

Leading the Special Education Teacher Allocation Model: Examining the Perspectives and Experiences of School Leaders in Supporting Special and Inclusive Education in Irish Primary Schools

This article is based on a small scale research study which examined the perspectives and experiences of Irish primary school principals on the special education teacher allocation model which came into effect in Ireland in 2017. It addresses some of the opportunities and challenges faced by principals and teachers in supporting the special educational needs of their pupils in an inclusive way. This article outlines considerations for school leaders in developing a culture of inclusion and leading inclusive practices in their schools. Policy implications, recommendations for practice and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Leadership for inclusion, inclusive education, special educational needs, SEN policy, special education teacher.

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INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, special education policy has experienced many changes and reforms in the past two decades (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008; Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). The Special Education Review Committee report (Government of Ireland, 1993), the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) and the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) have all been

influential in promoting inclusive education through legislation. Litigation also played an important role, with a number of legal cases taken against the state in the 1990s. The *O' Donoghue v. Minister for Health* (1993) case had particular significance, ruling the state to provide an appropriate education for children with severe/profound general learning disabilities who had previously been deemed 'ineducable' (Shevlin *et al.*, 2008).

In an attempt to allocate teaching resources more equitably, the Department of Education (formerly Department of Education and Skills) introduced a new model for allocating teaching supports to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) (DES, 2017). The purpose of this research was to explore the impact of this special education teacher allocation model (SETAM) on special and inclusive education and gain an insight into primary school leaders' views of the model.

SEN has been defined in a number of ways in Irish policy and literature (Rose *et al.*, 2015). For example, the EPSEN Act defines SEN as a within learner issue, resulting from an 'enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (Government of Ireland, 2004, p.6). In this article, a broader definition of SEN is used, to include all groups of learners ranging from those with formal diagnoses to those without, but who have been identified as needing additional teaching support. For example, children may have academic, sensory, language or social and emotional needs which may require additional support. Also, their level of need can be placed on a continuum (DES, 2007) which allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness to interventions. Some needs may be met at the classroom support level, and more complex needs may be met through class teacher and special education teacher (SET) collaboration. This broader view of SEN, which moves away from a deficit perspective, is reflective of the SETAM. The policy context of the SETAM is discussed next, followed by a literature review to identify the key tenets of leadership for inclusion. The research methodology is then explained, followed by the findings and discussion of the issues arising.

Policy Context: Finding a More Equitable Way

Prior to the introduction of the SETAM, there were two types of teaching posts available to schools other than the mainstream teaching role, known as learning support (LS) and resource teacher (RT) posts. The general allocation model (GAM) was introduced in 2005 with the intention of enabling schools to meet the needs of learners with high incidence SEN and those in need of additional support (DES, 2005). High incidence SEN were divided into three categories (Table 1).

Table 1: Categories of High Incidence SEN (DES, 2005, p.4)

1. In determining eligibility for learning-support teaching, priority should be given to pupils whose achievement is at or below the 10th percentile on standardised tests of reading or mathematics.
2. Pupils with learning difficulties, including pupils with mild speech and language difficulties, pupils with mild social or emotional difficulties and pupils with mild coordination or attention control difficulties associated with identified conditions such as dyspraxia, ADD, ADHD; pupils with conditions such as dyspraxia, ADD and ADHD who have been assessed as being in the low incidence category, will continue to receive an individual allocation of support through the relevant Special Education Needs Organiser.
3. Pupils who have special educational needs arising from high incidence disabilities (borderline mild general learning disability, mild general learning disability and specific learning disability).

The level of teaching resources allocated through GAM was determined by school size, gender and socio-economic disadvantage (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011). In addition to the GAM, schools could apply for RT hours for individual pupils based on their assessed SEN (Table 2).

Table 2: Resource Teaching Allocation Model (DES, 2005, p.17)

Low incidence disabilities	Hours of resource teaching support available to school per week per individual student
Physical disability	3
Hearing impairment	4
Visual impairment	3.5
Emotional disturbance	3.5
Severe emotional disturbance	5
Moderate general learning disability	3.5
Severe/Profound general learning disability	5
Autism/Autistic spectrum disorders	5
Specific speech and language disorder	4
Assessed syndrome in conjunction with one of the above low incidence disabilities	3 to 5, taking into account the pupil's special educational needs including level of general learning disability
Multiple disabilities	5

The process of matching diagnoses to resources put a lot of pressure on the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) to provide assessments as opposed to providing a comprehensive educational psychological support service to schools (Griffin and Shevlin, 2011; NCSE, 2013). Also, it was argued the use of diagnostic labels maintained negative attitudes towards SEN and these models did little to overcome this (Rix *et al.*, 2013).

