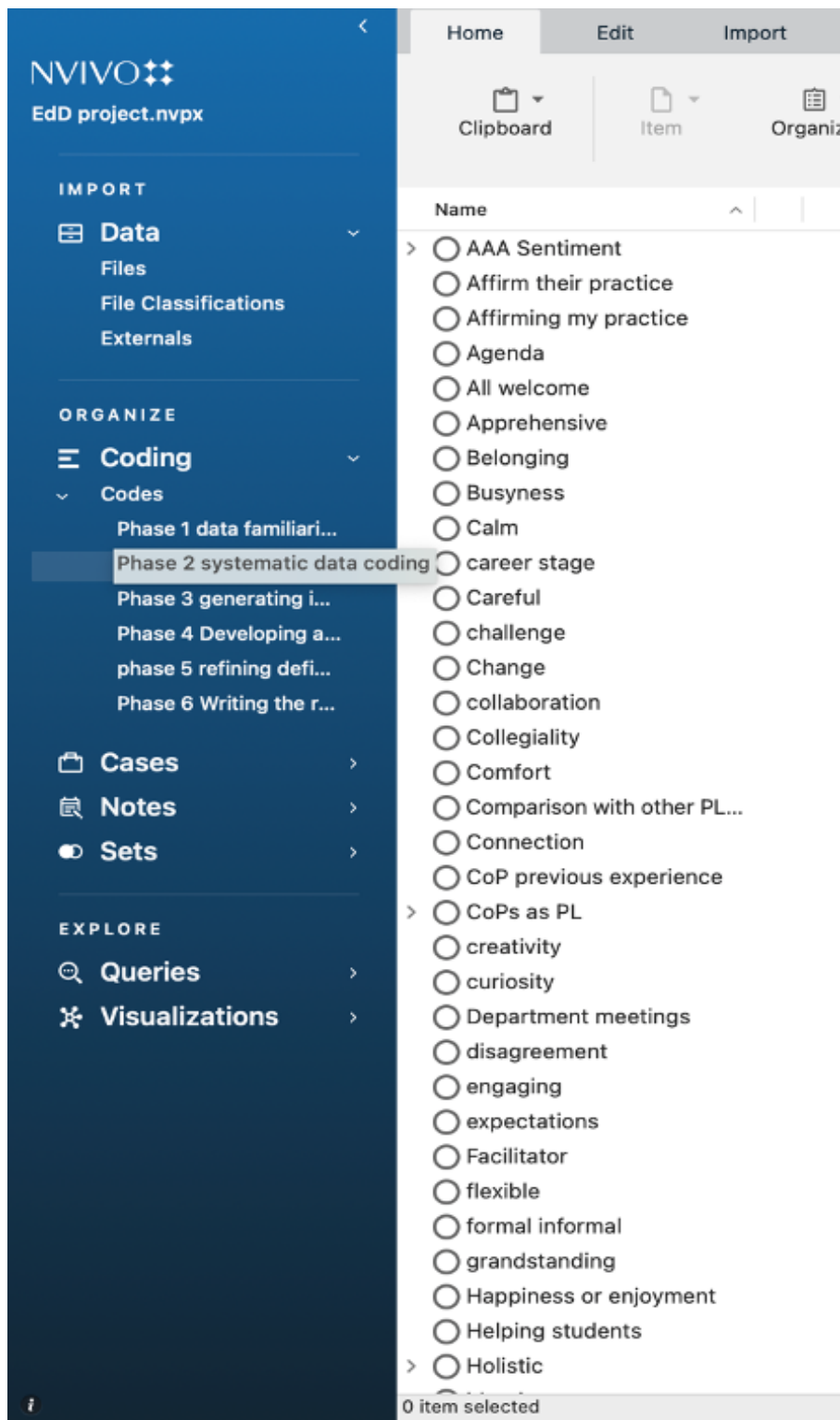
Appendix Q: Picture of early themes emerging

