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Journal of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education

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Contents

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.

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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 (Pantiċ 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 (IPPN) 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
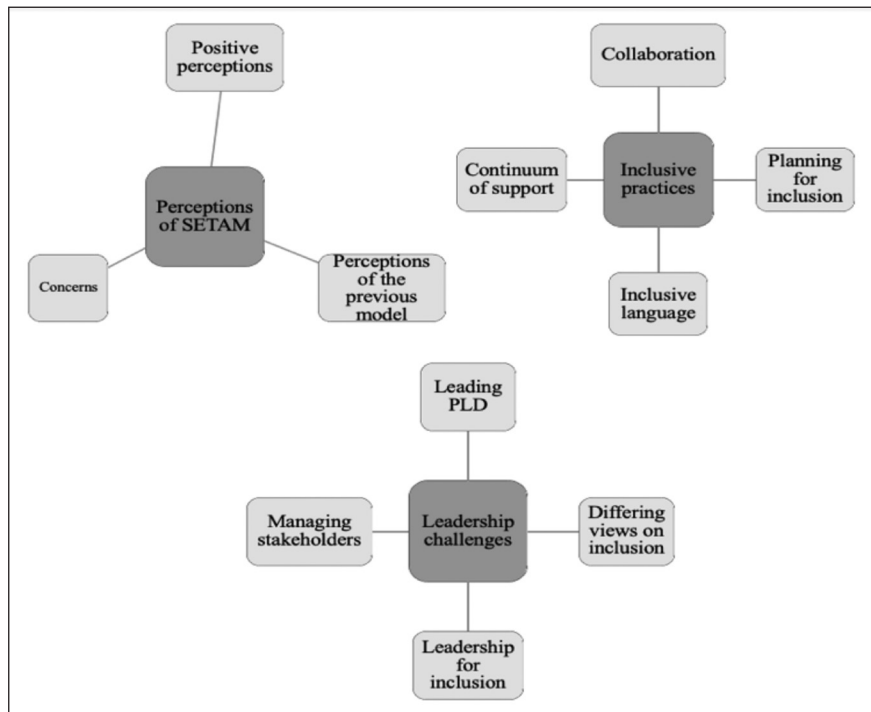
for every mainstream teacher for learning support, and then you knew exactly the resource hours you were getting as well'. Similarly, Principals 4 and 6 commented on the benefits of knowing that a particular type of diagnosis would entitle you to a set number of hours. Principal 1 saw very little wrong 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 stake-holders (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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Aistear: The Social Context of Play and Language Development

The social context of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) creates an inclusive learning environment in which pupils are free to communicate with each other in a natural setting. This article reports findings from a small scale study in a multigrade Junior and Senior Infant class in a rural school. The language development opportunities presented by the social context of *Aistear* were explored using a mixed methods action research approach, with data collected by recording observations of play, researcher's reflections and quantitative measures including topic specific vocabulary checklists. Findings from the study included identification of the benefits of the social context of *Aistear* for target pupils experiencing language difficulties. The language development opportunities created by social interaction with both peers and adults were noted in the findings.

Keywords: Play, Aistear, language, DLD, communication

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate with one another is the foundation of all relationships we make. Educators face the challenge of supporting the language development of all pupils in their classrooms. Some pupils start school having been exposed to rich, varied language at home, while others have not. Play is one way pupils of varying language abilities are enabled to learn from each other, trying out language in a naturalistic environment as modelled by peers and scaffolded by practitioners. Pupils' receptive and expressive vocabulary also has a significant impact on other areas of their development, notably their future literacy and intellectual functioning (MacWhinney & Bornstein, 2003). This development of language learning can be scaffolded in the first formal years of education through the creation of a shared context of meaning and experience (French, 2007).

RATIONALE

Communication and language difficulties are one of the most common early developmental problems (Määttä, Laakso, Tolvanen, Ahonen, & Aro, 2014). As an increasing number of children with special educational needs (SEN) are being educated in mainstream schools (Marshall, Ralph & Palmer, 2002) the size of the population of children entering mainstream education with Development Language Disorder (DLD) is also increasing. A review of international studies indicates a reasonable estimate of children, up to the age of 18, with DLD in Ireland is approximately 70,000 (IASLT, 2017). Contributing to this figure are those children identified with DLD in isolation, and the 36,742 children identified with complex needs, including Downs Syndrome and ASD (Conroy & Noone, 2014). Considering the significant impact communication and language skills have on all other areas of learning it is imperative that priority is given to effective development of these skills for all children.

As a Junior and Senior Infant teacher in a multigrade setting in a rural school in the west of Ireland, I have aimed to create the best possible learning opportunities for the pupils in my care by providing a combination of play-based and didactic teaching methods. Play has always been an important classroom feature and I first implemented the *Aistear* curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) five years ago. A significant amount of recent literature suggests that play-based instruction is particularly effective in the development of pupil's language skills (Conner, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls & Friehe, 2014; Stagnitti, Bailey, Hudspeth-Stevenson, Reynolds & Kidd, 2016; McLeod, Hardy & Kaisar, 2017). Since implementing *Aistear* I could see that pupils enjoyed engaging in play. However, I was unsure of whether all pupils in my class, particularly those with language difficulties, were benefitting educationally from play. A major factor which prompted my investigation into this topic was the recent emphasis on language teaching, and the significant reform it has undergone, in the Irish education system in the form of the new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) (NCCA, 2015). This heightened awareness combined with my aim to effectively implement the new PLC, motivated me to undertake this research. This article aims to examine the following research question: Does the social context of play areas during *Aistear* impact language development?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Play and Communication and Language for Learning
Communication is a central development task of early childhood (Määttä et al., 2014) with development varying significantly among individuals. From birth

onwards children begin to develop communication skills, with prelinguistic communication skills developing far in advance of spoken language skills. The idea that pupils' language ability should not be categorised as simply average or impaired is highlighted by Rescorla (2009), who describes language abilities as a spectrum. Bates (2004) also promotes this dimensional view of language, suggesting that socio-cognitive skills such as auditory processing, joint reference skills and verbal working memory form the base from which prelinguistic and later language skills progress. Recent curriculum developments, including the new PLC (NCCA, 2015), which is aligned with the principles and methodologies of the *Aistear* curriculum framework, identify the importance of language in the learning process.

Inclusion of Pupils with Language Difficulties

Many factors have been argued to influence the inclusion of pupils with SEN, with teacher's feelings towards inclusive education playing a considerable role in successfully implementing inclusive educational practice (Meijer, 2003). In relation to teaching pupils with speech and language difficulties (SLD), Sadler (2005) reports that while teachers held positive views regarding inclusion, their lack of experience with and limited knowledge of these difficulties meant including these pupils was a challenge. Marshall et al. (2002) argue that in order to overcome these challenges the system needs to be changed. They specify the importance of a change in teacher attitudes, followed by training and the prioritising of resources. Marshall et al. (2002) emphasise that teachers who are not confident in educating pupils with speech and language impairments are unable to meet their educational needs. The new model of inclusion in schools (DES, 2017) and the new PLC (NCCA, 2015) indicate that this change has begun, as they both emphasise the importance of inclusion and early intervention for pupils with language difficulties.

