

Teachers' opinions on the supports they have received and require to aid the implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum, with implications for future curricular implementation in primary schools

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Abstract

This study uses a sequential mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative research design to investigate teachers' opinions of supports they received to aid the implementation of the *Primary Language Curriculum*. Questionnaires were used to gather data; findings from questionnaires were explored further by conducting eight semi-structured interviews, six with practising primary school teachers and two with teachers seconded to educational agencies. Findings highlighted that teachers did not feel included in the curriculum's creation. Both questionnaire and interview data revealed that teachers were unimpressed with their initial seminar-style training days and would have found well-funded, on-site, and sustained support more appropriate. Whilst participants felt many of the supports provided were adequate; there remained a negative disposition towards aspects of the curriculum. The findings in the study will have implications for how future curricula are implemented, including the supports teachers should receive, the consultation process and the type of professional development required by teachers.

Keywords: collaboration; curriculum implementation; teacher perspectives; professional development; educational supports

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Introduction

Curricula constantly evolve and change. In the Republic of Ireland, we are now entering an era of change, where the entire primary school curriculum is being redeveloped. The first stage of this redevelopment is complete with the introduction of the *Primary Language Curriculum* (PLC) in 2015. It is envisioned that the structures of the curricula that follow will be similar to the *Primary Language Curriculum* (NCCA, 2020). The PLC replaced the English and Gaeilge subjects of the 1999 *Primary School Curriculum*. The 1999 curriculum was seen as holistic, child-centred, and focused on active and discovery learning. The

curriculum also included new content, approaches, and methodologies (NCCA, 1999) and it placed a priority on literacy and numeracy (Murphy, 2004). The *PLC* will seek to build on the methodologies of the 1999 curriculum but will be outcome focused, English and Gaeilge will be taught as interrelated languages rather than two separate subjects as they were in the 1999 curriculum.

Educational change is inevitable; what is not inevitable is that teachers will accept these changes (Ramberg, 2014; Zimmerman, 2006). Teachers are the foundation on which every new curriculum or initiative will succeed or fail (Le Fevre, 2014). For teachers to be receptive to a curriculum, they must be involved in its inception and implementation. They need to feel included in the curricular creation discourse and have support and resources to implement the curriculum deeply in their classrooms (Kennedy & Shiel, 2013). Whether teachers are receptive or resistant to curricular changes will have a significant effect on whether the curriculum is successfully or superficially implemented (Murphy, 2004; Park & Sung, 2013). The *PLC* is a new curriculum therefore there is limited empirical data to suggest how successful its implementation has been. This study sought to add to this research, focusing on the supports teachers need to ensure its successful implementation.

Teacher supports

What supports have already been put in place?

This study investigated the supports put in place by the Department of Education and educational agencies in Ireland to aid the implementation of the *PLC*. Many supports were promised when the curriculum was first being implemented. *Circular 0061/2015*, which the DES issued to announce the introduction of the *PLC*, sets out three stages of support that would be available for schools. The first stage involved a familiarisation year where staff discussed and read through the curriculum documents. The second stage included initial training days for principals. These initial training days used a cascade model¹ to disseminate information (McGarry, 2017). Finally, whole staff training was provided through seminar days. The circular also promised a variety of professional development (PD) models, including workshops, classroom modelling, summer courses, website resources and publications (DES, 2015, p. 5). In 2019 an updated version of the circular was published. *Circular 0045/2019* builds on the above supports and explicitly mentions that “a programme of sustained in-school support will be made available to all schools” (DES, 2019, p. 3). This circular proposed that support would be given to schools over a prolonged period by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) or the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). A suite of webinars would also be made available to teachers. The circular highlights the critical role that school leadership has in leading discussion and training in relation to the *PLC*.

¹ The cascade model involves staff attending seminars and then passing on information to colleagues (Kennedy, 2005). It is important to note that the cascade model has been criticised in the literature as it can lead to a dilution of ideas (Hayes, 2000). It is also stigmatised as a cost-effective approach, used as a cheap method of training in developing countries (Hayes, 2000; Kennedy, 2005; McGarry, 2017).

Many other resources are available on the Curriculum online website (www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Primary-Language/Primary-Language-Toolkit/), including a *Primary Language Toolkit*, which offers support documents, explanation videos and exemplars of children's work (NCCA, 2021). A suite of supports is provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) on their website (www.sess.ie/resources/curricular/primary-language-curriculum) to help adapt the curriculum for children with additional needs (SESS, 2021). The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has adapted their online planning tool (<https://nccaplanning.ie/>) to include the learning outcomes of the *PLC*. The curriculum documents and the progression continua are also a resource provided by the NCCA.

