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

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ABSTRACT

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

KEYWORDS

CPD, Inclusion, Inclusive Practices, L2lps, Policy Enactment, Professional Development, Teachers' Attitudes, Teacher Change, Whole-School Collaboration

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

CONTEXT

Level Two Learning Programmes

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

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

General Learning Disabilities

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

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