Following a piloting phase of the model (DES, 2016), the SETAM was fully implemented with each school being allocated a number of SETs based on a school's educational profile and a baseline component. The educational profile was based on three main criteria: the number of pupils with complex needs, the number of children performing at or below the standard ten score (STen) of 4 in standardised tests and the social context (socio-economic and gender) of the school (DES, 2017).

The SETAM removes the necessity of a diagnosis as a criterion for access to support and shifts the responsibility of managing and allocating additional teaching support to the school principal (DES, 2017, p.2). This puts a heavy burden on principals and raises the question of leadership capacity to make decisions around allocations of support (Travers, 2017). Leadership has emerged in the literature as a key factor in the successful promotion of inclusion in schools (Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015; Banks *et al.*, 2016) and the following section outlines some key considerations to support leadership for inclusion.

LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION

The impact of school leadership on student outcomes is well documented in educational leadership research (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003; Leithwood and Day, 2008; Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2008; Hallinger, 2011) and is also cited as a key factor in the development of inclusive schools (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). The 'inclusive school' can be characterised by the presence of a school leader with a commitment to inclusive values (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006). Positive teacher attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion are also key to the development of inclusive schools (Forlin, Sharma, and Loreman, 2014). However, there is evidence of mixed views among school leaders and teachers regarding the inclusion of pupils with more complex needs. Research has revealed a more positive attitude towards including those with SEN considered to be mild and less complex (de Boer, Pijl and Minnaert, 2011; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn, 2013).

Creating a learning environment for all remains a key challenge for school leaders (Ainscow, 2005). Demonstrating a commitment to inclusion, fostering an inclusive school culture, a culture of collaboration, supporting and facilitating professional learning and development (PLD) opportunities are some of the key factors identified in the literature as critical to developing inclusive schools (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; MacRuairc, 2013; Travers *et al.*, 2010). However, many barriers need to be overcome to create the space for this to happen. MacRuairc (2013, p.16) points towards the '*darker side of leadership practice*' in which he argues that challenging common practices, such as ability grouping, requires the leadership capacity to challenge the status quo to promote more inclusive practices. Similarly, distributed leadership, with leaders who share an inclusive vision has become a hallmark of inclusive schools (Day and Prunty, 2015; Travers *et al.*, 2010). Harris and Spillane (2008) describe distributed leadership as a model of leadership that centres on the interactions between those in formal and informal leadership roles, with a focus on leadership practice as opposed to delegated actions.

School leaders' dedication to supporting a culture of collaboration is paramount to creating inclusive schools (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Brennan, King, and Travers, 2019). However, as documented in the literature, time for teacher collaboration continues to act as a barrier to inclusion within schools. This is partly due to the lack of designated non-teaching time within the school day and no formal guidance on teacher collaboration in the Irish context (Brennan and King, 2021; Travers *et al.*, 2010).

Travers *et al.*, (2010) identified flexible ways to overcome this barrier, for example, the use of mandatory non-contact time (DES, 2011) to facilitate collaboration. This collaborative planning could be considered as 'school planning' (DES, 2011, p.3), which is deemed an appropriate use of these hours. In addition to time, teachers need to be supported in terms of how to collaborate effectively which requires appropriate PLD that begins at the initial teacher education level (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). There is a danger of collegial collaboration serving to reinforce the status quo and therefore meaningful collaboration for inclusion must include critical dialogue and sharing of practice to challenge hegemonic assumptions about difference. Such collaboration can be supported in professional learning communities (PLCs) which hold promise for developing and sustaining inclusive practice over time when initially supported by an external facilitator (Brennan, 2017). Leadership for inclusion must create the space and support for innovative models of collaboration, such as PLCs, to develop professional learning that empowers teacher agency to meet the needs of all learners (Pantić and Florian, 2015; King, 2016). This is particularly important in the context of the SETAM which is underpinned by the principle of developing 'truly inclusive schools'

(DES, 2017, p. 5). This study, therefore, addresses the research gap relating to school leaders' experiences of leading inclusive and special education within a new model of special education teaching allocation.

