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REVIEW



## Supporting the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in a primary school

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### ABSTRACT

While inclusion has generally been accepted as orthodoxy, a knowledge – practice gap remains which indicates a need to focus on inclusive pedagogy. This paper explores how teachers in the Republic of Ireland primary school were supported to develop inclusive pedagogy to meet the needs of learners with special educational needs (SEN). It is underpinned by a conceptual framework which combines an inclusive pedagogical approach and key principles of effective professional development (PD) arising from the literature, which informed the development of a professional learning community (PLC) for inclusive practice in a primary school. The impact of the PD on teachers' professional practice was explored using an evidence-based evaluation framework. Analysis of interview and observation data evidenced that engagement with inclusive pedagogy in a PLC, underpinned by critical dialogue and public sharing of work, positively impacted teacher attitudes, beliefs, efficacy and inclusive practice. This research offers a model of support for enacting inclusive pedagogy.

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### KEYWORDS

Inclusive pedagogy;  
inclusion; teacher education;  
teacher professional learning;  
professional development;  
professional learning  
communities

## Introduction

This study explores how teachers in a primary school, in the Republic of Ireland, were supported to enact inclusive pedagogy. While it is acknowledged that the concept of inclusive education has moved beyond solely concerning persons with special educational needs (SEN) to extend to all persons at risk of marginalisation or exclusion in society, the inclusion of learners with SEN is the focus of this paper. Legislation advocating inclusion in schools is now common across the developed world, however the implementation of such continues to be met with myriad barriers. In the Irish context, the diversity of learners has dramatically increased in mainstream classrooms as a result of rapid policy and legislative reform over the past two decades (McConkey et al. 2016). The Education Act and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland 1998; 2004) marked pivotal points in the progression of inclusive education, providing the legislative framework for policy development (Griffin and Shevlin 2011). However, full implementation of the EPSEN act has not yet been realised due to economic factors, which has negatively impacted policy development to support inclusion at school

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level (Rose et al. 2015). In addition to the challenge of varying school policies on inclusion, many teachers feel they lack the knowledge, skills, and understanding to create inclusive learning environments for learners with SEN (Rose et al. 2015; Travers et al. 2010). This lacuna can largely be attributed to the paucity of opportunities to develop teacher professional learning for inclusive practice across the continuum of teacher education (O'Gorman and & Drudy 2010).

A further challenge to inclusion has emerged from the explicit policy focus (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2011; 2017) on raising literacy and numeracy scores in international rankings. This policy focus excludes learners with SEN from norm-referenced standardised testing in literacy and numeracy and offers no direction regarding the development of inclusive assessment methods (King 2016). The prioritisation of achievement in supranational indicators mirrors global reform movements that arguably marginalise learners with SEN even further (McLaughlin and Dyson 2014). The preoccupation with standardised assessments, league tables, and competition, reinforces school structures which are underpinned by 'bell-curve thinking' and notions of fixed ability (Florian 2014). This system contributes to the legitimisation of ability grouping and the provision of additional support, which serves to reinforce marginalisation of learners with learning difficulties (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018; Spratt and Florian 2015). Teachers in the Irish context have shown to accept the principle of inclusion in a general sense, however hesitancy regarding the practical implementation of inclusion is palpable (Shevlin, Winter, and Flynn 2013). More than ever, teachers and schools need to be supported to challenge hegemonic assumptions regarding ability, and to develop a sense of responsibility for including all learners (Ainscow 2014). The focus of this paper is therefore to address the research gap relating to how teachers can be supported to enact inclusive pedagogy to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom in a way that avoids stigmatisation. Whether inclusive pedagogy is specialist or not warrants exploration in this regard.

### Specialist or inclusive pedagogy?

The concept of what is special about special education is widely debated. Norwich and Lewis (2007) acknowledge the complexity of this debate but contend that there is insufficient evidence to support specialist pedagogy for categories of SEN. However, they note that specialist knowledge relating to certain SEN groupings is valuable to inform pedagogical decisions. Others regard the separation of knowledge and pedagogy as potentially detrimental and assert that scientific knowledge about particular types of SEN is important in meeting the needs of all learners (Mintz and Wyse 2015). They argue for a concept of special pedagogy which refers to specialist knowledge of diagnostic categories and knowledge of the learner's individual needs. In contrast, Norwich and Lewis proffer that in supporting learners with SEN, teachers draw on continua of strategies which reflect the adaptations of common teaching methodologies. Teaching at various points on the continua may look different but not qualitatively different to warrant specialist pedagogies. For example, some learners may need high levels of mastery learning or more bottom-up phonological approaches to reading but these approaches are not pedagogically disparate from teaching that encompasses less of these approaches (Norwich and Lewis 2007). This stance is supported by other researchers in the field who believe that all children can

learn from the same pedagogical approaches, although adaptation and differentiation are key to meeting the diverse needs of all (Davis and Florian 2004; Rix and Sheehy 2014; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, and Hickman 2003). Teachers often adapt strategies when working with different groups of children but once a learner is identified or diagnosed as having an SEN, they can feel inadequately prepared to meet the needs of such learners (Florian 2014). Individualised interventions, based on a response to a particular impairment or specific difficulty, can compound the problem of difference by marking the learner as different. Conversely, inclusive pedagogy involves the use of specialist knowledge to inform teaching, approaches to group work, and to attend to individual differences during whole-class teaching in ways that avoid stigmatisation (Florian 2014).