The initial supports offered by the NCCA.

A more traditional form of PD involves a top-down approach. This approach involves teachers sitting in a room, away from their schools, and an expert lectures them about the merits, methodology, and theory behind the change they are trying to promote (Atteberry and Bryk, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; King, 2016; Park & Sung, 2013; Penuel et al., 2007). McGarry (2017) describes the form of PD chosen by the NCCA to disseminate the *PLC* as a top-down approach, which many participants of her research found inadequate. This traditional, top-down PD model is described as short-term, generalised, and a barrier to allowing teachers to participate in their learning (King, 2016; Van der Akker et al., 2008). It is also not inquiry-based and gives teachers little feedback or follow-up opportunities (Penuel, 2007; Ng & Leicht, 2019). However, it should be noted that the Department of Education promised sustained, on-site PD in *Circular 0045/2019*. Therefore, this study focused on investigating the supports outlined in this circular and to what extent teachers have engaged with these.

For PD to be successful, it should be inquiry-based (Penuel et al., 2007; Richardson 2003) and take place within the school context, with teachers' backgrounds and previous experiences in mind (King, 2016; Penuel et al., 2007; Van der Aaker, 2008). It should be expert-led, conducted over a prolonged period, and have extensive feedback and follow-up opportunities (Fang et al., 2014; Rogan & Grayson, 2003; Ng & Leicht, 2019). It should be collaborative, combining non-evaluative observation opportunities with teacher-led goals (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011; King, 2016; Richardson, 2003). PD should also allow teachers to investigate the theory and methods behind the new curriculum or initiative, and opportunities should be provided to discuss this in groups. This will give teachers a good understanding of what they are expected to teach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kennedy & Shiel, 2013; Park & Sung, 2013).

For PD to encompass all the above elements, it must be well funded (Kennedy & Shiel, 2013; Richardson, 2003). Kennedy and Shiel (2010) are critical of the type of PD opportunities afforded in the past to teachers in Ireland. They call these "insufficient" (Kennedy & Shiel, 2010, p. 373) as there were not enough facilitators and an inadequate amount of time was provided to schools to properly affect change (Murchan et al., 2009). The authors also challenge the Government to fund and resource PD adequately, stating, "it remains to be seen if the political will is there to provide the level and intensity of support

needed for real change" (p. 382). Park and Sung (2013, p. 28) assert that "if extraordinary resources are not levied in support of efforts to implement the new curriculum, the promise of deep reform is dim". Here, they maintain that additional resources and funding need to be put in place if a curriculum is to be implemented successfully. McGarry's (2017) study centred around the dissemination of the *PLC* found that the call to provide adequate funding for PD had gone largely ignored. Instead, teachers and principals perceived that a 'cascade model' (Hayes, 2000) used to introduce the *PLC* was chosen because it was the cheapest training method (McGarry, 2017). This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the supports provided in the period following McGarry's research.

Methodology

The study took the form of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) describe a mixed methods design as having different stages; these include piloting (Fink, 2010), combining quantitative and qualitative instruments in a study, and analysing data found using these instruments. Greene (2008) states researchers use this methodology because it can capture the general perspectives of a broad group of people and can then be used to investigate deeply specific themes or issues that have been identified. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instruments for this study. Combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis as part of a mixed-method sequential explanatory research design allowed me to obtain a more reliable picture of teachers' perspectives on the *PLC*. Furthermore, conducting interviews with both practising teachers and teachers seconded to educational advisory agencies allowed me to perform a robust analysis of teachers' perspectives and contrast these to the perspectives of two participants seconded to the educational agencies.

The first stage of research used a quantitative tool to explore the topic. This took the form of a questionnaire used to reach a broad cohort of primary teachers. Questionnaires are chosen as a data collection tool for many reasons; they are cost-effective, easy to distribute, standardised, can be distributed to many people and allow data to be analysed quickly (Denscombe, 2010). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all questionnaires were distributed and taken online. In total, 115 questionnaires were conducted with primary teachers in Ireland. These teachers came from a range of backgrounds and schools, they included principals as well as mainstream class teachers and teachers working in special education settings.

The second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were recruited through the questionnaires, where some participants wishing to be contacted further had volunteered their email addresses. In total, eight teachers were interviewed. Four teachers interviewed taught in mainstream classes and one teacher taught in a special school setting. In addition, one teaching principal was interviewed and two educational advisors, who conducted professional development training based on the *Primary Language Curriculum* to teachers.