METHODOLOGY

As the SETAM is still in its infancy, there is very little information or research available on the impact of the model in Irish primary schools. In order to gain an insight into the authentic perspectives of those who were implementing the model, a qualitative research approach was adopted with semi-structured interviews used to collect the data. This approach attempted to answer the main research question: 'What are primary school leaders' perceptions and experiences of the SETAM in meeting the needs of learners with SEN?'

Participants were recruited through the researcher's access to the Irish Primary Principal Network (IPPEN) and sampling was therefore purposive, which refers to choosing participants based on the potential that these participants will produce the most valuable data (Denscombe, 2010).

Table 3: Experience and School Context of Participants

Participant Interview Number	Status	Years' Experience in Leadership	Gender	School Location	School Status	Total Number of Classroom Teachers	SET Teacher Allocation
1	Admin	10	Male	Rural	Vertical Mixed	7	2 plus 1 shared
2	Admin	10	Female	Urban	Vertical Mixed	18 (2 ASD class)	6 plus 5 EAL
3	Teaching	4	Female	Rural	Vertical Mixed	5	1 plus 1 shared
4	Admin	2	Female	Rural	Vertical Boys	18 (2 ASD class)	6 plus 1 shared
5	Admin	1	Female	Rural	Vertical Mixed	10	3
6	Admin	2	Male	Rural	Vertical Mixed	8	3 plus 1 shared
7	Teaching	10	Male	Rural	Vertical Mixed	7	2 plus 1 shared

Seven principals were interviewed (Table 3) in March 2019. Therefore, participants in this research had been engaged with the SETAM for almost two academic years. The interviews were recorded on Audacity, a recording software programme, and stored safely on a password encrypted memory stick. These were then transcribed verbatim using an online transcribing application known as Otter. A qualitative data analysis (QDA) software package was adopted to organise the data in such a way that allowed the researcher to navigate the data proficiently. This data was then coded and subsequently analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. This is a six-step process in which patterns in the data were identified, analysed and collated into themes.

Prospective participants were sent an email to invite them to participate. Included in this email was a plain language statement that explained the research, with particular reference to anonymity. Pseudonyms were used throughout the research and participants were not identified. An informed consent form was signed and returned to indicate their willingness to participate. Ethical guidelines were carefully adhered to throughout the research, as any research involving people has the potential to cause negative consequences, such as stress or anxiety, for participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2011; Robson, 2011). Ethical approval was granted by the Dublin City University Ethics Committee. To ensure the trustworthiness of the research a pilot interview was undertaken before finalising the interview questions and an awareness of bias and reflexivity was acknowledged.

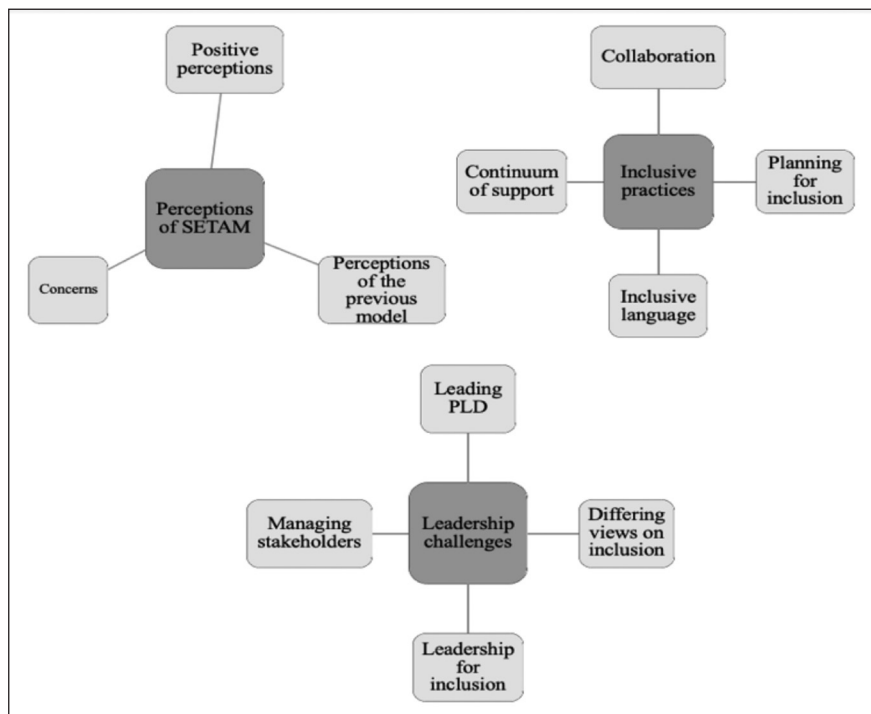
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main themes and sub-themes which emerged from the interviews are discussed next under the sub-headings of this section of the article (Figure 1).