### *The inclusive pedagogical in action approach framework*

The development of inclusive pedagogy emanated from a study of the craft knowledge of teachers who effectively supported the learning of all children in their classrooms, which included diverse learners, while avoiding stigmatisation of difference (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011). It was further developed through a project which embedded inclusive pedagogy in a postgraduate initial teacher education (ITE) programme in Scotland. In this context, the Inclusive Pedagogical Approach in Action (IPAA) framework emerged as a support mechanism for teachers to develop responses to individual differences in ways that do not marginalise any learner (Spratt & Florian, 2015). It is suggested as a tool for researchers in the field of inclusive education and for use in teacher education and PD contexts to support students and teachers in examining their own inclusive pedagogy (Florian 2014; Florian and Spratt 2013). Heretofore, published research on how teachers enact inclusive pedagogy and the way in which the IPAA can support this enactment, has been predominantly focused on teachers who have engaged in a postgraduate ITE programme in Scotland (Florian and Spratt 2013; Spratt and Florian 2015). This study expands the research on how the IPAA can support practising teachers, in collaboration with an external facilitator, to enact inclusive pedagogy in the classroom.

The IPAA framework identifies three key assumptions that teachers must hold in order to enact inclusive pedagogy while also acknowledging the challenges of meeting the needs of all learners. Firstly, teachers must believe in the concept of transformability which refers to the belief that a child's capacity to learn is not static nor pre-determined but can be transformed by the actions undertaken by the teacher in developing teaching and learning (Hart & Drummond, 2014). However, the dominance of 'bell-curve' thinking presents a challenge to rejecting deterministic beliefs about ability (Florian 2014). The second assumption of the IPAA refers to fostering teachers' beliefs in their ability to teach students with SEN. Research studies have highlighted the need to address teacher efficacy for inclusive education as it can negatively impact teacher behaviour towards, and acceptance of, students with SEN (Dupoux, Wolman, and Estrada 2005; Forlin, Sharma, and Loreman 2014). Associated with the second assumption is the view that difficulties in learning are not within the learner but are problems for the teacher to solve. In this context, teachers must be prepared to commit to supporting the learning of all (Florian 2014). The third assumption relates to teachers being willing to work with others which aligns with the literature that deems teacher collaboration as central to implementing inclusive education

(Ainscow 2014; Friend et al. 2010; Nevin, Thousand, and Villa 2009). Yet meaningful professional collaboration requires systemic and school support which can often prove limited (Kershner 2014; Travers et al. 2010).

Research on the classroom practices of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who had engaged with the IPAA in a postgraduate ITE context indicated that the NQTs demonstrated responses learning difficulties in ways which considered every learner, rather than responses targeted at individuals (Spratt and Florian 2015). A variety of approaches were evident in these classrooms which included collaborative group work, formative assessment, and choice. Such teaching approaches have been identified as effective teaching strategies both for inclusion and in general and are necessary to respond to individual needs within the whole class context (Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Richmond 2009). However, the challenge of inclusive pedagogy is to implement teaching approaches in a way that avoids the exclusion of any learner, as was demonstrated by the NQTs who had engaged with the IPAA (Spratt and Florian 2015).

There has been some criticism of inclusive pedagogy arising from a study of teachers' practices for including learners with Autism in mainstream classrooms (Lindsay et al. 2014). This qualitative research study examined the strategies used by 13 mainstream class teachers in meeting the needs of learners with Autism in their classes. While teachers adhered to inclusive pedagogy, they also reported that they had to use specific strategies to manage behaviour that could be considered exclusionary, as they targeted individual students. The study concludes that while the IPAA is a valuable framework to support the implementation of inclusive pedagogy, it could benefit from some amendments to reflect the complexity of including learners with significant behavioural needs or the complex needs of some learners with Autism (Lindsay et al. 2014). Similarly, research on special education teachers (SETs) who had recently completed a Postgraduate Diploma in SEN in the Republic of Ireland highlighted the challenge of meeting individual targets for learners with SEN, as outlined in individual education plans, in mainstream classrooms (King, Ní Bhroin, and Prunty 2018). Based on the findings, it is recommended that PD should support teacher collaboration for whole school approaches to incorporating individual learning targets into planning and teaching (King et al., 2018).