Play

Play is fundamental in the development of every child's intellectual, social, emotional and physical skills (Gray, 2015) and is the main context in which preschool pupils' develop their social and communication skills (Stanton-Chapman & Brown, 2015). Young pupils spend between 3% and 20% of their time playing (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). However, no consensus currently exists among researchers on best practice in relation to which instructional methods are most effective when teaching young pupils.

Play-based learning experiences are advocated by some (Smith, 2009), while others favour the direct, didactic instruction method (Hall, 2005) found to be implemented in Irish infant classes by the OECD (2004) and Gray and Ryan (2016). While numerous studies indicate positive associations between play-based teaching approaches and academic, social and language development skills

(Conner, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls & Friehe, 2014; Stagnitti et al, 2016; McLeod, Hardy & Kaiser, 2017; Dervan & Egan, 2018), researchers argue and the new PLC highlights that these two opposing approaches need to be blended in order to ensure a balanced experience (NCCA, 2015).

Social context of *Aistear* supporting language development
As highlighted by Stanton-Chapman and Brown (2015) the social context of play is central to the development of young children's communication skills. In contrast to the traditional classroom environment, play offers a wider range of opportunities for pupils to practice and develop their social skills. During play, pupils have the opportunity to play with words and to listen to and learn from each other. Dervan and Egan's (2018) recent study identifies the significant impact the social context of *Aistear* has on the language development of pupils with SLD, suggesting that the social context of *Aistear* provides pupils with the opportunity to play with language, to learn from each other and use new vocabulary in appropriate ways, while direct teaching also proved beneficial in teaching new skills.

Both Dervan and Egan's (2018) study and the *Aistear* curriculum framework (NCCA, 2009) suggest that *Aistear* can play a role in establishing an inclusive social context for all learners. Weisburg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2013) also propose that the social context of play constitutes a crucial component in the development of pupils' social skills, while Hurtado, Marchman and Fernald (2008) recognise that the amount of language children hear has a significant impact on their overall linguistic skills.

Conclusion
The review of the literature identifies the critical importance language plays in a child's learning and development and provides the context for this research study which aims to address the question: Does the social context of play areas during *Aistear* impact language development? The study was conducted as part of a Masters in Special Educational Needs and the study was approved by the Faculty Ethics Review Panel at the Dublin City University Institute of Education.

METHODOLOGY

Viewed as a valuable approach to social enquiry (McTaggart, 2006), which bridges a gap between research and practice (Somekh,1995), an action research approach was chosen for this study. The flexibility provided by adopting this approach allowed for mixed methodologies to be employed, ensuring that a comprehensive

analysis of the situation was obtained by the researcher who remained at the centre of the research throughout the study. Table 1 introduces the two pupils, given pseudonyms to safeguard their anonymity, who were recruited for this study. A pilot pupil, from Senior Infants, was also recruited, and all data collection instruments were piloted before the study began. The pilot pupil and both target pupils entered the study when parental consent and pupil assent were obtained.

Table 1: Target Pupil Profiles

Oliver	Lisa
• Attending SLT for the past year. • Has attended 20 sessions. • Identified as having "disordered language". • Receives daily support from the SET in one to one sessions. • Displaying significant sound articulation difficulties which are affecting his ability to be understood by others. • Struggles to pronounce "s", "sh", "c", "g", "r" and initial consonant blends. • Eager to contribute verbally and interact with peers.	• Awaiting SLT assessment at beginning of study. • Not receiving individual SET support. • Extremely reluctant to engage in verbal interaction with adults and peers. • Exhibiting difficulties articulating some sounds, constructing sentences and using pronouns. • Rarely responds to questions verbally. • Sometimes responds to questions non-verbally (shrugs shoulders, nods, shakes head) • Sentence structure is poor as is her use of pronouns and tenses.

Pre-intervention, an oral language profile of each target pupil was constructed using the following data collection methods:
- Bracken Basic Concept Scale-Third Edition: Receptive
- Bracken Basic Concept Scale: Expressive
- Mean Length of Utterance in morphemes (MLU-m)
- Topic Specific Expressive Vocabulary Testing
- Phonic checklists
- Individual pupil interviews

Field work for this action research began by establishing a baseline of oral language skills for both pupils and evaluating children's basic concept development using the Bracken Basic Concept Scale-Third Edition: Receptive (BBCS-3:R) (Bracken, 2006a) and the Bracken Basic Concept Scale: Expressive (BBCS:E) (Bracken, 2006b). The BBCS-3:R measures children's comprehension of the basic educational concepts in ten categories. It is a curriculum-based assessment of school-related concepts such as colour, size, letters, numbers and shape and is used to assess children's understanding of key concepts relating to the infant curriculum. The 3rd edition of this concept scale suggests its value as a measure of school readiness skills and to identify pupils with language impairments (Bracken, 2006a).

The BBCS-3:R was completed individually with each pupil by the researcher at the beginning of the study to assess their comprehension of educationally relevant topics, while the BBCS:E was used to evaluate the children's acquisition of these basic concepts expressively. As the suggested age range for administering this test is 3 years to 6 years 11 months, it was an appropriate measure to utilise in order to develop a comprehensive profile of the children's receptive and expressive language abilities. These pre-study results highlighted areas of strength and areas for development for each pupil. For example, Lisa's receptive language was "delayed" in the area of "Time/Sequence, while Oliver's expressive language was "very delayed" in the area of "Quantity".

The MLU-m was utilised to measure target pupils' language complexity skills. It has been identified as a useful benchmark in studies of children with speech and language difficulties (Rice, Redmond & Hoffman, 2006). Topic specific expressive vocabulary testing was used pre- and post-study to compare vocabulary acquisition relating to the two *Aistear* topics, "Topic 1: The Home" and "Topic 2: The Dentist". Pre-study vocabulary testing also informed the design of the action research in terms of vocabulary focus. The cyclical action research approach of planning, acting, observing and reflecting was adapted for this study as it was appropriate to the cycles taking place during the research (Sullivan, Glenn, Roche & McDonagh, 2016). Ghaye's (2010) model of reflective practice, outlining reflection as a process of *review*, *projection* and *improvising* was adapted. The following data collection methods were also utilised to monitor target pupils' behaviour in the social situations which *Aistear* presented:

- Observation Schedule
  An observation schedule was formulated to structure the observation and to add to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Pupils' language was observed in different contexts, at various play areas and also throughout

the school day to allow for a more holistic picture of their language needs (Owens, Metz and Haas, 2014). The observation schedule was segregated into the following sections: *description, this experience shows, what can be done to support/extend learning?*

- Reflective Journal
  Ghaye's (2010) model of reflective practice was adapted throughout this study. This included reviewing- looking back to see what has already been achieved, projection - looking forward towards future goals and improvising and responding creatively in the moment. Considering this, the reflective journal was central to informing this action research and involved my interpretation and explanation of events described

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornwill (2012) combining qualitative and quantitative measures of data collection and analysis allow the researcher to reflect on different perspectives of the subject, therefore creating a comprehensive insight into the effectiveness of the social context of *Aistear* in developing the language skills of pupils with language difficulties.

Procedure for Intervention

Aistear is a framework which encompasses the *"play, plan, review"* method - an approach used in similar research by Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser (2002). I facilitated *Aistear* in the mainstream classroom daily with a multigrade Junior and Senior Infant class of 28 pupils. I was the only adult present in the classroom throughout the *Aistear* sessions. Target pupils were observed daily during *Aistear* over a six week period. *Aistear* was implemented for approximately one hour each day. Table 2 outlines the daily structure of *Aistear* in the classroom.

