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Finding the Openings Amid the Closings: one school's approach to taking ownership of teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT Education is in challenging times, largely due to economic cutbacks on the one hand and growing demands on teachers to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population on the other. Given these constraints, teachers' desire and self-confidence to initiate and use their own imaginations to meet the diverse needs of their students is diminished. This article focuses on an approach that demonstrates how teachers in one school took ownership of their teaching and learning within these constraints, resulting in a more sustainable approach to teaching and learning for all students. The article draws on findings from a qualitative study in a large urban school in the Republic of Ireland in order to demonstrate how teacher agency can be fostered and developed over time. The analysis shows that teachers are ultimately concerned with what will work for their students in their classrooms, and consequently they will sustain practices that meet the needs of their students. This article argues that teachers are willing to use innovative and imaginative approaches to sustainability, and open to the idea, when empowered and facilitated to do so. Arguably affording teachers autonomy to be more innovative and creative leads to teachers taking ownership of their own teaching and learning, which can lead to more sustainable outcomes. The authors conclude that despite a global economic recession and increasing demands on teachers, there are openings within the closings where teachers can take ownership of their teaching and learning, which arguably results in more imaginative and innovative practices for sustainable futures.

Introduction and Context

Education is experiencing challenging times due to public spending cuts on the one hand, and increased demands on teachers to meet the needs of a broad range of stakeholders within the wider school community on the other. Despite economic cutbacks, governments continue to invest in teacher professional

development (PD) in a bid to enhance teacher practices to meet the increasing demands. The challenge, however, is that the link between teacher PD and changes in teacher practices to meet the needs of a diverse student population is not automatic (King, 2014). The concept of teacher PD itself is highly contested, with many viewing it as 'input' in terms of courses, in-service training and one-off workshops (O'Sullivan, 2011), and as something that is 'done' to teachers or 'provided' for teachers. Such 'training' models of PD arguably have less emphasis on teacher autonomy and are more suited to transmission of knowledge and skills to teachers (Kennedy, 2005). Given that teaching and learning is highly contextual, the relevance of such 'training' models in supporting teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students in their particular contexts has been questioned. An alternative would be to view PD as 'output' arising from engagement with professional development (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2007; Bubb & Earley, 2010; King, 2014), thus enabling or supporting teachers to change their practices to support student learning. Models of PD such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), coaching or mentoring and/or action research are arguably more process driven and therefore likely to result in teachers changing or transforming their practice for enhanced student learning (Kennedy, 2005). Such models are more teacher-led, thus increasing teachers' capacity to exercise their professional autonomy (Kennedy, 2005). With a reconceptualisation of teacher PD in terms of change or 'output' there is an emphasis on 'high-quality' PD to help bridge the gap between teacher PD and student participation, engagement and learning. This is reflected in the increasing number of causal impact studies which seek to show the link between teacher PD and student outcomes (Desimone et al, 2002; Yoon et al, 2008). However, findings from these randomised control trials are not generalisable across a diverse range of settings (Wayne et al, 2008). Arguably, teaching and learning is contextual, and understanding the complexity of teacher learning and teacher change is important in learning how to support the link between teacher engagement with PD and meeting the needs of students (Opfer & Pedder 2011; King, 2014). Given that everything works somewhere and nothing works everywhere (White, 2006), this article focuses on a transformative model of PD (Kennedy, 2005) in the context of a primary school in the Republic of Ireland to explore how teachers increased their professional autonomy to enhance their practice.

The aims of this article are fourfold: (1) to explore the current challenges facing teachers that arguably limit their professional autonomy; (2) to look at how best to support teachers' professional learning; (3) to demonstrate how a collaborative learning initiative unfolded in this study; and (4) to set out how this collaborative learning initiative impacted on teachers' professional learning. Therefore the focus of this article is on the collaborative learning initiative and its impact on teacher professional autonomy and transformation of practice within the context of the following study.

Current Challenges Facing Teachers

In many countries investment in teacher PD is intimately linked to an increasingly globalised education system in which all are encouraged to participate in a 'race to the top'. This is evident in the Irish context (Republic of Ireland), where substantial investment in teacher PD continues despite the economic recession over the past number of years.