Arguably the IPAA does not consider the levels of complexities of difference that may occur between learners, which may present varying levels of challenge to addressing individual learner differences in whole class contexts. However, it can support teachers to draw on a range of effective methodologies to meet the needs of all learners. In particular, it focuses on democratic teaching practices, such as differentiation through choice, which advocates providing learners with choice over how they engage in and display their learning (Florian 2014). Furthermore, the three key assumptions outlined in the IPAA are fundamental to positive dispositions towards including all learners in classrooms where individuals are valued. Yet these are complex concepts for teachers to consider, in particular when they have not met these concepts in their ITE programmes. Therefore, teachers need to be effectively supported in developing their understanding of inclusive pedagogy in order to challenge hegemonic assumptions about difference and to develop inclusive practice. In this study, such support was conceptualised in terms of evidenced-based approaches to transforming teacher learning for inclusive pedagogy.

### *Supporting teacher professional learning for inclusive pedagogy*

There is some disagreement regarding which is impacted by change first: beliefs, practices or student learning. Guskey (2002a) maintains that changes can occur in teachers' beliefs and attitudes after they see evidence of improved student outcomes while others dismiss that change occurs in a linear progression and highlight the reciprocal relationship between changes in beliefs, practices and student learning (King 2014; Opfer and Pedder 2011; Rouse 2008). Opfer and Pedder (2011) maintain that change can occur at any point. It is reciprocal, with a change in one element depending on change in another. However, for teacher learning to transpire, there must be a change in all three areas; beliefs, practices and student learning. Similarly, Rouse (2008) describes the reciprocal triangular relationship between knowing, believing and doing. If teachers have positive beliefs about inclusion and support to implement new approaches, then they are likely to develop new knowledge about inclusive practice. Alternatively, a teacher who believes in inclusion but does not feel capable of implementing inclusive practice could undertake PD to develop his or her knowledge for inclusive practices, which may enhance teacher efficacy for inclusive practice. Teachers will differ in levels of knowledge, beliefs, and practices relating to inclusive practice but all three do not have to be in place to ensure teacher change, development of two elements is likely to influence development of the third (Rouse 2008). The challenge for teacher education is to support teachers' understanding of the complexity of change and implementation of change (King 2014) and to employ effective pedagogies for teacher learning that develop the knowledge, beliefs and practices to support inclusive pedagogy (Florian 2008).

A meta-review of 24 physical education PD studies published between 2005 and 2015 verified three distinct pedagogies of effective teacher learning; critical dialogue, public sharing of work, and engagement in communities of learners (Parker, Patton, and O'Sullivan 2016). These pedagogies are delineated according to Shulman's (2005) signature pedagogy dimensions: surface, deep, and implicit structures. At the surface structure of critical dialogue there is a focus on reflection and inquiry through deep conversations that challenge teaching and evidence of student learning (Parker, Patton, and O'Sullivan 2016). At the deep structure of this pedagogy teachers construct meaning through collaborative discourse relating to teaching and learning. The implicit structure of critical dialogue aligns with the discursive practice approach which has shown to be an effective method for challenging and transforming deterministic beliefs about difference (Peters and Reid 2009). It is a form of resistance, exercised by disability scholars, that targets hegemonic theories of disability and impairment in order to reframe attitudes and beliefs to lead to transformative practice. Public sharing of work relates to teachers sharing practices, beliefs, values and artefacts of work at the surface level (Parker, Patton, and O'Sullivan 2016). The deep structure involves teachers creating and sharing elements of their practice that can be used by others in the classroom. While it can be daunting for teachers to share their classroom practices and evidence of student learning, at an implicit level it can lead to affirmation of their work and consequently improved self-confidence (Parker, Patton, and Sinclair 2016) which suggests the potential for improved efficacy. The pedagogy of communities of learners aligns with the professional learning community (PLC) model of teacher learning, in that it promotes collective