Findings

The supports teachers received to aid curriculum implementation

The supports teachers receive can influence positively or negatively how a curriculum will be implemented; for a curriculum to be implemented successfully, teachers have to receive multi-layers of support (Kennedy & Shiel, 2013; Park & Sung, 2013). These layers of support (adapted from Van den Akker et al., 2008) are organised from a national level (macro supports) to the individual level (nano supports). In addition, two other levels are considered; these include supports from a school leadership level (meso supports) and the support that comes from collaboration amongst teachers (micro supports).

Macro supports

The macro supports examined in this section appeared most often in interviews. These included the initial in-service training received by teachers and ongoing sustained support.

Initial seminars

During the initial stages of curricular implementation, teachers were given in-service days and half-days to help them become familiar with the curriculum. The in-service days took the form of seminars in local education centres and on school campuses for larger schools. During these in-service days, educational advisors from the PDST or NCSE delivered seminars to teachers. The data gathered in both the questionnaires and interviews showed teachers were unconvinced by the initial seminar days. Five of the six practising teachers interviewed gave a negative appraisal of seminar days.

Eugene, an educational advisor, admitted that the seminar days are far from perfect as teachers received a lot of information during such days but retained very little. He believed seminar days should be used at the beginning of a curriculum rollout to deliver a consistent message to teachers. He acknowledged that with Covid restrictions, the online seminar-style days might be even less effective:

To get consistency of messages is through a seminar ... I remember reading a quote before; I think teachers maybe take in 10 per cent or something like that of the content in a six-hour seminar, and that's face-to-face. Imagine what it's like now online? (Eugene)

Later in the interview, Eugene pointed out that he would rather see more bespoke training for schools, but there is a place for seminar days to disseminate a curriculum earlier in the process:

It's all about consistency of message ... it's ... getting the word out that this is happening ... it's in the ether. But then ... there needs to be very bespoke sustained support. (Eugene)

When Bridget, also working for an educational advisory agency, delivered curriculum training days, she tried to make the days as practical as possible. Days which were theoretical or just about providing information were not as helpful for teachers:

If you go with a blanket theoretical point of view, it's just going to stay at a theory level, it is just going to stay at an information level. But for the teachers to engage with it, implement it, and take it on board, they have to relate to it. (Bridget)

Esme, a teacher in a large junior school, supports Bridget's recommendation; she found that the initial days were too theoretical. She did not see their benefit but would have preferred more practical training:

It was more the theory behind the *Primary Language Curriculum* and how it would help the children, and there wasn't so much practical help at the training days. (Esme)

Megan, a teacher in a large country school, also found the initial training less than helpful. She remembers advisors being more concerned with highlighting the positives around the curriculum rather than giving practical training.

They had spent the whole day trying to convince us that it was going to be OK and that they didn't want to worry us, and it was the absolute greatest load of fluff; there was no actual work done during that day. Nobody, I don't think anybody, came out of it feeling like they knew what was going on. (Megan)

Shauna, a recently qualified teacher, working in a special education school, pointed out that she and many others missed out on the initial training days. Recently qualified teachers usually engage in short-term subbing work. She drew attention to the fact that not being a temporary or permanent staff member might result in a whole cohort of teachers missing training:

But if you are not working in a school, you didn't have that access. Because you weren't on staff of this school or whatever, and the only way as a sub you would have gotten that access would have been if you were subbing long term, which was what ended up happening for me at one point. (Shauna)

The teachers interviewed did not perceive the initial seminar days to be appropriate or practical. They thought these days were more about trying to appease teachers rather than being based on their actual practice. Eugene believed that seminar days helped deliver a consistent message to all teachers. After this initial input he suggested that more bespoke on-site training be given. Shauna makes a very important point that training should be available to all teachers, that newly qualified teachers might miss out unless something is done to ensure they have access to in-service training in the future.