Table 2: Daily Structure of *Aistear*

Planning (5 minutes)	• Each group made a "huddle" in which they planned for the play activity under the theme being explored. • Researcher circulated and scaffolded/assisted when necessary. • Planning recorded every second week.
Play (30-35 minutes)	• Pupils engaged in activities with their peers. • Researcher monitored, contributing direct and indirect instructions to groups to focus play on topic.
Tidy-up (5 minutes) Review of play (5 minutes)	• Pupils tidied up and returned to their seats. A representative from each group, chosen by the researcher, reported back on the area of play and the activity they engaged in with their group. • Review recorded every second week.

As suggested by the new PLC (NCCA, 2015) play was combined with direct instruction. The *Aistear* theme was carried into other curricular areas throughout the school day. Reading lessons and explicit language teaching sessions were focused on the themes of "The Home", the focus of *Aistear* in Weeks 1-3, and "The Dentist", the focus of *Aistear* in Weeks 4-6. The process of evaluating observations and reflections continued daily throughout the research study. In the final week of the study semi-structured interviews were repeated, as were the topic-specific vocabulary checklists ("The Home" checklist was repeated in week four) and the phonic checklist. MLU-m was calculated again in week six using a combination of 50 utterances from interview and planning/reflection audio recordings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data collected conveyed that the social context of *Aistear* had a positive impact on supporting the language development of the participants involved. This intervention was assessed using a combination of semi-structured interviews, topic specific vocabulary checklists and calculation of MLU-m in the final week of the study. Observations and reflections were also examined and contributed to the findings. In Figure 1 the measured improvement in both Oliver and Lisa's verbal response rate as observed during post study interviews is outlined.

Figure 1: Target Pupils' Verbal Response Rate in Pre Study and Post Study Interviews
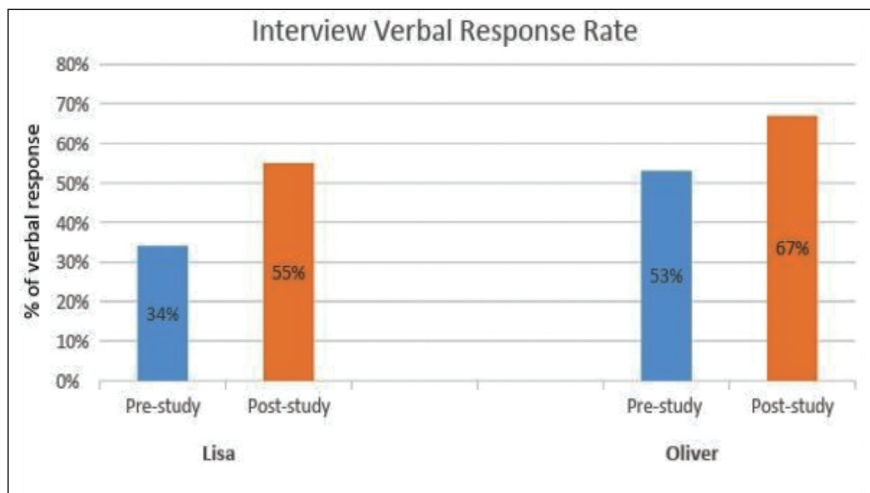
In Figure 1 an improvement in both Lisa's and Oliver's verbal response rate is evident. Out of a total of 145 utterances in her pre-study interview Lisa only responded verbally to 49, equating to 34% of utterances. In the post-study interview, Lisa's verbal responses had risen to 61 out of 112 utterances, 55%, an improvement of 21%. In his pre-study interview Oliver responded verbally to 56 out of 106, or 53% of his utterances. In his post-study interview Oliver made verbal contributions to 84 out of 126, or 67% of utterances. With an increase in his verbal response rate of 14%, this finding indicates Oliver's improved willingness to engage verbally in conversation in a one-to-one setting.

Social Context of *Aistear*

Play is the main context in which preschool children develop their social and communication skills (Stanton-Chapman & Brown, 2015), and the impact of the social context of *Aistear* on language skills was very evident throughout this study. Notes from the reflective journal and observations indicated that the social context of *Aistear* played a significant role in creating language development opportunities. The following extract from observations of Olivier at the Junk Art area illustrates this clearly:

> *Creating a house at junk art, he chatted to N. about pets and asked how her fish died. He initiated conversation with her. Drew windows, doors and a stairs on the box he was using. Expressed himself verbally willingly. He is interested and willing to converse with others in his group. He shared his ideas and asked questions. Pronunciation difficulty made conversing with peers a challenge, stairs= dairs and N. could not understand him at times.* (Observation 2, 09.01.18)

The opportunity provided to build social relationships was one of the study's key findings. Lisa's increased motivation to use language in the social context of *Aistear* was noted in observations:

> *(Lisa was) very eager to engage and be part of group action. Laughing and interaction was more frequent than usual. She was more interested in the topic and excited to engage. The excitement of a new topic could have been the reason for more eager engagement.* (Observation 15, 31.01.18)

Role of Peer Interaction

Peer interaction played a significant role in promoting language development of target pupils at various *Aistear* areas. This was consistently noted in observations. Similar to Dervan and Egan's (2018) study, the social context of *Aistear* was observed to have a positive impact on pupils' confidence engaging with each other. While Oliver's articulation difficulties posed some challenges for him when

communicating with his peers, all observed peer interaction was of a positive nature, with peers showing patience and understanding when they were unable to understand Oliver's verbal contributions. In observations recorded at the *construction* area it was noted that Oliver initiated conversation and spoke freely to others in his group.

CONCLUSION

While recognising the limitations of this small-scale study, focusing on two participants, its findings support previous research. It presents encouraging evidence to support the implementation of *Aistear,* identifying it as an inclusive framework, with the social context of play providing a supportive context for language learning (Weisburg et al., 2013). Increased interaction between pupils during *Aistear* meant increased language use opportunities supporting Hurtado et al.'s (2008) claim that pupils' overall linguistic skills are significantly impacted by the amount of language they hear. The social context of *Aistear* promoted complex language interactions such as negotiation of roles at the *role play* area, co-operation and turn taking skills during paired and group tasks and in turn, the opportunity to develop and practice the skill of self-control (Weisburg et al., 2013).

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HOME

Where We Were Then: An Illuminative Evaluation of Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs and Practices in Relation to Level 2 Learning Programmes and Inclusion in a Mainstream Post-Primary School

This article reports the findings of the first phase of a case study exploring the impact of collaborative whole-school professional development (CWPD) to enact Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LP) in a mainstream post-primary school. In Phase 1, a baseline in relation to the school's existing engagement with and knowledge, practice, and beliefs around L2LP and inclusion, was established in order to ascertain the staff CWPD needs and inform the subsequent design, implementation, and evaluation of the whole-school professional development in phase two which are reported elsewhere (Flood, 2019). Though the research explored the voices of students, parents, teachers, and special needs assistants (SNA), this article will focus on teachers' perspectives and practices. Sixteen teachers, including the principal and the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), participated in phase one of the research. The findings suggest that despite a stated commitment to inclusion, there were significant gaps in teachers' knowledge and understanding of policy in relation to L2LP and how to plan for and implement these in their classroom practice.