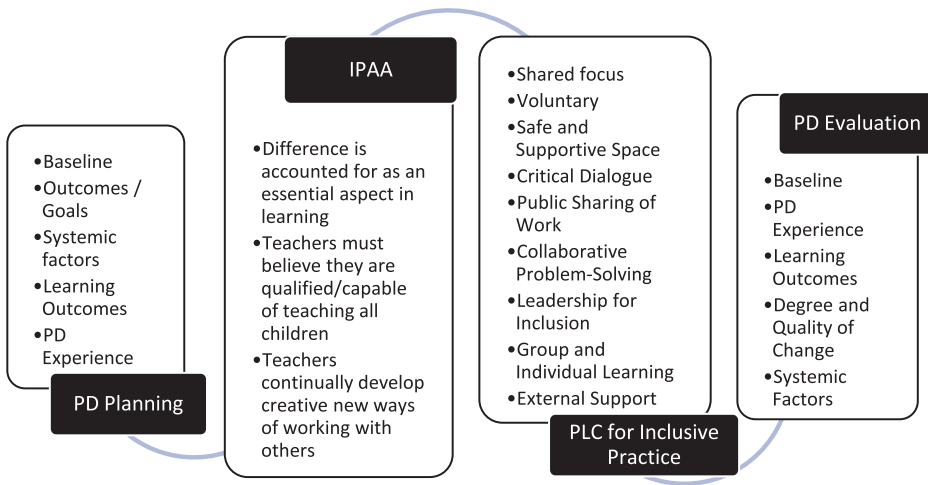
knowledge building around a shared concern at the surface level. The deep structure provides the supportive conditions for such while the implicit structure provides a safe space for teachers to explore and challenge practices that are routine (Parker, Patton, and O'Sullivan 2016). The PLC model is a form of collaborative inquiry that can manifest the pedagogies of critical dialogue, public sharing of work and working in a community of learners and has been shown to hold promise for transformative teacher learning (Kennedy 2014; Stoll et al. 2006). However, this model of professional learning remains under-utilised for developing inclusive practice (Pugach and Blanton 2014).

## Research approach

This research study explored how a PLC, underpinned by the IPAA, can support teachers in a primary school in the Republic of Ireland, to meet the needs of learners with SEN. The research approach was a qualitative, single-site case study that incorporated multiple methods of data collection. Ten participants were recruited through purposive sampling comprising eight mainstream class teachers, the deputy principal and the school principal, both of whom were in administrative positions. Of the eight mainstream teachers, two were NQTs, while the other six teachers ranged in teaching experience from 2 to 11 years. Prior to undertaking the study, ethical approval was obtained from Dublin City University Ethics Committee.

Monthly PLC meetings were held between January and June 2016 with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. At the outset, participants were introduced to the IPAA framework. As characteristic of effective PLCs, the participants chose a shared focus – differentiation through choice – which is a key facet of inclusive pedagogy. Each month there was engagement in public sharing of work and critical dialogue on teachers' practice and student learning in the classroom, followed by agreement on actions for the following month. In addition, the participants completed a reflective learning log at the end of each session in order to critically reflect on any new learning and to guide the researcher for the following session. Researcher observations from the PLC meetings were recorded in a researcher reflexive journal. Four participants consented to engage in observation of practice on two occasions during the study, in order to explore inclusive pedagogical approaches in action. This involved researcher observation of two lessons in the four participants' classrooms. An observation schedule was devised based on the IPAA and 'Levels of Use of New Practice' from the PD Evaluation Framework (King 2014). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with all participants at the end of the study.

The use of the IPAA framework to support teacher learning was planned and evaluated using the evidence-based PD Evaluation Framework as PD is more likely to be effective when it is planned and evaluated (King 2014; 2016). The paucity of research on the evaluation of teacher PD prompted the development of the PD Evaluation Framework (King 2014). Building on previous research (Bubb and Earley 2010; Guskey 2002b; Hall and Hord 1987) it offers a refined evaluation tool to capture the complexities teacher professional learning. It was validated in a study which evaluated the long-term impact of a PD initiative on teachers' professional learning in five primary schools in the Irish context (King 2014). The framework includes key criteria to consider when planning



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework.

	Level of Use	Behaviours
<b>Users</b>	<i>Discontinued</i>	I did try a particular practice but have since discontinued it.
	<i>Critical</i>	I am using the practice in collaboration with other teachers and we have made some changes to it to meet the need of our pupils on our context. We are also using the underlying principles and procedures in other teaching areas.
	<i>Accepted</i>	I have established a way to use the practice and it works for me in my classroom. I understand the underlying principles and I will continue to use it regardless of continued support from others.
	<i>Technical</i>	I am using the new practice and am following the guidelines as suggested for its use
<b>Nonusers</b>	<i>Preparation</i>	I have decided to use the practice and exploring possibilities and planning for using it.
	<i>Orientation</i>	I am looking at the practice and exploring the possibilities for its use. I have not committed to using it.
	<i>Nonuse</i>	I have not begun to explore the use of the new practice to date.

**Figure 2.** Levels of use of new practice (King, 2014).

and evaluating professional learning (Figure 1). The ‘Levels of Use of New Practice’ (Figure 2) is included in the framework to support the evaluation of changes in teachers’ practice and was used in the analysis of the research findings in this study.