Figure 6: Picture of early themes emerging



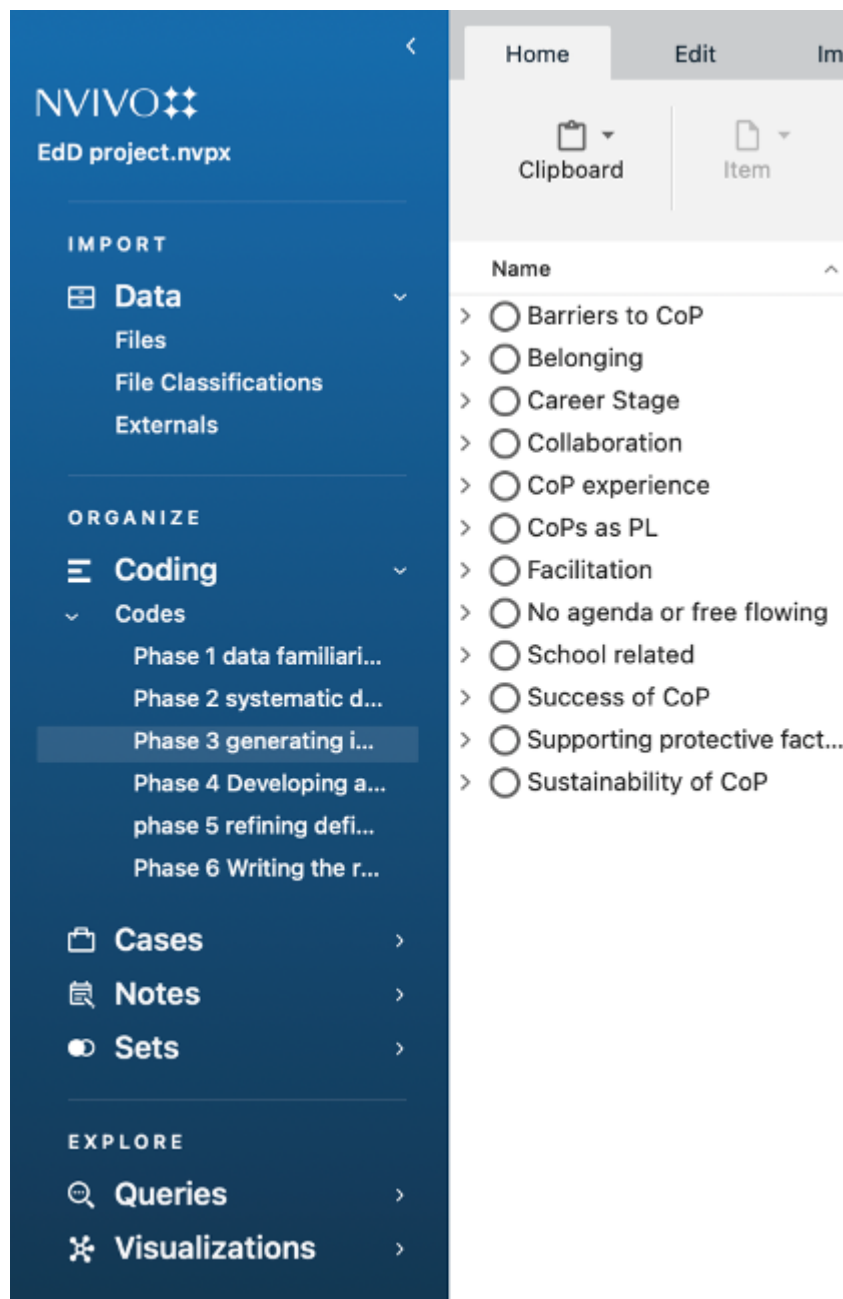
Appendix R: Nvivo screen shot of phase 2 TA, showing some of the codes from the research