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INTRODUCTION

The Level 2 Learning Programmes (L2LP) were introduced as part of phase one of the new Framework for Junior Cycle[1] (FJC) in 2014. The aim of the L2LP is "to make the curriculum more accessible to students with special educational needs" (NCCA, 2016, p.6), in this instance students with low mild to high moderate general learning disabilities (GLD). The underlying principle of inclusion is promoted in the L2LP by advocating a student-centred and flexible approach to planning and assessment. A Level 2 Learning Programme is designed to meet the strengths and needs of the student in the context of the student's school.

The L2LPs recognise the foundations for inclusive education established in Irish legislation (NCCA, 2014), building on the work of previous inclusion documents for students with GLD and special educational needs (SEN) (DES, 2007a; 2007b; NCCA, 2007). As part of the Framework for Junior Cycle, L2LP[2] have embraced the vision set out by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to "enable post-primary schools to provide a quality, inclusive and relevant education with improved learning outcomes for all students, including those with special educational needs" (DES, 2012, p.1). The intention is that students participating in L2LP in mainstream post-primary settings engage with their individual L2LP learning outcomes (LOs) in their mainstream classes and, where appropriate, through small group or one-to-one classes.

Teacher Engagement with Inclusive Education

The role of teachers is critical in enacting inclusive education policy initiatives such as L2LP (Forlin & Lian, 2008), as it is the day-to-day action of front-line staff that determines the effectiveness of the policy (Lipsky, 1981; Gilson, 2015). Teachers' knowledge, skills, understanding, and attitudes impact their own and their schools' capacity to create inclusive learning environments (Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013). Preparing teachers for effective engagement with policy initiatives requires addressing the readiness of teachers cognitively, psychologically, and technologically (Cheng & Cheung, 1995; Cheng, 2005). The analysis of teacher readiness to engage with new initiatives offers an opportunity for policy makers to consider the position of those who are tasked with enacting the policy at school level. Recognising what stage of preparedness teachers are at will enable policy

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1   FJC is the overarching curriculum framework for the first three years of post-primary education in Ireland. See https://ncca.ie/en/junior-cycle/framework-for-junior-cycle/

2   L2LP: Level 2 refers to the level on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, in which the Junior Cycle Certificate is at Level 3. See https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Frame-work-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx

makers to plan and put in place the supports required to prepare teachers to positively engage in the policy initiative.

Understanding of policy objectives influences teachers' attitude and willingness to engage with policy enactment (psychological readiness). This, in turn, can affect teachers' technological readiness and competency, and their professional development (PD) (Cheng & Cheung, 1995; Cheng, 2005). Similarly, inclusive education practices can be enhanced through the development of the three dimensions of knowing, doing, and believing (Rouse, 2007) or knowledge, practice, and belief (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). If two of these aspects are in place, the third is likely to follow. If teachers gain new knowledge and are supported to put this into practice, then their beliefs and attitudes relating to inclusive practices will change over time (Rouse, 2007; 2008). If teachers believe in inclusive education and are given the support to enact new practices, they are likely to develop new knowledge and skills (Rouse, 2008). Recording the attitudes of Greek secondary teachers (n= 365) towards inclusion, Koutrouba, Vamvakari and Theodoropoulos (2008) found that attitudes were positive when teachers had specialised knowledge, experience, and further professional development (PD). The absence of these factors resulted in a lack of confidence and preparedness. This highlights the necessity for specialised knowledge, experience, and PD for all teachers to advance inclusive practices in teachers' classrooms across the school environment (Brennan, King & Travers, 2019).

RESEARCH APPROACH

To explore the impact of collaborative whole-school PD on the enactment of L2LP, this research first gathered information to assess the situation before designing a CWPD programme. The research approach was a predominantly qualitative case study that used multiple methods of data collection in a purposively sampled post primary school. Phase one comprised an illuminative evaluation of the school's previous efforts to enact L2LP. This was an important approach as illuminative evaluation is a formative process that emphasises interpretation and understanding rather than measuring success against pre-determined criteria (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972). This, combined with its attention to the views of all stakeholders' perspectives (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972; Maxwell, 1984), met the purpose of gaining an insight into the enactment process of L2LP pre-intervention which would in turn inform decisions pertaining to phase two. Ethical procedures were informed by the 'Ethical guidelines for education research' (British Education Research Association (BERA), 2011) and the study was reviewed and approved by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Sixteen teachers, including the principal and (SENCO) participated in phase one. Findings in relation to L2LP knowledge, understanding and practice were drawn from multiple data sources as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Source	Details
Documentary analysis	• School Documentation: school mission statement, admission policy and additional support needs (ASN) policy • Teachers Documentation: 2 long term schemes of work, 6 subject planning checklists & 2 lesson plans, 2 individual education plans (IEP).
Individual interviews	• principal and SEN coordinator (SENCO) • 2 students and 2 of the students' parents
Focus groups	• 3 teacher focus groups with 11 participants in total • 1 SNA focus group with 3 participants • 1 focus group with 3 Professional Masters in Education (PME) student teachers
Classroom Observations	• 3 classes: Music, Geography, Home Economics

FINDINGS

The findings from phase one are reported in terms of the school commitment to inclusion, the role of the principal and SENCO, teacher knowledge of L2LP, L2LP in practice and PD for inclusion and L2LP.

A Commitment to Inclusion

Analysis of the data evidenced a commitment to inclusion, with L2LP forming one part of this. However, there was a significant gap between teachers' perceptions of their understanding of L2LP and the accuracy of their L2LP knowledge. The school's commitment to the principles of partnership, accountability, transparency, inclusion, and respect for diversity, parental choice and equality were stated in its mission statement and Admission Policy. The schools' Additional Support Needs (ASN) Policy (n.d) outlined the schools' intention to be inclusive and "wo*rk with students in an equitable manner that respects and develops the students' learning potential and sense of self-worth and dignity*" and engage with external inclusive education policies. The introduction of L2LP for some students was referred

to. However, the Admissions Policy and curriculum link on the school website listed junior cycle subjects and short courses available but not L2LP. The staff[3] demonstrated an awareness of the diversity of students attending the school and the responsibility of teachers, SNAs, and leadership to include every learner and provide appropriate programmes such as L2LP in the school. The SENCO observed that: "*as a group we are getting to grips with just the basic understanding of L2LPs but apart from that we haven't had a major amount of engagement*" and noted the collaborative nature of inclusion and L2LP and the difficulties of getting all teachers to collaborate for this purpose.

Role of the Principal and SENCO

In interviews, the principal and SENCO highlighted their responsibilities for communicating and enacting whole-school SEN policies and planning. They noted the importance of resources (time, teacher availability, and PD), structures and teachers' commitment to inclusive teaching approaches such as team-teaching to enact the ASN Policy and L2LP. With respect to school readiness for enacting L2LP, the SENCO spoke about the school having a lack of knowledge and limited focus on pedagogy and the tools to teach L2LP, suggested a lack of awareness of students who may benefit from L2LP and reflected on the barriers to enacting L2LP saying: "*it's just a lack of knowledge and a lack of understanding, because even my interpretation of who was able to access L2LPs has actually changed since September.*"

Teacher Knowledge of L2LP

Data from focus groups support the SENCO's concerns about lack of teacher knowledge, with teachers having less knowledge than the principal and coordinator. Nine of the eleven teachers who participated in focus groups spoke positively about L2LP and the benefits for their students. However, interview data highlighted teacher misconceptions about L2LP and the student cohort L2LP are designed for. Staff explanations of L2LP exemplified this confusion. Six teachers and the principal spoke about L2LP in their subjects as if the L2LP were traditional Junior Cycle level 3 subjects differentiated for level 2. Eight teachers demonstrated an assumption that students participating in L2LP studied mainstream Junior Cycle subjects but learned and expressed their knowledge in different ways.