A six-step approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was adopted. Phase one of the coding process involved familiarisation with the data set. At the beginning of this process, the interviews were transcribed and collated with the data which had been transcribed throughout the research; observation schedules, field notes from the PLCs in the researcher reflexive journal and participant reflective logs from each PLC. Transcribed data were re-read and initial ideas were noted by the researcher. These data were imported into NVivo 11.4 along with the literature. Phase two involved the identification of interesting features or initial codes from across the data set. These codes were then collated into relevant themes in Phase three. Following this the themes were reviewed in relation to their relevance to the coded extracts which resulted in seven themes. The final round of coding involved refinement which resulted in the generation of definitions and names for each theme. The final themes from Phase five of the data analysis include; changes in teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards inclusive practice, changes in teachers' efficacy for inclusive practice, changes in teachers' practice, factors that supported teacher change, and factors that hindered teacher change.

## Findings

Analysis of observation and interview data evidenced that the IPAA framework was effective in supporting seven of the class teacher participants to enact an inclusive pedagogical approach at a critical level and one participant at a technical level (Figure 2). Teacher professional learning relating to the three assumptions outlined in the IPAA (Figure 1) was discernible in the research findings.

### *Challenging deterministic beliefs about ability*

Analysis of interviews and research field notes from the PLC meetings demonstrated that there was a shift in thinking relating to learner ability among the participants which aligns with the first assumption of the IPAA. In the second PLC meeting, there was a critical discussion about ability labelling. Emily, who was teaching a third class (8–9 years), reflected on how differentiation through choice had impacted her thinking about ability labelling. She reported that she became more aware of the negative impact of determining the level of each child and putting limits on what they can do, as opposed to giving them choice and allowing learners to determine their own level of engagement. Similarly, Rebecca, who was teaching a senior infant class (5–6 years), added that differentiation through choice improved her inclusive practice as she could differentiate for all without marking any one child as different. Rebecca elaborated on this point in the interview when she referred to the significant impact that teacher expectations can have on student learning:

... when you're differentiating it's your expectations deciding what they can achieve from the lesson. If you're giving them the choice you have different options as how they are going to express themselves in the lesson. It's really letting each child achieve. Because it's differentiation by choice it's including every child, every child has a chance to achieve to the best of their abilities but they're not being pigeon holed as someone who is different. (Rebecca, Interview)

Niamh, who was teaching fourth class (9-10 years), reflected that she had previously decided on learner ability in her head and how she realised that she was putting limits on learners as a result: 'sometimes you think well x's strength is this because you decide in your own head and maybe that is wrong' (Niamh, Interview). Having engaged in the IPAA in the context of the PLC and through implementing differentiation through choice in her classroom, Niamh exhibited a change in her attitudes and beliefs relating to learner achievement, reflecting the inclusive pedagogical approach assumption of believing that all learners can make progress:

I kind of just think to a certain extent that anything is possible now ... I do think if you plan the lesson correctly and use the right methods and everything that everyone can achieve something in the class. (Niamh, Interview)

It is evident that the IPAA supported a shift away from deterministic thinking about ability among the participants, a change that was influenced by positive learner outcomes. The teachers observed that when learners were offered choice, most were more motivated and engaged in their learning, and produced work of improved quality. Some of the participants ( $n = 4$ ) expressed surprise regarding what certain children could achieve when they determined their own level of engagement in their learning, mirroring research findings evincing teachers' surprise at learner engagement when opportunities for learning were made available to all children (Florian and Linklater 2010). For example, Kieran, who was teaching a senior infant class (learners aged 5-6 years), reflected:

It surprised me how productive they were when they were given that free choice and they were proud of their work ... I found their strengths by letting them pick how they wanted to do things and it showed me their strengths and it showed me how to work with them. (Kieran, Interview)

Through the provision of choice, the learners in Kieran's class whom he had previously regarded as 'the weaker kids' displayed their learning in ways which surprised him and this challenged his thinking about ability. However, a move away from deterministic beliefs about ability was not evident in the practice of one participant, who was teaching a third class (8-9 years). There was an inclination towards ability grouping for the teaching of numeracy, 'you can't teach maths to high achievers and low achievers at the same time' (Anne, Interview). This participant's beliefs about ability remained static, unlike the other participants who rejected ability grouping in their classrooms. For most participants the changes in practice led to changes in beliefs, however this participant demonstrated limited attendance at PLC meetings (3/6) and as a result implemented the new practice at a technical level. For this participant, increased engagement in collaborative professional inquiry may have resulted in changes in practice at a deeper level. Considering this finding, sustained support may be required beyond a six-month period to challenge and deconstruct deterministic beliefs about ability.