One such strategy launched in the Republic of Ireland in July 2011 by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) was the 'National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020'. The emphasis on teacher PD to enhance literacy and numeracy for *all* students is a central precept of the strategy, with the concept of mandatory PD being introduced for all teachers, which will in time be linked to teacher registration. Within the strategy there is also a renewed emphasis on assessment and school self-evaluation for supporting the needs of all learners and enhancing the overall capacity of the school. This new focus on literacy and numeracy and assessment requires the submission of standardised test results in literacy and numeracy to the Department of Education and Skills. This is a new departure for Irish teachers, many of whom fear that this will lead to publication of league tables. With the introduction of what is arguably perceived as high-stakes testing there is also a fear that the pattern for teachers will follow what has happened in other jurisdictions, such as the USA, where teaching to the test has become an issue (Ravitch, 2011). While the outcome of this high-stakes testing remains to be seen in the Irish context, it is likely that accountability and performativity measures such as these will result only in mediocrity (Sachs, 2006), as in other jurisdictions.

The literacy and numeracy strategy was quickly followed by the introduction of new school self-evaluation guidelines (DES, 2012) which require schools to explore where they currently are, and to set targets with measurable outcomes. While the underlying principles of school self-evaluation, as outlined in the guidelines, reflect a more collaborative bottom-up approach with an emphasis on increasing teacher autonomy, the concern is that it will merely result in a paper exercise for schools and/or result in self-inspection against the in-built criteria, as arguably happened in England (MacBeath, 2006, p. 57). Emerging evidence in the Irish context substantiates these fears, with findings showing self-evaluation as a process which has failed to take hold (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012). While schools may produce reports and evidence, to date it is seen more as a product than as a process (McNamara & O'Hara, 2012). It seems to be perceived as something that is imposed on teachers rather than something they do for themselves.

Compounding this issue in the Irish context was the introduction of mandatory, non-contact extra hours for teachers, as part of the recent 'Croke Park Agreement' (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2010), the name given to public-sector negotiations that emphasise increased performance management. All of these top-down policies and strategies have added to the demands placed upon teachers, and compound problems created by troika-

driven pay cuts of typically 20%. Despite much rhetoric advocating teacher autonomy, the reality internationally is arguably more reflective of a move towards standardisation of practices, with teachers lacking time, space and self-confidence in their own ability to innovate and decide on strategies that best meet the needs of their students. The fear of failure with 'giving it a go' or risk-taking is palpable, especially if teachers' ideas don't fit within the guidelines or policies recommended from above. The difficulty therefore lies in how to respond to these challenges while maintaining a commitment to professional integrity and social justice. The answer arguably lies in viewing the teachers as change-agents enhancing their own professional learning and growth to result in improved skills and learning for all. However, teachers need to be supported in an environment where their knowledge and skills are seen as valuable contributions to overall teaching and learning in the community.

Supporting Teachers' Professional Learning

Given the central importance of teachers and teaching on student learning, it is incumbent on systems and in particular school management to invest in teacher PD and to understand and support teachers' professional learning. Teacher professional learning in this context is defined as the growth of teacher expertise leading to a change in practices that result in improved student learning (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2007). Central to this is the concept of teacher professional development, which is defined as the 'processes, activities and experiences that provide opportunities to extend teacher professional learning' (NSW Institute of Teachers, 2007, p. 3). Teachers need to engage in high-quality PD (Desimone et al, 2002) that is collaborative (Cordingley et al., 2004), planned and evaluated (King, 2014) in order to bridge the gap between teacher PD and enhanced student learning. Additionally required is a focus on 'systemic factors' (King, 2014) to support implementation and sustainability of new practices, as many new initiatives and innovations are introduced in schools, with an overwhelming amount subsequently disappearing (Cuban, 1988, Fullan, 1999, Sahlberg, 2012).

High-quality PD is defined by Desimone et al (2002) under two categories: structure of the PD and core of the PD. The structure includes aspects such as the duration of the activity, type of activity (such as network, mentoring, research, workshop, etc.) and collective participation. The core of the activity is considered under the headings of active learning (such as peer observation), coherence (alignment with teachers', school and department aims) and content (subject-matter content and how students learn that content). The aspects of collective participation and active learning reflect a move away from PD being conceptualised as something that is 'done' to teachers or 'provided' for teachers, thus acknowledging the importance of teacher agency and autonomy in engaging with PD.