Classroom observations supported the idea of differentiation and the accommodation of different learning styles. Summary field notes (Table 2) recorded the observation of inclusive practices but there was no evidence of including L2LP learning outcomes into the lessons.

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3   'Staff' is used to refer to teachers, SNAs, the principal and SEN coordinator.

Table 2: Summary Field Notes of Classroom Observations*

Summary of practices observed
- The <u>use of learning outcomes</u> on the board to focus lesson was evident in the three lessons.   - <u>Peer-to peer</u> learning was used in all lessons. This was scaffolded with individual teacher support for students requiring it.   - <u>Multiple means of representation</u> were evident. All classrooms had key subject terminology on flashcards or posters on the walls. Student work was displayed. Subject related posters, diagrams etc were on display. Written, visual (video clip, chart showing timelines etc) and verbal instruction/ explanations were given in Home Economics and Geography.   - <u>Differentiated worksheets</u> were used in Home Economics and Geography.   - <u>Student check-in</u> evident. There was student questioning in all classes to check understanding. Random selection of students by teacher for questioning was used in Music. It appeared that teacher had pre-selected questions for students with SEN in Home Economics Students raised hands to answer questions in Geography Student A reluctant to answer in Geography, teacher moved to another student then returned to student A.   - All subjects <u>theory based</u>. Music theory-based writing in copy. Home Economics theory based with group activities. Geography theory with video and active participation (in earthquake procedures for a school).
* Note: This is a summary of practices that occurred in at least two of the three classroom visits for Music, Home Economics and Geography in Phase One of this study.

L2LPs in Practice

L2LPs in practice emerged as a significant theme in phase one and are presented here under three sub-headings: policy and practice, planning for L2LPs, and from planning to practice.

Policy and practice

Staff reported a greater interest in day-to-day practical learning and teaching strategies than policy at whole-school or national level. Teachers spoke about sharing information, team-teaching, differentiation, behaviour strategies, and L2LPs. SNAs spoke about the practices they observed and participated in, such as group work, differentiation, and using the physical environment (for example placing a student near the window or using standing desks). Most staff referenced

the supportive staff culture in the school in terms of staying informed and getting help with students, activities, and policies. Nine teachers referred to the SENCO as a *"great source of information"* and mentioned looking up student profiles and using the additional needs communal forum on the school's communication system, Schoology. The SENCO was surprised at teachers' awareness of this communication system as she felt it was not being used due to a reliance on her giving verbal information on request.

Planning for L2LP

Teachers had planning time as part of Haddington Road[4] hours to create subject plans that reflected the school's commitment to inclusive education and plan for L2LP. The principal expected differentiation and L2LP to form part of teachers' planning and that this should be included in the PD intervention. The principal, coordinator and nine teachers noted the importance of planning for L2LPs and that it *"is seamlessly embedded within your planning"*. All eleven teachers and the SENCO stated that more time was needed to plan in a meaningful and collaborative manner.

> *We don't have the planning time required to successfully integrate L2LPs in anything more than on paper at this stage, the personalised and directed learning that we would need to successfully integrate L2LPs and just the overall resource of time for teachers to plan differentiated lessons, to discuss what's working well, what isn't working well with the students. That time for discussion is just completely unavailable to us in this school and probably every school* (SENCO).

> *We tried really hard to implement them [L2LPs] last year but there's not enough time to do it. Like you're getting 20-40 minutes put aside a week to do your planning and every other student needs to be accommodated for too* (Teacher).

The principal agreed with the teachers, recognised teachers' needs to have time to follow-up with each other after PD or meetings; to check-in, reflect and plan but questioned *"Who has the time to do that? Where does this time come from?"*

Schemes of work and subject planning checklist responses (Table 3) revealed the different stages of L2LP planning teachers were at. The checklists, completed by the teachers in subject area groups, produced positive responses regarding teachers' perceptions of their subject planning. The response to individual planning linked

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4   Haddington Road is a public service agreement between the government and public service unions. This agreement includes teachers working an additional thirty-three hours per annum. These hours can be used in a flexible manner to meet the needs of the school. They include whole-school staff meetings, small group meetings and individual hours.

to L2LPs was less positive. The SENCO felt teachers had *"a great start"* but momentum was lost when they did not know what to do next or where to find support.

Table 3: Summary of Responses to Subject Planning Checklist

Subject Planning Checklist: Linking L2LPs and Subject Planning			
Subject Planning	**Yes**	**No**	**Comment**
Common subject plans with links to Level 2 Learning Outcomes have been devised and written	5	1	Possible outcomes highlighted in plan
Expected learning outcomes are set out in written plans	4		
Individual planning is linked to the subject plan and/or L2LP and incorporates learning intentions developed to address students' learning needs	3	3	
Individual teacher planning incorporates teaching and learning approaches that are clearly linked to expected learning intentions	5	1	
Timeframes are suggested for teaching various elements of the subject across the subject department	4	2	Corresponding outcomes highlighted in plan
There are links made between statements of learning, key skills and learning outcomes	6		
Links with other subjects/base class to support the consistent development of students' key skills are incorporated in the subject plan	5	1	
The subject assessment policy is consistent with the whole-school assessment policy	4		
The subject assessment policy incorporates formative and summative assessment practices	5		
Written plans for assessment and the gathering of evidence align with planned student learning	3	2	Aspect of L3 portfolio
The plan incorporates opportunities for regular collective review of student work where teachers share professional practice	6		Regular department meetings As I have no L2LP students currently in class, I have not found time to incorporate the L2LP fully into plans and schemes

However, there appeared to be a disconnect between teachers' perceptions of their planning compared to the planning documents data. Seven teachers referred to their planning and embedding L2LPs into their schemes of work. All teachers were invited to submit their schemes of work. Two teachers responded, for first-year Business and second-year Music respectively. Six teachers reported not submitting their schemes because they had insufficient time, or the knowledge to complete the planning and five teachers looked for more examples and guidance to be better informed on how to incorporate L2LP into their planning.

The Business scheme of work linked Business and L2LP learning outcomes for the L2LP were not differentiated success criteria with L2LP criteria shown in bold and L3 criteria in italics (Table 4). However, the Music scheme suggested a lack of understanding of planning for L2LP. L2LP LOs were not identified in the scheme and success criteria were not differentiated.

Table 4: Extract from Business Scheme of Work

Unit of Learning	Learning Outcomes	Success Criteria/Differentiation
Level 3	Level 2	**Students' work will show…**
Personal Finance: 1.1	PLU	• **an ability to differentiate between a person's basic needs and wants**
Personal Finance: 1.2	Numeracy: A4, A5, A6, A7.	• **an understanding of income and its different sources**
Personal Finance: 1.3 – Financial lifecycle		• **an understanding of expenditure and the different types of expenditure within a household.**
Personal Finance: 1.12		*Students work will display*
		• *a knowledge of how a person's needs and wants change throughout the different stages of their lives.*
		• *an understanding of what opening, closing and net cash are*
		• *their ability to record income in a household budget*
		• *the ability to record expenditure in a household budget.*

Note. This table represents the alignment of Level 3 and L2LPs LOs in the Business Scheme of work. The use of bold and italic font for level 2 and level 3 criteria respectively was how the teacher highlighted their differentiation for students doing L2LPs/requiring scaffolding and students doing Business respectively.