### *Teacher efficacy for inclusive practice*

The second assumption of the IPAA framework refers to teachers believing that they are capable of teaching all children. The class teacher participants ( $n = 5$ ) displayed increased efficacy for inclusive practice arising from successful outcomes in their classes which

encouraged sustainability of new practices throughout the duration of the study (King 2014; 2016). Emily discussed the impact of differentiation through choice on one particular learner whom she had concerns about:

He is a reluctant learner but definitely, by giving him the choice he really flourished and he came up with some really creative stuff and it was really just amazing. (Emily, Interview 5)

The implementation of the new practice had motivated this learner to engage in the classroom as he could choose how he wanted to display his learning, thus creating a more inclusive learning environment. While this was self-reported in the interview, Emily had previously shared her experience regarding this learner in the PLC and shared evidence of his learning with the group. Emily had used a choice board (Figure 3) with her class and mentioned how the learners were more motivated as they could choose a preferred mode of learning. The learner she discussed had composed a rap based on the class novel, while another learner composed a piece of music to accompany the rap which was performed for the class. Emily shared the learner's rap with the PLC along with other learners' work samples and this provided a stimulus for critical dialogue on learners having control over their own learning and learner agency. Through implementing differentiation by choice Emily realised that: 'it includes the kind of children you didn't even think needed including in the first place and that's the beauty of it really' (Emily, Interview). This influenced Emily's approach to differentiating her planning and teaching to meet the diverse learning needs in her classroom: 'I think it just made me look at that and how I could include more people by giving them that choice or giving everybody the same choice' (Emily, Interview 5). Offering choice to her learners provided opportunities for learners to have autonomy over their learning which Emily came to view as a positive aspect owing to improved learner motivation.

There was also evidence of improved efficacy amongst other participants. In responding to whether engagement with the IPAA had impacted on her confidence in her capability to develop inclusive practice Niamh reflected:

Definitely, especially the two children which I originally came here for at first. They're prouder of their work because to them they're choosing what's easiest or more interesting

Draw your prediction in the Crystal Ball	Draw/write your connection to the story	Use a Y Chart to create images of your favourite part of the story
Put the pictures of the story in order	Talk about the main events of the story with your friend	Create a different cover for the book
Design a character from the story using plasticine	Act out a scene from the story using puppets	Compose a piece of music to accompany the story

**Figure 3.** Choice Board Example: Responding to a Text (Brennan, 2019).

to them and they're completing that first and by the time they get to something that they think might be difficult they're on that roll and suddenly they're doing it without even being aware. (Niamh, Interview)

Niamh mentioned that the new practice – differentiation through choice – had positively impacted her class, especially for the two children that she was initially concerned about including. She had gained new knowledge about inclusive practice in terms of offering choice in her classroom and she subsequently put this knowledge into practice. This aligns with the literature that purports teacher change as a cyclical rather than linear process (Opfer and Pedder 2011; Rouse 2008). As Rouse (2008) proffers, the changes in beliefs came after two of the elements were in place, knowledge and doing. Niamh's knowledge of how to develop inclusive practice was enhanced through the PLC and she used this knowledge to implement differentiation through choice. Niamh's belief in her ability to implement inclusive practice was impacted after she witnessed improvement in the learners' achievement. Therefore, her efficacy for inclusive practice was developed in a positive way.

### *Teacher collaboration*

The development of inclusive schools depends on school leaders' commitment to inclusion and the development of a culture of respect for difference through ongoing collaboration (Ainscow and Sandill 2010). The principal and deputy principal demonstrated this commitment to supporting teacher learning for inclusive pedagogy from the outset. They showed enthusiasm for collaborative PD and dialogue which bolstered the development of teacher professional learning for inclusive pedagogy. The principal commented: 'I am very committed to the idea of teachers learning from each other. I think much of our most worthwhile learning comes from the dialogue we have with other teachers' (Principal, Interview). This kind of support from school leaders is paramount to the success of teacher professional learning, as is emphasised in the literature time and again (Day et al. 2009; Harris and Jones 2010; Stoll et al. 2006). In addition, the principal demonstrated a commitment to inclusion which is fundamental to the development of inclusive schools (Mac Ruairc 2013). The participants highly valued the support from school leadership which empowered them to take agentic approaches to their practice and to collaboration, identified as important for developing teacher professional learning (King 2014; 2016).

The teachers in the study successfully enacted the third concept of the IPAA regarding working with others in creative ways to develop inclusive practice. The participants engaged in various forms of collaboration including collaborative problem-solving, shared planning, lesson study and observation, and the development of inclusive practice through co-teaching. Two of the class teachers were engaged in co-teaching with SETs during the study, something which was being piloted in the school. These teachers capitalised on this opportunity to support the development of inclusive pedagogy. They reported that this collaboration proved very effective in implementing new inclusive practices in the classroom and had some impact on the dissemination of new practice, as noted by Niall:

I think through the team teaching it spread because I know two of the learning support staff were in Niamh's class and they were also coming down to my class and they could see we were trying similar things and they might say 'oh Niamh tried it this way and it might work better that way' so it is kind of filtering through. (Niall, Interview)