However, in the Irish context teacher PD is largely synonymous with 'in-service', where teachers are 'trained' in new mandatory practices, such as school

self-evaluation, with little time or scope for collaborative PD, such as the Japanese practice of lesson study (Conway & Sloane, 2005), which is a collaborative research-oriented learning activity focused on enhancing teachers' and students' learning. It is then not surprising that individual practice is pervasive in the Irish context (O'Sullivan, 2011) despite collaborative practice being a central component of high-quality PD for enhancing teachers' professional learning.

Indeed, the evidence for engaging in high-quality PD to bridge the gap between teacher PD and student learning remains somewhat elusive at school or classroom level (Earley & Porritt, 2014; King, 2014). This is perhaps surprising given that PD that is planned at the outset and evaluated for impact has been shown to lead to better-quality PD and learning for students (Earley & Porritt, 2011). This is not to say that all PD needs to be formal and planned. Ironically in Ireland, as in many other countries, there is little evidence of impact of PD on teacher practices and student learning, beyond the 'happy sheet' approach to evaluating PD. While there are a number of evaluation frameworks and tools available, they are yet to be employed effectively by schools (Earley & Porritt, 2014), arguably again due to a lack of time and other pressures or because schools need support in this area. Figure 1 highlights the systemic factors (King, 2014) needed to support teacher engagement with PD and implementation and sustainability of new practices.

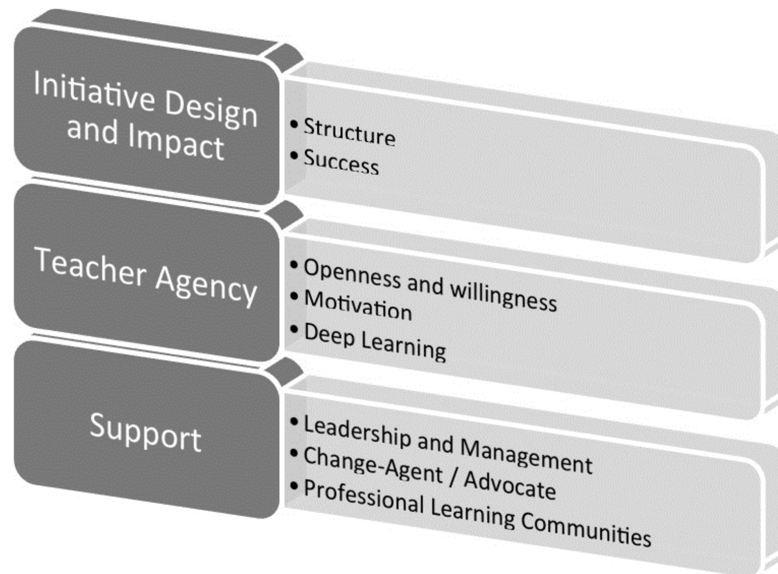

Figure 1. Systemic factors.

These factors incorporate the high-quality aspects of PD as espoused by Desimone et al (2002), while at the same time acknowledging the importance of individual teachers and teacher agency (Kervin, 2007). They also recognise that teachers need leadership support to be confident to engage with collaborative PD and to implement and sustain new practices for school improvement. This support takes the form of alignment with teacher values, creating organisational capacity for change and empowering teachers to create professional learning communities (King, 2011). Arguably teachers at grassroots level who see a need for change and want to collectively bring about that change require leadership support from a principal or head teacher, in terms of time, resources, valuing the idea, encouraging collaborative practices or encouraging teachers to become leaders or change agents themselves (King, 2011). While many schools may have in-house expertise to support change, it is also important for leadership and management to engage outside expertise as determined by the staff, if required (Guskey, 1996).

Leaders creating organisational capacity for change also involves principals taking seriously their role as instructional leaders for leading teaching and learning, which is contingent upon them having an understanding of new pedagogies and practices at conceptual and procedural levels (King, 2011). It also relates to principals trusting their teachers, valuing their opinions and not micromanaging their engagement with new pedagogies and initiatives (King, 2014). Teachers, as the key players in change, must be supported and trusted to find effective solutions to problems and to make key decisions on learning and teaching. It is the role of management in the school to provide and optimise a learning environment that nurtures this collaborative decision-making process. 'Professional collaboration breaks the cycle of exclusion, allowing staff members to utilize their expertise in a planned, coordinated way that yields quality results that individual efforts would not produce' (Crawford et al, 1993, p. 7). Another key consideration in narrowing the gap between teacher PD and implementation and sustainability of new practices is the structure and success of the practice.