Sustained support

Above, we can see that the teachers did not believe seminar days were an ideal form of PD. The PDST and NCSE are now delivering sustained support to schools. The two educational advisors explain this. First, we get Eugene's explanation of sustained support, where each school receives six visits from an educational advisor each year:

The model we're using is sustained support, so it's not once-off visits. It is six visits over a period of a year, and within that then there's a number of different approaches and models we use. (Eugene)

Eugene then goes on to further explain why sustained support is beneficial. It is more bespoke, it can better meet the needs of individual schools and be more practical and specific:

That's what sustained support is; it's really bespoke. The needs in your school are probably very, very different to the needs of my school. (Eugene)

Bridget is also in favour of sustained support because it is more tailored to a school. The advisor is only there in a facilitative role rather than the lecturing role they played in the seminars:

The way we run sustained support is that it is intensive over a one-year period where ... the school can have up to six visits from a support advisor and the school decide the agenda, they decide the focus, we're just there in a facilitative role to bring the school along in that journey. (Bridget)

Five of the six teachers interviewed praised the model of sustained support. Esme recalls the support she received in her school, saying how practical it was:

It was very specific to our school. She [the advisor] was in the school; she was looking at our plans. It was very personal. That was really helpful (Esme).

When asked about the ideal form of training they would like to receive, Emer, a teacher in a large DEIS school, described the support she would have wanted. This involved an advisor coming in as a facilitator and the staff collaborating to decide a path forward:

You would have some facilitators in for half a day, but the other half of the day is dedicated for just actual staff collaboration. To ... get together, talk about what we've just been presented with, and decide, maybe on a route forward. (Emer)

The teachers and educational advisors agreed that a sustained support model was beneficial for schools. This support would be practical, bespoke and take place on-site. Importantly it would take place over a protracted period allowing for feedback and staff collaboration.

Meso supports

This section describes the supports that come from a school's leadership level. The perspectives are provided by teachers and educational advisors. Interviewees believed that the leadership team plays a vital role in setting an atmosphere congruent to implementing a curriculum successfully.

Importance of leadership

Eugene depicts the importance of leadership, especially when it comes to curricular change. The leadership in a school sets the tone and the example of best practice. This then filters down to the staff. A curriculum might not be successfully implemented if leadership don't set a good example:

As a leader, you have to be just as invested in it, if not more invested ... Demonstrating it, being an advocate of it, celebrating it, modelling it, monitoring it, for any curriculum to be ... successful. So yeah, I think it's imperative that leadership are all about this and driving it. They're the drivers of change in a school, aren't they? (Eugene)

Emer agrees with Eugene, she again says that leadership sets the tone, but they can't simply impose change on the staff. Instead, they must encourage staff to become involved. They must use a dynamic bottom-up/top-down approach that fosters collaboration and includes all staff members. Leadership must include members of staff who are enthusiastic about the new curriculum or initiative. Those more enthusiastic teachers will be better equipped to encourage reluctant colleagues to become involved:

The leadership are ... the people in the school who set the tone. Who will encourage ... teachers with the expertise to come forward and share their expertise. Share their enthusiasm for something ... And obviously, they are the best people to help bring the more reluctant members of staff along. (Emer)

Emer also points out that there are always enthusiastic staff in a school who will try their best to embrace and implement initiatives. However, if leadership do not set the tone, this will remain on an individual level and will not be adopted by the entire staff or become part of the school culture:

I feel like the management and the leadership in the school is one of the most important things ... individual teachers will go into their classroom and take it on board, but maybe it's not overall the school culture, so that definitely has to come from the leadership, so important. (Emer)

The interviews revealed that leadership plays a vital role in determining whether a curriculum will be successfully or superficially implemented in a school. Leadership can set an atmosphere of collaboration and experimentation in a school and enable enthusiastic

staff members to encourage others to be part of the change process. The management team must lead the change culture; however, if this is left to individual teachers, the change may only occur at an individual level. Good leaders will not mandate (King, 2016). Instead, they will encourage teachers to collaborate and work together towards a common shared goal.

Micro supports

Micro supports stem from a culture of collaboration when dynamic top-down/bottom-up approaches are availed of in schools. This form of support thrives when staff are not just mandated to work together but instead are empowered and encouraged to find solutions and experiment with new methodologies and ideas (King, 2011; King, 2016).

Collaboration

The teachers interviewed felt that a dynamic top-down/bottom-up approach is not commonly availed of in Irish schools. However, when asked about collaboration in the interviews, four out of six teachers interviewed talked about collaborating with colleagues informally and how positive this was.

Emer here states that the best form of support did not come from the macro or meso support layers; instead, it came through peer support and collaboration. Through discussing what worked in the classroom and sharing practice with staff, she found the most beneficial:

I suppose what I always find to be the best ... source of support is when we do get time with staff to sit, collaborate, share practice, go off, try things, come back, talk again ... (Emer)

From Megan's perspective, she also found that peer support was essential in her everyday teaching. Especially in the practical sense of discussing methodologies that work and experimenting with initiatives:

One of the most important things has been that peer support. That kind of like, oh, I tried this in my classroom today ... Did you do this yet this week? How did you find it? Did you find that children struggled with this kind of thing? (Megan)

Collaboration and peer discussion are essential in ensuring that a curriculum can be embedded successfully. However, this support should come from a dynamic top-down/bottom-up perspective where leadership and teachers work together to achieve a common goal (Fullan, 1994; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Poedjiastutie, 2019; Priesly et al., 2011; Ramberg; 2014).