Principals' Perceptions of the SETAM

A significant finding of this research is the predominantly positive outlook participants held on the SETAM. Five of the seven principals interviewed preferred the new allocation model in comparison with the previous models. The main reasons cited were the flexibility of the model, the reduction in the administrative burden and its guiding principles. Three principals commented on the flexibility of the model, with one noting the model allows '*flexibility to give support to children in a systematic manner where the most need gets the most support*' (Principal 5). However, three out of seven principals commented positively on the clarity of the old model. Principal 1, who articulated his preference for the old model commented, '*We knew exactly how many hours you get, because it was five hours*

Figure 1: Main Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from Principal Interviews



for every mainstream teacher for learning support, and then you knew exactly the resource hours you were getting as well’. Similarly, Principals 4 and 6 commented on the benefits of knowing that a particular type of diagnosis would entitle you to a set number of hours. Principal 1 saw very little wrong with the old model and felt all it needed was *‘for the NCSE to come along and employ more psychologists to ensure that more assessments are carried out in a quicker space of time’.*

Principal 2, a principal of a developing school, had a unique view of the old model as she felt her school had adopted the new model long before its introduction. She described how teachers in her school, through in-class interventions, were able to ensure that the children with resource hours got their allocated time and simultaneously enabled other children to benefit from this additional teacher. When questioned by a teacher on a child’s allocated hours, she was able to demonstrate that the child was receiving a lot more hours than prescribed through the various in-class interventions.

In contrast to the positive outlook on the clarity of the old model, four principals referenced the issue of diagnoses being needed for children to access resource teaching supports as having negative implications. Similar to the findings of the NCSE (2014), principals found this requirement for a diagnosis by a professional to access support as unfair. Principal 5 articulated the predicament schools and parents found themselves in when they sought assessments ‘*to get the label, to get the support. And it’s not necessarily that they wanted the label, but they wanted the support*’.

On the question of whether or not principals felt they had a sufficient level of support to meet the needs of their pupils, responses were mixed. Principal 3 questioned the use of standardised test scores as a criterion for the educational profile:

I was a little bit wary about how standardised testing came into it, and the fact that you work so hard at improving your standardised test scores. And then, you wonder are we going to lose SETs and then you know, that will then bring our test scores back down, and you end up in this cycle.

The use of standardised testing was made compulsory in Irish schools in 2007 and is a topic of much debate amongst the education stakeholders (MacRuairc, 2009; Kelleghan, Madaus and Airasian, 2012; O’Leary *et al.*, 2019). This form of testing was originally a trusted measure for measuring standards of achievement but later contested over questions of what counts as standards to be measured and who decides (MacRuairc, 2009). The data from these tests can be used to inform decision-making around teaching and learning in schools, however, this information is also shared with parents and the DE, which could negate the potential benefits by replacing them with accountability pressures (O’Leary *et al.*, 2019). The use of standardised test results as a criterion for resource allocation is problematic, as it could potentially act as a disincentive for schools to perform well, as doing so could result in a reduction in SET allocation (Banks, 2021).

The issue around the lack of clarity on what constitutes complex needs was raised by two participants as a point of frustration, as it affected their ability in planning for their new pupils with complex needs. Principal 2 called for transparency with the distribution of resources based on this criterion. This view is consistent with policy, as the DES (2017) note that a model for the identification of children with complex needs has not been completed and will be decided upon in the future.

Inclusive Practices Referenced by Participants

Another significant finding was that all participants identified effective inclusive practices which were in operation in their schools, as advocated by the new model. Planning for inclusion, collaboration and using inclusive language to create an inclusive ethos were examples of inclusive practices evident in participant responses, aligning with previous research in the area as important to leadership for inclusion (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; MacRuairc, 2013; Travers *et al.*, 2010).

In this article, inclusive practices are defined as teaching methodologies that allow for the meaningful inclusion of children with SEN or additional needs in mainstream classrooms. The research revealed inclusive practices were evident in all participant schools. These included, and are not limited to, evidence of planning for inclusion, collaboration, inclusive language and the use of the continuum of support to meet the needs of children with SEN.