Lesson plans submitted by teachers for classroom observations further demonstrated a gap in the teachers' knowledge regarding planning for L2LP. The plans did not reference L2LP, or differentiation for students with SEN and two teachers expressed uncertainty about breaking down L2LP in this stage of their planning.

From planning to practice

Interview data indicated varying degrees of teacher confidence regarding putting L2LPs into practice. However, the SENCO was concerned that teachers were unaware of how L2LP would work for them and their students in the classroom and believed that more PD would help. *"Well, we've only had that one two-hour CPD training, so as far as I'm aware there's no further training, which I think is a shame because individualised training could be beneficial."* Focus group discussions revealed teachers' awareness of the gap between their planning and classroom practices.

> *It's very hard to practically implement them within the classroom then like it's all well and good having it on paper but it's not going to work if we can't do it properly and have the time and resources to do it.*

> *So, we've like, the best intentions in the world, we all really want to make this successful. We've all the planning basically done; it's integrated into our schemes but just actually putting it into practice I find a challenge now. Where do we go next? Where do we go from here?*

All classroom teachers (n=14) volunteered to be observed and four were randomly chosen. The classroom observations showed no evidence of inclusion of L2LPs into the lesson. However, other inclusive practices, such as seating arrangements, visual cues, and peer-to-peer support, as well as teacher support were identified.

Professional Development (PD) for Inclusion and L2LP

Most teachers interviewed felt their PD experiences did not adequately prepare them for inclusive practices such as L2LP in their teaching. Newly qualified (n=2) and student teachers (n=2) spoke about the lack of inclusive education instruction in initial teacher education. Longer serving teachers (n=7) noted a lack of appropriate PD for them, citing dictated and overly structured PD as reasons teachers may not engage fully with PD. In the year prior to the study, fifteen teachers and one SNA engaged in a two-hour whole-school L2LP session provided by the Junior Cycle professional development support team[5] . Teachers interviewed who attended this PD (n=7) felt this was insufficient and wanted more

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5   See Junior Cycle for Teachers https://www.jct.ie/home/home.php

opportunities to have discussions and share resources, experiences, and practices with colleagues. All teachers, the principal and SENCO wanted to know how the L2LP would impact on their time in relation to planning and subjects**.**

Taking account of teachers' beliefs that more PD was required to support progression from planning to practice, teachers were asked what they would like to see included in the PD intervention for L2LPs that would be delivered in Phase 2. Key themes that emerged are outlined in Table 5. (For further details of the implementation and outcomes of the CWPD see Flood, 2019). When given the option to participate in the online PD sessions at home, all sixteen teachers chose to participate as a group after school via the 'Facetime' app.

Table 5: Key Focus Areas for PD Intervention in Relation to L2LP

Key areas for focus	Evidence
Opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and with teachers of the same subject area.	• Important for subject teachers to have the opportunity and time to work with other teachers in their subject department and in other schools (focus group).
Knowledge and understanding of L2LPs	• Teachers (n=8) spoke about understanding different learning styles and needs and knowing how to teach L2LPs learning outcomes in their subjects. The SEN coordinator further developed this when she spoke about whole-school responsibility: *"I know that right now some teachers think 'well I'm Maths so I only need to know about Numeracy' for example. But I know from my sessions that it needs to be all teachers in all subjects, the SNAs, the caretaker and secretary can help too. We need to talk together to make decisions. This is really important for our CPD."* (interview)
	• Six teachers spoke about "*making sure we pick the right students for L2LPs*" (interview). The SEN coordinator was concerned about teachers' understanding of GLD as the criteria for L2LPs (personal communication).
Practical examples relevant to students, teachers and subjects	• Teachers (n=7) requested strategies and practical examples of how to incorporate L2LP into practice in their subjects (focus group)
Support in planning for L2LPs	• Ten teachers requested support in planning
Assessment and gathering evidence for L2LPs	• All teachers expressed the need to learn more about assessment for L2LPs to *"know how these students have reached their goal"*.
	• *Teachers* asked about measuring students' success without an exam and who is responsible for this: "*I know there's a portfolio but what do I, we, put in it? And who is responsible for marking it?* (focus group). *I'm gathering evidence so there's something there but is it enough and is it just me responsible for saying pass or fail?"* (personal communications)

DISCUSSION

Teacher education has struggled to prepare and support teachers to enact inclusive education approaches, such as L2LP, in their classrooms (Travers et al., 2010). Teachers reported that previous teacher education relating to inclusion did not prepare them for inclusive practices in the classroom, or to teach L2LPs. Phase one findings reported here indicated that newly qualified and student teachers had not heard about L2LP in their initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, and the other participants had limited exposure to PD relating to L2LP. Teachers who had attended the two-hour PD felt that this was was insufficient and wanted more opportunities to have discussions and share resources, experiences, and practices with colleagues. Only the SENCO had attended full day PD in the L2LP. All staff needed to understand the rationale for L2LPs, they wanted to know how the L2LP would impact on their time in relation to planning and subjects and wanted follow-up support after PD.

The findings also evidenced teacher's misconceptions about the nature of L2LPs and student eligibility for L2LPs, resulting in a fundamental lack of understanding for planning for learning and teaching. This lack of understanding may have contributed to the gap in teachers' perceptions of their planning and the reality of it in this phase. Furthermore, despite teachers reporting positively on their current planning and practice there was a lack of confidence and ownership to progress L2LP enactment from the school's initial steps. This gap in knowledge and practice despite inclusive beliefs highlights the argument that change is reciprocal (Rouse, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) and that the three dimensions of knowing, doing, and believing (Rouse, 2008) are interdependent. Indeed, change in just one dimension may not represent teacher learning as change in the three elements is required for learning to occur (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). However, teachers' belief in inclusive education meant teachers willingly submitted lesson plans without references to L2LP to receive feedback and guidance.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This was a small scale study conducted in one purposively selected post primary school with a limited number of participants and thus the findings cannot be generalised. Nevertheless, the illuminative evaluation carried out in this research facilitated a detailed exploration of the phenomenon of L2LP enactment in one mainstream post-primary school.

The need for additional support to effectively enact L2LP was a consistent theme throughout interviews with teachers. The findings indicate that the school had started to engage with L2LP, but momentum was lost without support following initial PD in L2LP. This seems to reflect a rather piecemeal approach to junior cycle reform with a priority placed on level 3 subjects. Furthermore, the dependency of JCT on the cascading model and the optional two-hour transmissive session to deliver professional development in relation to L2LPs may have contributed to the gap in teachers' knowledge and practice regarding L2LPs.

Based on the findings outlined in this paper, this study established a baseline from which to develop the CWPD intervention that formed phase two of this research (see Flood, 2019).