Professional learning communities

Much literature points to the fact that professional learning communities are an excellent means of implementing changes in a school (Bolam et al., 2005; Kennedy & Shiel, 2013; King, 2016; Toole & Louis, 2002). Professional learning communities were mentioned

in half of the semi-structured interviews. Bridget gives an example of the makeup of a professional learning community. She highlights that they usually comprise members of the leadership team and teachers, but especially teachers with an interest in what the group is trying to achieve. The group can come together, experiment and collaborate before bringing their ideas to the broader staff:

You have leadership level, and you have class teacher level, and you know maybe somebody who has a particular interest in literacy. Where maybe they take an idea, or they take a focus, they look at it together as a group, and they bring it to the wider staff (Bridget).

Joseph, a teacher, working in a large DEIS Band 2 school, discusses how professional learning communities were voluntary and made up of teachers and members of the leadership team in his school. These groups were very practical, tried out different ideas inspired by the curriculum, and then fed these back at meetings:

Voluntary committees were set up by the AP1 [Assistant Principal 1] post holders looking for ... feedback, and we had ... working groups and working committees on the language curriculum ... looking at ... what aspects can we take from the curriculum ... looking at the curriculum in greater detail and saying this is certainly something we could try out (Joseph).

Professional learning communities can foster an atmosphere of experimentation and collaboration in a school. They also ensure that ideas and methods are trialled before being shared with the wider staff. They are a way of ensuring that enthusiastic teachers are included in the implementation process. These teachers are in a great position to encourage colleagues to become involved in implementation.

Nano supports

Nano supports are the supports that come from teachers themselves. For teachers to support themselves to implement a curriculum, other supports mentioned above need to be in place. For teachers to have a positive attitude towards the curriculum, they need to feel trusted (Penuel et al., 2007; Rogan & Grayson, 2003); a positive collaborative atmosphere needs to exist (Le Fevre, 2014). They need time to implement the changes (King, 2011; King, 2016). These teachers felt that time was vital in determining whether a curriculum would be implemented deeply or superficially.

Time

Teachers need to have time to implement a new curriculum. However, they should also not feel overwhelmed (King, 2016). Eugene acknowledges that teachers in Ireland have faced initiative overload over the past few years and that this could affect change and lead to teachers not having the time they need to implement the changes:

It's like there's initiative, after initiative, after initiative being introduced. We're right in the middle of curricular reform with the language curriculum. We're moving into a numeracy curriculum. Every other curriculum thereafter is going to be an outcome-based curriculum. But teachers need time to get their heads around it. (Eugene)

Five of the six teachers who were interviewed agreed with Eugene. They admitted to feeling overwhelmed and not having the time they needed to implement the curriculum properly. Emer affirms that many teachers have not yet fully interacted with the curriculum in her school. She believes that teachers do not have adequate time to implement it:

I suppose everybody knows that the *Primary Language Curriculum* book is sitting there, but ... just with the pressures of everything in the classroom ... maybe it just gets put to the side, and it's gathering dust. (Emer)

Megan's experience is similar; she strongly indicates that teachers have an unbearable workload. She feels exasperated and admits that she spends a lot of time feeling guilty about what she has not achieved. For her, the curriculum is just one thing on a very long to-do-list:

I think that, I think it's just ... another thing. I feel like being a teacher these days is spending 90 per cent of your free time thinking about all the things that you should be doing. So, the curriculum, I don't think it's changed the way I teach. I think it's just yet another thing on that pile of 'the never-ending to-do list'. (Megan)

Michael, a teaching principal, comments on how teachers are dealing with more complex issues. As a result, their priority has shifted to dealing with the social and emotional needs of the children and embedding a new curriculum is not a priority:

All of those structures are in addition to the ever-increasing social and emotional demands that, or needs that children appear to have. It effectively comes down to a matter of is it a prioritisation? (Michael)

A proposal by Eugene is to give teachers two non-contact hours each week to collaborate with staff and plan. This time, provided as a macro support from the Department of Education, could be used to help teachers collaborate or work individually to ensure successful implementation. Unfortunately, he also admits that he cannot see this being granted to teachers:

I think if I was ... Minister, I'd love to see every teacher getting two hours a week for prep during school time. But yeah, I don't think that will ever happen. (Eugene)

The teachers interviewed highlighted time as an important factor in determining if a curriculum will be successfully implemented. If teachers feel overwhelmed or are experiencing initiative overload, they will not have the capacity to implement a curriculum deeply. On the other hand, whether teachers are given enough time to research and implement a curriculum could also determine how receptive they are to change.