However, a limitation of this study is that no SETs elected to participate in the PLC which restricted the extent of such collaboration. The IPAA suggests that teachers should collaborate with other adults in the school, in addition to other professionals outside the classroom in developing inclusive practice. However, participants reported that there was limited scope for working with other professionals such as psychologists and speech therapists, which presented as a challenge to meeting the needs of learners with SEN. While teachers are not expected to provide therapeutic support to learners, there was an expectation from some external professionals that teachers would incorporate some suggested activities into their teaching. However, there was no space for teachers to collaborate with external professionals, who could provide guidance in meeting the specific needs of learners with SEN in the classroom. This echoes findings on barriers to inclusion in Irish schools (Shevlin, Kenny, and Loxley 2008; Travers et al. 2010). Professional collaborative inquiry could include professionals external to the school setting which may enhance teachers' professional learning in meeting the individual needs of their learners in the context of the classroom.

## Challenges

Research on inclusive pedagogy has documented practices which are informative and valuable in understanding how teachers can enact inclusive pedagogy in their classrooms (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011; Florian and Spratt 2013; Spratt and Florian 2015). However, there is a lack of research into how teachers can enact pedagogy that marks no one as different in situations where learners experience significant challenges. While participants in this study were successful in creating environments that provided learning opportunities for all learners without marking any individual as different most of the time, six participants reported that differentiation through choice did not work for all learners. There were some situations where the participants struggled to avoid approaches which marked some learners with SEN as different, despite engaging in critical dialogue and sharing of practice. For example, Kieran expressed disappointment regarding one child who had difficulty with choice:

perhaps part of that was a failing on my part for not teaching him how to make a choice and stick with it but it fed into other areas of school life as well. I think it's a language disorder. (Kieran, Interview)

Despite giving this learner individual attention within lessons, Kieran struggled to facilitate this learner in engaging in choice. He suggested that more explicit and intense instruction on choice was needed for this learner, reflecting the IPAA assumption that this challenge was a teaching dilemma to solve. However, he concluded that perhaps a language disorder was the problem thus reverting to the view of the difficulty in learning as a deficit 'within' the learner (Florian 2014). In order to enact inclusive pedagogy, teachers must move away from the view of SEN labels as learner deficiencies, towards the consideration of difficulties in learning as teaching problems to be solved (Florian

2014). This finding demonstrates the pervasive influence of the deficit view of learning difficulties and indicates that sustained PD is needed to challenge this view. Furthermore, it reflects the importance of collaboration with the SET in meeting individual learning targets (King et al., 2018) which might have supported the learner to choose in this instance.

Another example of difficulty with differentiation through choice was observed during a lesson in Rebecca's classroom, where a child with Autism struggled to stay on task and demonstrated frustration. Rebecca had taken an inclusive pedagogical approach by developing a whole class lesson, which accounted for the diverse learning needs of all learners, in addition to avoiding ability grouping. She reflected on how she had to give one learner a lot of individual support in order for him to engage in the task, which meant that she could not provide support to the other learners, demonstrating a conflict with the IPAA. However, this additional support enabled the learner to engage in the lesson.

Arguably the learners in the participants' classes who needed 'something different' than their peers required pre-teaching before they were expected to engage in choice. Explicit instruction and modelled practice with the whole class in preparation for the lessons may have prevented the learners from encountering the level of difficulties that were experienced. Again, this finding demonstrates the importance of collaboration between the class teacher and the SET to focus on individual targets (King et al. 2018) in preparation for and/or in tandem with differentiation through choice. The teachers in these cases had to modify their teaching approaches to meet the needs of the learners who had difficulty with choice, demonstrating the notion of continua of teaching approaches that may be adapted to different degrees of intensity depending on learner needs (Norwich and Lewis 2007). However, considering the research findings, it could be argued that IPAA did not support the teachers to include some learners with SEN without marking them as different. This finding is consistent with research carried out by Lindsay et al. (2014) which identified elements of the inclusive pedagogical approach that proved impracticable in certain cases. Lindsay et al. (2014) suggest that inclusive pedagogy could prove difficult to enact for some learners with Autism, who may need individualised strategies to address behavioural issues, echoing arguments that learners with Autism may need different approaches (Jordan 2005). Contrary to the findings of Lindsay et al. (2014) there was evidence of the IPAA supporting teachers to effectively include learners with Autism and other learners with SEN. In relation to one learner with Autism, Niall reported that 'socially, getting to choose which group he was part of was of great benefit to him' (Niall, Interview). While Diane expressed concern regarding including a learner with a Moderate GLD (Down Syndrome) engaging in choice, she successfully supported him to make choices by using pictures that were available to all the class. This reflects an inclusive pedagogical approach of responding to learner difficulties in ways that consider all children, rather than using strategies aimed at individual learners (Spratt and Florian 2015).