Planning for inclusion was evidenced throughout the data as principals explained the whole school approach to meeting the needs of children with SEN. For planning to be effective and worthwhile, time is necessary to be given to teachers to do so. Principals facilitated planning time in different ways, such as allowing time for planning during non-teaching time (DES, 2011). The principals were very aware of the extent of time that is needed to plan for inclusion effectively and called on the Department of Education to recognise this. Principal 2 provided a solution to this, encouraging principals to not feel '*guilty about letting people plan and do things during the school day*'. Planning for inclusion was also identified in the literature as a core element of inclusive schools (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). References to time for coordination and planning are made by the DES (2017). However, it is quite vague. It states that the allocation includes provision for planning, yet at the same time, it should be minimised, so it does not unduly interfere with teaching time.

Six of the seven participants viewed the continuum of support model as useful as it provided clarity in the process of identifying children with additional needs and how to support them. Principal 6 saw the continuum as a very effective framework:

I think the continuum of support is very strong. There's a great pathway there for teachers and parents for the benefit of the children to work through the continuum and they know where their children are at, and this idea of review and you know, the SMART targets and as I say at times, sometimes you just need to focus on one thing for a month, and not to be overloading children. I think having that framework is very, very helpful.

This view of the continuum of support highlights its effectiveness in terms of clarity for all stakeholders and recommends keeping targets achievable.

The nature of the language used around special education and SETs was remarked on by all participants. Some of the participants' schools also had special classes for children with autism, which were originally called ASD units. These principals commented on the department language as being non-inclusive and contrary to the inclusive ethos they were trying to embed in their schools. During interviews, participants were asked about how they felt about the renaming of learning support and resource teachers as special education teachers. The 'special education' title was identified as labelling teachers with connotations that they only work with children with SEN. It could be argued that the term 'special' suggests something different to what is ordinarily available which is echoed in the literature (Norwich 2008; Florian 2014). All participants in this research preferred the term 'support teacher' as it was more suggestive of support to all and not just those identified as needing 'special' support.

Leadership Challenges

A number of challenges in leadership were discussed by participants. The complexities of leadership for inclusion, leading change, providing opportunities for PLD and managing the various stakeholders in schools were all highlighted, similar to the research findings of Travers *et al.*, (2010) and Ainscow and Sandill (2010). In particular, the challenges around opportunities for PLD were highlighted by three participants as a serious barrier to inclusion. One principal commented, '*many PLD opportunities are provided during school hours, and most have substitute cover...but I can't get a sub for love nor money,*' (Principal 6). The same principal explained that this lack of available substitute teachers (O'Doherty and Harford, 2018) has led to him having to turn down teachers who expressed interest in PLD courses due to the implications for the day to day running of the school. Curtin and Egan (2021) reported similar findings when investigating the workings of the SETAM in the context of practice, with teachers reporting difficulties accessing PLD opportunities.

Principal 2 described leadership for inclusion as having to '*come from the top down*' and the importance for a school leader sharing their vision of inclusion with the school community. However, Principal 2 also commented on her school context as a newly developing school which allowed her to build this vision from scratch, with no prior school culture to amend or build on. Similarly, an inclusive vision is evidenced in the participants' responses to their own view on inclusion. All participants referred to an inclusive school

culture where all people are welcome and experience the same opportunities as everyone else.

Positive relationships amongst staff, parents, outside agencies and pupils were considered important factors in leading inclusive schools. There was a consensus amongst participants that positive relationships in schools aided collaborative teaching. According to Principal 6, collaboration and teamwork are the fruits of the good relationships needed in an inclusive school and teachers can '*spark*' off each other to bring on the learning in the classroom to a new level. Similarly, Principal 1 described his staff as a family with everyone sharing an interest in each other's lives. The theme of good relationships amongst staff is echoed in the research (Hoppey and McLeskey, 2013).

All principals provided an understanding of inclusion in their own words. All views were focused on the inclusion of 'every' child in their respective schools, and not just those with SEN. This view of inclusion extending beyond the realm of just including those with SEN is consistent with the literature (Ainscow *et al.*, 2006; Winter and O' Raw, 2010; Rix *et al.*, 2013). There was a strong link evident between inclusion and school ethos. Most principals commented on their view of inclusion in relation to their school ethos and these inclusive values embedded in a school's ethos enabled an inclusive environment in which inclusive practices could exist and be sustained. This is also consistent in the research of Shevlin *et al.* (2013), who acknowledge that when inclusion is part of a schools' ethos, it is a good starting point from which inclusive practices can be formed and developed.