Structure of the practice refers to how feasible, focused, collaborative and time bound it is, as well as whether or not it meets individual teachers' needs and level of skill at that time (King, 2014). Success considers the impact of the practice on student learning, and the more successful it is, the more likely the practice will be implemented and sustained. Not to be underestimated is how much teachers value other teachers' opinions in terms of success and feasibility of practices (Boardman et al, 2005; Hargreaves, 2010). This also potentially serves as important validation of teachers as change-agents in the process of bridging the gap between teacher PD and student learning.

However, leadership and management need to recognise the importance of individual teachers as change-agents for bridging the gap between teacher PD and student outcomes. Bottom-up change by teachers supported from the top by leadership and management (King, 2011) arguably results in more

meaningful and lasting change where teachers take ownership of the change and are more likely to mediate structures to sustain such changes. This ownership is also contingent upon teachers being afforded the time and space to become familiar with new practices at a deeper pedagogical level where they can move from using practices at a technical level to engaging with them at a more critical level (King, 2014). At a critical level teachers can see how a new pedagogy or practice aligns with other practices and how the learning can be transferred or the practice adapted to meet the diverse needs of students. When teachers deem that practices are meeting students' needs they are more likely to mediate policies and strategies to continue to meet students' needs. Democratic participation regarding engagement with teacher PD in schools, at a pace and level that supports teacher professional growth and expertise, is more likely to result in enhanced student learning.

This may be reflective of a 'new professionalism' that promotes teacher collaboration and participation in decision making, problem solving and planning PD, to support teacher autonomy and ownership in relation to school improvement (Seed, 2008; King, 2011). Teachers are the gatekeepers of change in their classrooms, and appreciating the centrality of teachers and teacher autonomy in the change process is essential for school improvement.

Context and Methodology

This article draws upon a study based in a primary school in urban midland Ireland. It has 27 teachers, with just under 450 pupils. The school had applied for support from the national Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) in Ireland. At the same time a number of advisors from the PDST, together with two local education centres, were undertaking a collaborative learning initiative (CLI) in conjunction with and under the guidance of a university consultant. The CLI involved a group of teachers and PDST advisors working collaboratively in schools across the west and north-west of Ireland. Within the CLI were a number of disparate groups, each focused on a particular aspect of teaching and learning, as decided by the group. This article draws upon the journey of one such group of teachers in a primary school in midland Ireland. The group consisted of 11 participants, including the principal. Sessions were conducted on a monthly basis and were facilitated by two PDST advisors.

The qualitative research sought to explore the impact of the collaborative learning initiative on teachers' professional autonomy and enhancement of practice. Qualitative data emerged from a short open text questionnaire pre and post initiative, a focus group at the end of the CLI, individual reflective logs and a closed-access blog used by the teachers. Not all teachers kept individual reflective logs or contributed to the blog. The framework for the initiative employed was that outlined in Figure 2, where teachers were afforded the autonomy to collaboratively identify a problem or issue within teaching and learning. They then devised a set of research questions to investigate the issue

and analysed the findings. This involved teachers using a problem-solving approach to do something about the issue and evaluate whether that worked for them in their context. The findings are reported below.

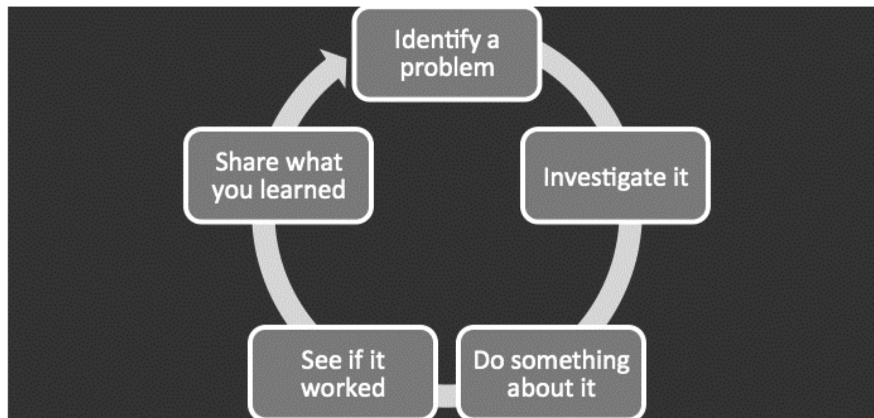

Figure 2. Improvement through collaboration (Stevenson, 2006)