It is proffered that a minor adjustment to the IPAA would be beneficial, which could acknowledge that there may be certain cases where individualised strategies may be necessary to meet learner difficulties, as arguably no one strategy or approach will work with all learners in all contexts. However, teaching strategies which highlight difference serve to compound the marginalisation of learners who already experience isolation (Florian and Spratt 2013). Therefore, it is critical that any adjustment to the IPAA would not be a *carte blanche* for teachers to use exclusionary approaches in meeting

the needs of learners with SEN, for example, deciding at the outset of a lesson that a learner with SEN will need additional support to engage in an activity or depending on overt differentiation such as differentiated expectations for learners. This demonstrates the importance of teachers developing a repertoire of pedagogies that can be drawn upon to meet different learning needs, rather than one set of pedagogies for all learners (Florian 2014; O’Gorman and & Drudy 2010). Furthermore, the third principle of the IPAA, working creatively with and through others, behoves class teachers and SETs to collaborate in ways that support the inclusion of learners with SEN without highlighting the difference. Such collaboration can support learners’ individual targets in a whole class setting (King et al., 2018).

Teaching dilemmas in inclusive practice cannot be simply solved by providing the same type of support or approaches, as differences in learners cannot be characterised as homogenous (Lawson, Boyask, and Waite 2013). In such cases, critical dialogue and public sharing of work are valuable teacher education pedagogies that can disrupt hegemonic beliefs about difference and disability. These pedagogies were critical to supporting teachers to enact inclusive pedagogy in this study. Critical dialogue and public sharing of work in the PLC diminished teacher isolation and subsequently affirmed participants’ practice and improved their self-confidence which corroborates research on the benefits of collaborative social learning (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999, 2009; Stoll et al. 2006) and research which demonstrates that this type of learning affirms teachers’ practice (Parker, Patton, and O’Sullivan 2016). The external expertise in this study facilitated these pedagogies and was also highly valued by the participants to support their engagement with the IPAA. While these pedagogies could be facilitated internally within schools, there is a danger that a collegial community will only serve to embed existing practice if it fails to challenge current teaching methods and lacks focus regarding meeting learners’ needs (Timperley 2008). Furthermore, models of collaborative professional inquiry will not transform practice if they are contrived efforts to promote external interests rather than meaningful teacher and student-driven collaboration (Kennedy 2014). Thus, external support may prove necessary in supporting teachers to engage in pedagogies such as critical dialogue and public sharing of work, which as evidenced in this research, can scaffold collaborative problem solving around teaching dilemmas.

## Conclusion

Teacher learning for inclusive practice across the teacher education continuum is paramount to the development of inclusive schools. Yet the literature has demonstrated that initial teacher education does not sufficiently prepare teachers to effectively include all learners (Forlin 2010; O’Donnell 2012) and PD opportunities in inclusive education are insufficient (Rose et al. 2015; Shevlin, Kenny, and Loxley 2008; Travers et al. 2010). It is not suggested that the IPAA is a menu of options nor that the enactment of inclusive practice occurs in a typical way, it will depend on the unique context and the individual learners in the class context (Spratt & Florian, 2013). Hence, considering that each context, as well as each learner, is unique, it is unlikely that any one framework will cover all aspects and situations of practice in developing inclusive pedagogy. However, this study has shown that the IPAA can effectively support newly qualified and experienced teachers

to enact inclusive pedagogy, with positive outcomes for teachers and learners. This was a single-site case study and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to the population. Notwithstanding, the research findings demonstrate that the IPAA can position teachers to meet the needs of all learners when they are supported with engagement in critical dialogue and public sharing of work in a PLC. Furthermore, collaboration with SETs in this context could ensure an awareness of individual needs and may support class teachers in devising inclusive choices for learners.

Teachers work within a system in which difference can be viewed as a deficit and therefore as advocated by Lawson et al. (2013), policy needs to support teachers to acknowledge, problematise, question, and rethink difference in a way that becomes embedded in practice at classroom level. As demonstrated in this study, external expertise can provide facilitation of effective pedagogies for teacher learning that challenge teacher beliefs. However, university-school partnerships could support teachers who have engaged in postgraduate studies in inclusive education to facilitate collaborative inquiry for inclusive pedagogy in their own contexts. The conceptual framework underpinning this study (Figure 1) presents a model to guide the development of such teacher professional learning. Furthermore, school leaders must encourage open dialogue within schools that explores difference and diversity and how it can be addressed in a way that is inclusive for all (Mac Ruairc 2013). In order to build an equitable society, educational endeavours must work towards eliminating deficit conceptualisations of disability. In this context, teachers need to be prepared to commit to supporting the learning of all learners without marking any one learner as different. In order to foster that commitment, teachers must be supported to develop an understanding of inclusive pedagogy for the benefit of all learners and how to enact it in the classroom. This research offers a model of how critical dialogue and public sharing of work in a PLC can support teachers to contribute to the goal of equality for all learners.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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