Establishing a baseline for CWPD indicated where the school was in its journey with L2LP and identified the goals of the CWPD. It was evident from the findings that the approach needed to be responsive and facilitate collaborative discussions, inquiry and decision-making based on acquired knowledge and understanding of students with GLD and L2LPs. Illuminative evaluation of Phase 1 resulted in the following areas of focus for the CWPD:

- Knowledge of GLD and understanding and rationale of L2LPs
- Planning for L2LPs, including LOs at classroom and whole-school level
- Assessment and gathering evidence

Incorporating the three elements of belief, knowledge, and practice (Rouse, 2008; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) into each session would support teacher change. Finally, in response to teachers' desire to participate in PD together, this CWPD took a blended approach building in synchronous and asynchronous elements. Teachers met as a group in school and Facetime was used to communicate with the facilitator. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, this represented an innovative and atypical approach to CWPD which in itself reflects the spirit of the case study school and staff in embracing inclusivity and flexibility.

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The Limerick Parent Toe-by-toe Intervention for Struggling Readers: Findings from A Research Project

Parent delivered intervention offers potential as a means for directly improving the reading skills of struggling readers. The focus of this study was to examine the impact of a reading intervention when used by parents within the home setting. Specifically, this study evaluated the effects of the Toe-by-Toe Reading Programme when implemented by parents of struggling readers. Findings showed that students participating in the Toe-by-Toe programme significantly improved on three different measures of reading word attack, word reading and reading fluency. There was less impressive growth on the reading comprehension and spelling subtests. The results of these studies are consistent with the empirical literature on the potential efficacy of parents as tutors of their children.

Keywords: *Toe-by-toe, reading intervention, parent, struggling readers*

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2017, all the Primary schools in Limerick (City and County) were contacted with a view to identifying children who were (a) struggling to acquire reading skills and (b) whose parents would be interested in participating in a parent-child reading intervention. The schools represented a diverse range of communities at both ends of the continuum of social and economic disadvantage (DEIS and Non-DEIS) in both rural and urban contexts. In the current study the aim is to measure how effective the Toe-by-toe (TBT) programme could be if delivered by parents rather than teachers. The material cost of the Toe-by-toe programme itself, is very low (40-60 euro). However, due its individualised delivery, it is very costly in terms of teacher time (20 minutes per day for extended periods of between 6 and

9 months typically). If motivated parents could be trained effectively on a research validated programme and could administer it with fidelity, there would be obvious benefits for struggling readers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Toe-by-toe is a highly structured phonics programme which has historically been used in schools within the context of special education provision for children with specific reading difficulties (Nugent 2010) The programme is a synthetic phonics approach which predicated on teaching learners the relationship between letters and sounds and how to use this process to decode and read words (Adams 1990) The Toe-by-Toe programme contains components common to all explicit and systematic phonic approaches including, a curriculum with a specified, sequential set of phonics elements; and instruction that is direct, precise, and unambiguous (Stahl et al. 1998). The reading of non-words is a particular feature of this programme, and there is also considerable emphasis on recording progress. It is an individualised approach, and the recommended practice is for approximately 20 minutes of instruction, daily.

In a previous study by the current authors the Toe-by-toe programme was combined with guided oral reading, both undertaken by a Special Education Teacher (O'Rourke, Olshtroon, & O'Halloran, 2016). In addition to receiving the Toe-by-toe programme, the pupils benefited from a targeted intervention of guided oral reading, at the 'just-right level', using the Rigby PM Readers series. This allowed struggling readers to read books with high levels of success and just the right amount of challenge. The pupils had previously been identified by their individual school as having reading difficulties and were receiving either individual or small group reading intervention. All participants received one to one daily Toe-by-toe teaching (15-20 minutes) and oral reading practice (15-20 minutes) over the duration of five months. A high portion of the participating pupils in the 2016 study made impressive gains in word reading and reading fluency.

Parent-Delivered Intervention

The focus of this study was to evaluate the Toe-by-toe programme in the context of home-based use by parents. There have been several studies which have confirmed that if parent tutors are provided with appropriate training and supervision, they can successfully improve their children's academic skills (Daly Iii and Kupzyk 2012). A meta-analysis of studies measuring parent–child reading activities and found that they can positively influence children's reading skills (Sénéchal and

Young 2008). This finding is further strengthened when parents are provided with tailored training to implement reading interventions rather than the parents just reading to children or listening to their children read. Research which examined the effects of summer parent tutoring on three children with specific learning difficulties using evidence-based reading interventions found that parents were able to implement the interventions effectively when they were provided with appropriate support (Gortmaker et al. 2007). Finally, (Zhou et al. 2019) reported that parent led reading interventions can lead to encouraging pupil outcomes even when the pupil had failed with previous school intervention.

The Toe-by-toe programme was selected as a suitable programme because it has a straightforward lay out and research suggests that parent delivered reading interventions work best when they are structured and easy to follow (Kupzyk et al. 2011).

METHODOLOGY

In the current study a parent/ caregiver of each identified struggling reader was invited to a local Toe-by-toe training. The training was a tailored hands-on workshop which provided guidance on how to implement the programme. The Local Education Centre invited a trainer from the Toe-by-Toe publisher to deliver the workshop. This research was underpinned by the informed consent process which included all pupils being given the opportunity to assent to involvement in the study through participant and parental information sheets and consent/assent forms.

At the introduction to the training parents were given verbal assurance that the research element was voluntary. Indeed there was a small group of children, whose parents attended the training and who received the Toe-by toe intervention, but did not take part in the study.

The participating pupils were all selected as having significantly below average reading skills (see table 1). An email was sent to every Mainstream Primary School in Limerick for the attention of the Special Education Teacher (SET) Coordinator to inform them of the proposed study and requesting suitable participants. The SET Coordinator was asked to consider only pupils who were receiving additional teaching support to help target reading difficulties. There were no other exclusionary criteria highlighted by the researchers such as general cognitive ability or English as an Additional Learners. The SET Coordinator

contacted parents/guardians of suitable pupils directly to see if they wished to participate in the study and explained that it would be a parent lead home-based intervention. The participating children (n=27) were initially pretested using the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement (WJ III ACH) (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001; 2007). The following subtests were used:

- *Letter-word identification*
- *Passage comprehension*
- *Reading fluency*
- *Word attack*
- *Spelling of sounds*

Table 1: The Average Pre-test Standard Scores/Percentile Scores for Each of the WJ-III Subtests

The average pre-test standard scores/percentile scores for each of the WJ-III subtests.	*Average pre-test standard scores average*	*Average percentile equivalent*
Letter-word identification	*81*	*10th*
Passage comprehension	*80*	*9th*
Reading fluency	*73*	*3rd*
Word attack	*69*	*2nd*
Spelling of Sounds	*82*	*12th*

The pupils were also individually assessed using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale, 3rd Edition (BPVS-3) (see table 2). This test measures a child's receptive vocabulary and does not require the child to read.

Table 2. The Average Pre-test Standard Scores/Percentile Scores for the BPVS-3

	Average pre-test standard scores average	*Average percentile equivalent*
British Picture Vocabulary Scale: Third Edition (BPVS3)	*81*	*10th*

RESULTS

Participants (N=27) were pre-tested using subtests from the Woodcock Johnson III Brief Battery-C. Subtests examined participants' levels of word identification, passage comprehension (reading comprehension), reading fluency, word attack skills and spelling of sounds. After four and a half months of intervention, participants were post-tested using the same subtests. Pre-intervention and post-intervention data were collected after approximately 4.5 months. Ideally the period between testing should have been at least 6 months to ensure no practice test effects. Word reading accuracy improved by 16.8 months (ratio gain = 3.35), reading fluency by 14.3 months (ratio gain = 2.8), passage comprehension by 10.7 months (ratio gain = 2.1), word attack by 12.4 months (ratio gain = 2.8) and spelling skills by less than 4 months (ratio gain = 0.8). These gains are all the more impressive because the participants were all children who struggled significantly to acquire reading skills.