Findings

This section of the article will draw on the data to explain how the collaborative learning initiative unfolded in this study and how it impacted on teachers' professional learning. Given that the focus of this article is to explore teachers' taking ownership of their own teaching and learning, it is important to understand how this happened in this context. Noteworthy here was that the initial interest in this study stemmed from the principal of the school, who subsequently explored the idea at a meeting with the school's senior and middle management teams at a meeting held outside school hours. They in turn were asked to discuss the CLI with all teachers, with the intention of finding out who, if anyone, was interested in getting involved. Teachers were told that the purpose of the project was to review teaching and learning in the school and that the teachers themselves would identify an area for attention, which would be the focus of the CLI project. 'Croke Park hours' had recently been introduced into schools and teachers were already feeling overwhelmed. However, the fact that the school would have the expertise of a university consultant and two PDST facilitators appealed to many teachers, which shows the influence of outside expertise on teachers' motivation to engage with new practices (Guskey, 1996). Embedded in the school for some years were weekly planning meetings for teachers at the same class level which aimed to promote consistency and continuity of practice within and between class levels. For this reason, the principal encouraged teachers teaching the same class level to get involved. Staff understood the principal's motive for doing this. With some nudging on the principal's part, all three senior infant teachers (teaching 5-6-

year-olds), all three third and fourth class teachers (teaching 9-10-year-olds) and four of the eight teachers on the special needs team in the school agreed to participate in the project. The principal trusted the teachers to make the right decisions for the school. There was no pressure on any teacher to participate in the CLI project, and subsequently only teachers who were open and willing to engage did so. This echoes one of the central precepts in King's (2014) systemic factors shown in Figure 1: teacher agency - openness and willingness.

Having elected to participate in the CLI, the principal sought sanction from the Board of Management to provide substitute cover for the teachers while they met for a day with the PDST advisors and the university consultant, thus showing the importance of principals creating organisational capacity for change (King, 2014). Monthly meetings lasted for two hours, where the first hour was during school time (the principal negotiated any necessary substitute cover for the teachers) and the second hour was recorded as part of the Croke Park hours.

For the second CLI meeting, the team of ten teachers led by the facilitators began at step 1 of the process, 'Identify a problem', whereby they reviewed literacy in the school. The principal opted to stay out of this review as she believed that the area identified for attention by this CLI team had to come from the group if they were to seriously engage with the process. The teachers as workers had the responsibility, autonomy, recognition and authority to make instructional decisions (Crawford et al, 1993, p. 64). While teachers were being encouraged to become the change-agents and decisions were being made in a bottom-up manner, they were also being facilitated by top-down support from leadership and management.

After some lengthy discussion, the teachers selected to work on 'discrete oral language'. It was clear at this early stage that there was little agreement in the group on the aims and objectives of 'discrete oral language', the teaching strategies used in the school to teach oral language or the time allocated in classes to teach 'discrete oral language'. The area of focus was articulated using research questions which evolved from discussion within the group.

1. How do we define 'discrete oral language'?
2. What are we currently doing in teaching discrete oral language?
3. How do we currently assess discrete oral language?

The research questions broke the problem down into manageable tasks and allowed for step 2 of the cycle, 'Investigate the problem'. To answer the research questions the teachers gathered evidence of practice from all teachers and senior pupils in the school. A simple survey was done with senior pupils to elicit their understanding and experience of 'discrete oral language' teaching and learning in the school. The school plan/policies, assessments of literacy and teachers' monthly reports were also scrutinised. The principal was keen that the evidence gathered was brought to the next whole staff meeting to share with all. The staff were divided into three groups and each group focused on one of the three research questions listed above. Members of the CLI group were

dispersed among the three groups. This again is reflective of the lead-manager principal who establishes decision-making structures that involve every staff member (Crawford et al, 1993, p. 66).

Findings from this revealed inconsistencies among staff on the definition of 'discrete oral language', with misunderstandings on the difference between the words discreet/discrete. Although elements of oral language were being addressed in class teaching, discrete oral language lessons were not the norm. While there was widespread use of teacher-led informal observation of oral language skills, structured assessment, target setting and documentation of findings were not common practice. Even though teachers felt that assessment informed their teaching in terms of planning, resources, methodologies and differentiation, evidence suggested that this was occurring on an informal basis. However, evidence of good practice in the school, where reports informed targets for developing oral language and listening skills, originated from assessments from external bodies (speech and language, occupational therapy and/or psychological assessments). These assessments informed the learning outcomes/targets set by teachers for these children, including targets for developing oral language and listening skills.