Figure 7: Nvivo screenshot of TA phase 2- the codes



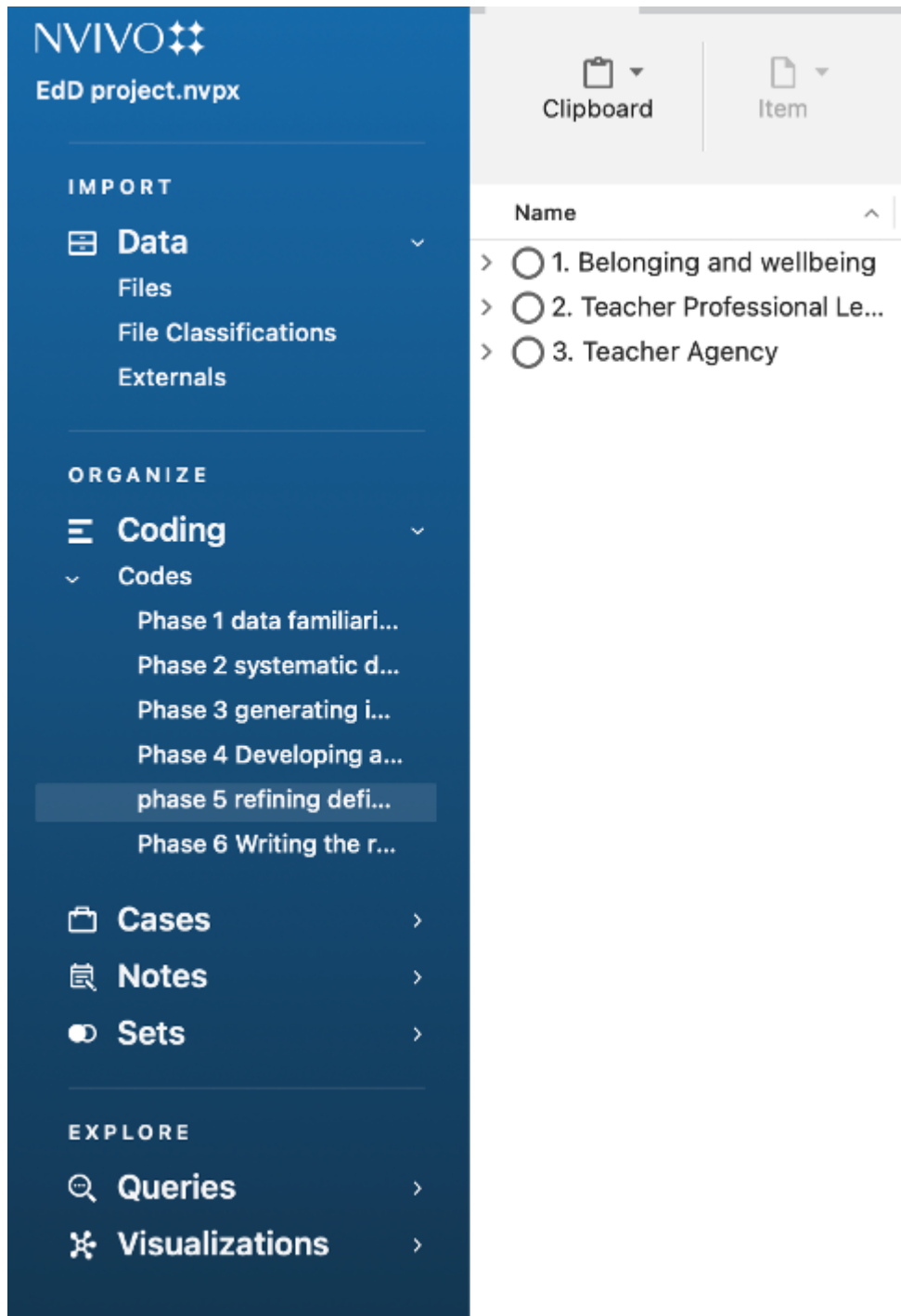
Appendix S: Nvivo screenshot of phase 3 TA, showing the categories that emerged from the codes from the research

Figure 8: Nvivo screenshot of TA phase 3 – the categories



Appendix T: Nvivo screenshot of phase 5 TA showing the themes that emerged from the findings of the research

Figure 9: Nvivo screenshot of TA phase 5 -the themes



Appendix U: Braun & Clarke (2006) Six step approach to Thematic Analysis

Table 12: Braun & Clarke (2006) Six step approach to Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description
1. Familiarise myself with the data	I transcribed the interview and inputted the data into nvivo
2. Generate codes	I coded the data within nvivo using highlighted segments and created categories
3. Construct codes to themes	I collated codes into possible themes
4. Review potential themes	I reviewed potential themes by grouping and categorising the data
5. Defining and naming themes	I built a descriptive thematic analysis table
6. Report findings	I wrote my findings chapter

Appendix V: Overview of the CoPs of the study

CoP Number	Topics Discussed
1	Introductions, areas to reduce/alleviate student stress. Written reflection at the end of the session with mindfulness music playing in the background.
2	Reflected on what worked when we tried new approaches (mindfulness minute, movement breaks, trophy for students trying hard). Written reflection at the end of the session.
3	Group agree to continue to try the suggested strategies that may reduce student stress around assessments. Written reflection at the end of the session.
4	Ideas shared about teaching pedagogies for students in class. Differentiation of activities included. Written reflection at the end of the session.
5	Discussion started about teacher wellbeing. Written reflection at the end of the session.
6	Teacher wellbeing was discussed. Final, wrap up, reflection and appreciation to participants for engaging in the CoPs. Written reflection at the end of the session.