Concerns were also raised with how other stakeholders viewed inclusion and the potential conflict of interest this could cause. Principal 4 acknowledged the pressure that comes from parents, especially under the SETAM. She commented on the parents who have an awareness and understanding of the model: '*Well, the way I feel about it, now, it's a cake and everyone feels they're entitled to a piece of it*'. She goes on to elaborate on the cake analogy as not always having enough to go around, and that she can't assure parents that their child will receive enough support or '*a big enough slice of cake*'. This principal is unsure if the support allocated will suffice to meaningfully include all pupils. These examples are just a snapshot of some of the challenges facing school leaders in implementing the SETAM. In meeting these challenges, school leaders would benefit from further policy enhancements to support them, which are discussed next.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The research findings indicate three particular recommendations for policy. Firstly, the issue around complex needs as a criterion for allocating supports must

be clarified. Currently, there is a system for collecting the data around school leavers. However, there is no similar approach in place to capture data relating to newly identified complex needs. The DES (2017) state that there is a mechanism for identifying complex needs being devised by the NCSE, in consultation with NEPS and the Health Service Executive (HSE). There was uncertainty amongst principal participants around having enough support to meet incoming needs, as it depended on the level of teaching support becoming vacant as a result of pupils with SEN moving on to post-primary or needing less support. It is recommended that a mechanism to take account of incoming needs be finalised and clearly communicated to schools.

Secondly, to ensure pupils are receiving quality support, a PLD programme for SETs should be completed by every teacher in the role. Research has shown the value of PLD in relation to inclusion (Travers *et al.*, 2010; Ní Bhroin and King, 2020). However, there is no obligation for SETs to complete PLD specific to their role and opportunities are limited. Two participants highlighted the importance of PLD for class teachers and SETs to meet the growing needs of their diverse pupil population. The Cósán framework for formalising teacher PLD (The Teaching Council, 2016) which is currently in development could be used to take ownership of their PLD needs and put an emphasis on PLD for inclusive practice.

Thirdly, a clear strategy for communication and collaboration with and access to specialist services should be formalised. The lack of access to timely intervention from specialist therapies, as commented on by two participants and noted elsewhere in the literature is concerning (Travers *et al.*, 2010). The current pilot project (DES, 2018a) which aims to increase the number of speech and language therapists and occupational therapists in schools is a welcome initiative. This scheme has the potential to alleviate some of the challenges facing schools when meeting the needs of their pupils. This scheme should also incorporate a facility for schools to communicate with external agencies effectively when working together on individualised plans for pupils.

This research has highlighted a movement towards the use of more collaborative approaches to planning and teaching when supporting learners with SEN. For a school to successfully implement new practices or adopt new methodologies, a process of deep learning and engagement is necessary (King, 2014). As noted, innovative approaches to collaboration can significantly contribute to the development of inclusive schools (Brennan, *et al.*, 2019). It is recommended that PLCs become a prominent feature of whole-school practice. PLCs could also extend to groups of schools to facilitate shared learning between schools of

different contexts and structures. However, school leaders should be supported to create supportive environments for such collaboration, for example, through university-school partnerships or school support services such as the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

Planning for inclusion has been identified as a core element in this study, as well as the literature reviewed (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015). Formal guidelines and time for planning for inclusion are needed to enhance and sustain inclusive practices. It is recommended that formal time be allocated to schools to facilitate collaborative planning, echoing the recommendations in the research literature (Travers *et al.*, 2010; Rose *et al.*, 2015).

CONCLUSION

The provision of education for learners with SEN has had a complex history in Ireland. The level of spending on SEN provision has increased in recent years. However, it is also important to point out that as a fraction of GDP, Ireland ranks among the lowest in Europe (Kenny *et al.*, 2020), ranking 18th highest among the 31 OECD countries (DES, 2018b). Further commitment to SEN provision and enhancing the supports for school leaders outlined in this article would be a welcome step in moving to a more inclusive and equitable system.

Including all children in a meaningful way, will continue to challenge educators and policymakers. This article highlights a belief in and a commitment to an inclusive education system amongst participant principals. However, it is important to expand on this study to include a broader picture of leadership for inclusion in the context of the new SETAM model.

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