The staff identified the strengths and areas of need that currently existed in the teaching of discrete oral language. This information assisted in the development of an action plan and demonstrates how teachers solved their own job-related problems through working collaboratively in groups (Robson, 1984). They decided that a clear definition of discrete oral language was needed to ensure consistency, and that discrete oral language lessons needed to take place in all classrooms. Noteworthy is the fact that it was decided to focus on one aspect of oral language only, listening skills, as it was important to keep in mind the structure of the initiative to be undertaken to ensure it was feasible, focused and time bound, as well as meeting individual teachers' needs and level of skill (King, 2014). During this investigation step of the CLI cycle the CLI team felt that a weekly meeting among themselves was required to ensure everyone was clear on the tasks in hand and their role in the process. The principal valued teachers' opinions on this and entrusted them with making these decisions (Crawford, et al, 1993). The meetings were held after the children of the junior and senior infant classes went home at 2 p.m. The three teachers of the junior infant classes planned together on a weekly basis at this time and also agreed to teach the third/fourth classes once per week, thus facilitating the teachers of third/fourth class level to plan together. Teachers at this stage had taken ownership of the process and found ways to mediate the structures to engage with the CLI.

Having investigated the problem and devised a plan, the CLI group then embarked on step 3, 'Doing something about it'. However, they were looking forwards, to step 4 of the CLI cycle – 'Did it work?' - and therefore set about establishing a baseline of listening skills among the students. The CLI group devised a rubric for use as a pre- and post-lesson assessment tool, focused on 'listening skills'. Teachers collaborated in the planning of a number of lessons

appropriate to their class level to develop listening skills. A significant improvement was noted in the listening skills of the children where the 'listening' lessons were taught. They had now completed step 4 of the CLI cycle. The CLI process, as outlined in Figure 2, was systematically followed by the teachers, facilitated by outside expertise (Guskey, 1996) and supported by leadership (King, 2011). Another important focus of this article is on exploring the impact of the process on teachers' professional learning using an evidence-based evaluation framework (King, 2014).

Impact on Teachers' Professional Learning

For the majority of teachers, the motivation for engaging with CLI centred around aspects of professional responsibility, such as collaboration with other teachers, up-skilling, gaining new knowledge and professional development. All teachers were willing to engage and open to the idea of doing so, and their expectations from CLI largely aligned with their motivation for engagement. Interestingly, a small number of teachers talked about their personal beliefs and values around teachers working together and learning together. At the end of the CLI most teachers were interested in engaging with another cycle of CLI, with one possibly interested and another probably interested. Overall, staff reported enjoying collaborating with teachers outside their class-level group. They valued the time given to professional dialogue and requested that there would be more time in the future for this. People were open in their discussion and every voice was given equal hearing. There was flexibility throughout the process, giving them a feeling of ownership as they moulded the process as they deemed fit. Nothing was imposed. They enjoyed sharing ideas, resources and experiences. Some teachers used reflective diaries and blogs to communicate thoughts and share ideas. This was a new experience for many in the group and its value was acknowledged.

However, teachers stated that the pace at times was sometimes slow and they were not sure where it was all going.

> It's been a journey, initially into the unknown but as it draws to a close it's a journey that's taught this teacher a lot!' (Special needs teacher)

Nevertheless, sometimes at the end of a meeting teachers were disappointed as there was no end product, as the focus was on teacher dialogue and the process, not the product. This was difficult for one teacher, who noted that there was more talk than action. However, this was not the same for all teachers.

> I have come out of the last three CLI meetings feeling energised and with a 'good gut feeling' that this [CLI process] is the way to go. (Class teacher)

Overall, teachers agreed that the CLI process needs to be clearly stated at the first meeting, which ideally should take place early in the school year. One

teacher felt that it was only by going through the process once that you could understand it and that no matter how much it was explained at the beginning, it would be difficult to understand as teachers tend to want to 'do' and 'fix' and are somewhat reluctant to give themselves the time to stop, reflect and plan. However, it may help if the process or CLI cycle was revisited at regular meetings, in particular at the early stages.