Letter Word Identification
After a period of approximately 4.5 months, participants' accuracy in word identification had improved on average, by 16.2 months. This represents a **substantial ratio gain** of 3.61, and an average gain of 8.77 standard scores.

Reading Fluency
Post-intervention test results demonstrated that on average, participants' reading fluency ages had improved by 10.8 months. This represented a ratio gain of 2.4 and an increase of 7.72 standard scores.

Passage Comprehension
Participants' overall average passage comprehension attainment scores demonstrated relatively modest improvement post-intervention. The average passage comprehension scores increased by 4.05 months. This indicated a ratio gain of 0.9 which is an average of 2.63 standard score points.

Word Attack
Upon examination of pre- versus post-intervention attainment scores, gains in word attack skills were generally very positive. On average, an improvement of just less than a full year's growth (11.48 months) was recorded post-intervention, representing a ratio gain of 2.55 on the word attack subtest. On average, participating pupils showed an increase of 7.9 standard scores.

Spelling of Sounds
Participants indicated an average increase of 6.98 months in the accuracy of their spelling of sounds during their post-intervention assessment. As a result, a ratio gain of approximately 1.55 over the 4.5-month period was recorded.

DISCUSSION

The results have important implications because they present clear evidence that if the Toe-by-toe programme is delivered by trained parents, it can produce significant gains for struggling readers. The greatest gains achieved were in word reading, reading fluency and word attack skills. While the reading fluency improvement is good, it is less impressive than that found in the previous study (O'Rourke et al., 2016) which produced an average gain of 14.29 standard scores (compared to 10.8 in the current study). It is noteworthy that this intervention did not include an oral guided reading component. Perhaps this may explain this shortfall and underline the key message that a systematic phonics programme should always be coupled with ample reading practice for balanced reading growth.

The least impressive gain was in reading comprehension (just over 4 months progress in 4.5 months intervention). However, this particular cohort of pupils had generally low vocabulary levels in addition to poor word identification/ decoding skills. Multiple studies have highlighted a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, finding that the size of a person's vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension (Nation et al. 2010). For example, (Clarke et al. 2010) reported on a study that showed that despite being matched to typical readers on decoding, phonological skills, and nonverbal ability, children with reading comprehension difficulties performed poorer on vocabulary compared with typical readers. Similarly, the findings from (Snowling et al. 2016) found deficits in vocabulary as a significant underlying cause of pupils' reading comprehension difficulties. Although difficulty in decoding the words on a page is the most common cause of reading comprehension problems, between 10 and 15% of children experience poor comprehension despite maintaining normal levels of reading accuracy and fluency (Adams et al. 1992)

This suggests the need to include components designed to build other literacy-based skills fundamental for reading comprehension success e.g. vocabulary, background knowledge, explicit comprehension strategies. Developing and

implementing an intervention that incorporates these elements is likely to be much more successful at remediating children's reading comprehension skills (Gredler 2002).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our findings show that the Toe-by-toe programme delivered by trained parents has the potential to be a highly effective intervention, particularly for word decoding and word identification skill deficits. These findings have practical implications for parents who are willing and able to intervene themselves for their struggling children. Therefore, educators aiming to increase home-school collaboration and/or intervention support for struggling readers should strongly consider providing training and ongoing support with the Toe-by-Toe programme.

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HOME

The Everyday Autism Handbook for Schools: 60+ Essential Guides for Staff

By Claire Droney and Annelies Verbiest

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The Everyday Autism Handbook for Schools provides essential guides for teachers and the whole school community educating and supporting autistic[1] learners across all age ranges in mainstream primary, post primary, special class and special school settings. It starts with an impactful visual representing views of autistic students answering the question "what brings you joy"? This is a remarkable opener that reminds us how supporting autistic learners is about using strengths to thrive. It effectively sets the tone for this handbook that is informed movingly in parts by the insights, opinions and commentary from autistic students, families and advocates. This handbook links theory to practice in an accessible way, structured simply in six key parts with each broken into user-friendly guides. The book is accompanied by downloadable appendices which offer concrete resources highly suitable for the busy teacher.

This practicability comes from the experience of the authors Claire Droney and Annelies Verbiest who have been working in this area for almost 40 years combined. They know what works and how to communicate in a way that will support teachers in an efficient and sustainable manner; it is a book by teachers for teachers.

Part one provides two short guides in understanding autism. These give digestible information in what you need to know. The strengths based approach is refreshing and almost novel for a book which provides guidance for supporting autistic learners. Notes on terminology as well as gender and autism reflect ongoing understanding and new learning in this area.

Part two offers autism friendly strategies which are both evidence based and accessible. These again are refreshingly entitled from the perspective of the

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1   Terminology adopted in the book reflects choices of authors who use identity first throughout but respecting views of contributors who chose to use person first language.

learners e.g. "Make everything visible for me". These guides provide case examples, top tips, frequently asked questions and most importantly, the views of autistic advocates, parents and learners themselves in short quotes. The authors have aimed to centralise the insider perspective of autistic individuals and families which reflects a participatory approach to supporting autistic learners.

Parts three and four give guidance in cultivating an inclusive whole school community. This includes the environment along with supporting all staff, parents and peers again with a focus on acknowledging autism as a difference rather than a disorder. Here the authors have balanced supporting learners directly but also providing guidance in the role all community members play to create autism friendly schools. The authors' reminder that good practice for autistic students will also benefit all learners is welcome.

Part five contains much of what you wanted to know and were afraid to ask about setting up the special class. This real-world information will be invaluable for all teachers in particular, those new to their special class or for principals planning to set one up in school. It is an often overlooked aspect but crucially important and again, the authors' own experience and research here is evident.

Part six reflects the realities of the special class in an effective guide to class management with empathetic understanding. It is noteworthy that the authors discuss that what is perceived as challenging could actually be a very logical and functional solution for the pupil due to their areas of difference. This small attitudinal change has the potential to be very impactful in the classroom. This section again is further supported by case examples and guidance on how to use this information effectively.

This handbook is a clear move away from deficit based and hierarchical structures in autism education, reflecting the centrality of the autistic community in these matters and relating information grounded in research and professional experience in a straightforward way. Those interested in learning more can be guided by the comprehensive reference list and the index allows teachers to dip in and out of the pertinent aspects relevant to them. Further colour coding with easier access to the appendices could be beneficial here. These are possibly featured in an online version which was unavailable to the reviewer at time of writing.

The insights and tools in this book have the potential to lead to attitudinal and effective change in schools. It could be a resource for teachers as part of school self-evaluation or as a resource for communities of practice within or across

schools. The authors have provided an abundance of information that reflects a transactional approach to both supporting and educating autistic learners as well as guidance for educators and community members to think and behave ourselves in more inclusive ways to support diverse learners.

THE EVERYDAY AUTISM HANDBOOK FOR SCHOOLS: 60+ ESSENTIAL GUIDES FOR STAFF by Claire Droney and Annelies Verbiest, illustrated by Melanie Corr is published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2021 and costs Stg. £25.00

HOME

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