In terms of learning outcomes, all teachers reported significant improvements in their knowledge and skills related to oral language on a pre- and post-test question. Evidence clearly showed that the majority of teachers were engaging with the new practice at a critical stage where they are using the particular practice in collaboration with other teachers and have made some changes to it to meet the needs of their students in their context. They are also using the underlying principles and procedures in other teaching areas (King, 2014). Interestingly, when asked to identify and rank the three most important things learned from engaging with CLI, all but one teacher talked about the process and not the product. Typical comments included working with colleagues, sharing responsibility, reflecting on practice, using data. At the end of the CLI cycle explicit teaching and assessment of listening skills were embedded in the classrooms of the teachers involved in CLI. Some of these lessons involved teachers team teaching or piloting lessons that were co-designed and subsequently co-evaluated for students' learning, a process similar to the collaborative problem-solving Japanese model of lesson study.

When teachers were asked about the factors that helped or hindered them in the process of CLI, the findings align with some of the key aspects of King's (2014) systemic factors. All teachers reported the pivotal role of leadership and management support in this process. The principal created the organisational capacity for change through provision of time, resources, trusting the teachers and not micromanaging the process (King, 2011). At the same time, the principal had conceptual and technical knowledge of the new practices around listening skills and was able to support teachers in these practices when required. Being available to support, advise, encourage and guide when necessary is important for teacher engagement and sustainability of new practices (Crawford et al, 1993). Equally important is teachers keeping the principal informed of the ongoing developments. As teachers valued the impact of the listening skills on students and wanted to continue these with their own classes, they equally wanted to diffuse the practices to other teachers and students. Again, the principal was instrumental in facilitating this into the next school year through the weekly class-level planning meetings. Another important aspect of the role of leadership here was affording the teachers the time and autonomy to focus on what mattered most to them in their context despite the external demands and pressures of policies and strategies.

Teachers also reported the support from outside expertise as being instrumental in their engagement with the CLI process and in its sustainability. While this support guided the group it was not directly involved in devising the listening skills lessons - that is, the product. It was more to do with the

planning of the process itself and facilitating that dialogue. This echoes Earley and Porritt's (2009) call for PD to be planned and evaluated for enhanced outcomes. Of particular significance here is the fact that the practices implemented in oral language have been sustained in the school, led by some of the former CLI group members. This echoes the findings of Groves and Ronnerman (2013), who posit that teachers, when supported in year one, will be able to continue in their roles as teacher leaders in their own schools.

Some important aspects noted by teachers included the size of the group, with many feeling it was too big, making consensus at times difficult. Others felt that the weekly and monthly meetings should be held outside school hours as they impacted on direct teaching time for some teachers. This shows that when teachers value a practice they are more likely to commit to it, regardless of timing.

Conclusion

This article focused on the collaborative learning initiative project and its impact on teacher professional autonomy and transformation of practice within the context of a large urban midland school in the Republic of Ireland. Given the volume of policies being promulgated and the amount of external pressures, it is not surprising that these demands can paralyse schools and teachers into concentrating on practices valued by external agencies and, in so doing, lose sight of the broader moral purpose of teaching and learning. The fundamental act of schooling is learning and the role of the Board of Management is to create the conditions under which learning can be nurtured for all – child and adult (Government of Ireland, 1998). Management should trust teachers to make the right decisions for the school, with managers playing the role of 'lead managers' not 'boss managers' (Crawford et al, 1993). A challenge for management is how to keep those who have the commitment and capacity to enrich so many children every day energised – often when external pressures militate against this. The CLI project provided a framework that facilitated teachers to have positive learning experiences, to develop and to find fulfilment in teaching and learning. It gave teachers the autonomy to make decisions, recognising that they are 'best placed' to critically examine approaches to learning and teaching in their classrooms. Dialogue on teaching and learning was encouraged (Delaney, 2010). Everyone worked together as a team that was needs-based and research-informed. Teachers were encouraged to engage with research-based literature on teaching and learning and share their learning/findings with their colleagues.

> … as teachers we are researchers every day monitoring, evaluating, assessing, using data to inform practice ... We are familiar with our school context and are best placed to know what will work and what won't. Using research from within and without the school, one informing the other should lead to better teaching and ultimately more profound learning for all in the school community. However,

we also support the guidance from outside expertise ... We don't always have the answers ... nor should we be expected to ... we need to look within and without. (Class teacher)

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