Discussion

The initial supports used to promote the *PLC* were investigated. McGarry's (2017) study found these to be inadequate. The opinions of participants in this study reflected McGarry's findings. Those same participants went on to discuss the supports that they needed to ensure successful curricular implementation. The supports mentioned by participants included sustained, inquiry-based PD and help to establish professional learning communities. The vital role of leadership in nurturing a positive collaborative environment and providing teachers with the time they need to implement successful curricular change was also highlighted.

Sustained, inquiry-based professional development

It was clear from previous research that teachers were unhappy with the type of PD they had received (McGarry, 2017). This study supported this finding. Initially, the NCCA used a top-down model to disseminate the *Primary Language Curriculum*. The teachers in this study felt this was inadequate and was the opposite of what they required. They wanted PD that was sustained over a more extended period in their schools and was inquiry-based. It was suggested by Eugene, the educational advisor, that at the very beginning of a dissemination process, off-site seminars can be beneficial because they provide a consistent message to teachers and also allow teachers to give feedback on the new curriculum or initiative.

The vital role of leadership

Leadership plays a vital role in implementing changes in a school (Rogan & Grayson, 2003). Leadership's influence can result in a new curriculum or initiative being successfully or superficially implemented. Leadership sets the tone and culture in a school; this could ensure an environment is either receptive or resistant to changes (King, 2016). However, it is important to note that leaders can't simply impose change. They should be part of a collaborative effort using dynamic bottom-up/top-down approaches to foster changes in a school (Priesly et al., 2011; Ramberg; 2014). It is also crucial for leadership to be a catalyst and acknowledge those teachers in a school who are amenable to changes; to tap into their enthusiasm, knowledge and skill sets allowing teachers to be a stimulus for change implementation (Atteberry & Bryk, 2011). Some enthusiastic teachers – regardless of leadership - will seek to implement changes on an individual level. However, these changes will remain at an individual level and this will not be congruent to positively affecting an atmosphere of change in a school (Rogan & Grayson, 2003).

Staff collaboration and professional learning communities

Evidence suggests that teachers do not take kindly to being dictated to; if initiatives are forced on them, they can be met with resistance (Park & Sung, 2013). Therefore, changes should take place as part of a dynamic top-down/bottom-up implementation strategy, with communication and consultation between all parties as part of the change process (Fullan, 1994; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Poedjastutie, 2019; Priesly et al., 2011; Ramberg, 2014). Therefore, staff collaboration and instruments such as professional learning communities could be used to ensure that teachers feel their voices have been heard in the change process.

The study found that there was evidence of a dynamic top-down/bottom-up implementation strategy being used within schools to help implement changes in Ireland. The teachers interviewed in this study, spoke of collaboration with other staff members as a vital part of their professional development. The most popular forms of collaboration were informal and not mandated; this type of collaboration allowed for informal discussion of new methodologies or initiatives used in classrooms. It encouraged teachers to support each other when experimenting with new teaching methods or implementing a new curriculum.

The teachers interviewed also spoke of using professional learning communities as a good way of implementing changes in the classrooms. Professional learning communities consist of groups of teachers working together towards a common goal (Bolam et al., 2005; Kennedy & Shiel, 2013; King, 2016; Toole & Louis, 2002). This goal can focus on implementing a new teaching methodology, initiative or curriculum etc., in a school. Teachers had positive opinions on professional learning communities. These were seen as an opportunity for teachers with a genuine interest in the initiative to lead, experiment and work together. They allowed teachers to try out ideas before bringing them to the whole staff, allowing them to be 'classroom ready' and therefore more likely to succeed. Importantly, professional learning communities allow teachers and leadership teams to work together, so initiatives are discussed collaboratively and not just enforced on staff.

Time

Teachers need time to implement educational changes (King, 2011; King, 2016). Time, teachers felt, was a vital component in determining whether a curriculum would be implemented deeply or superficially. Eugene felt that teachers are currently experiencing initiative overload. Five of the six teachers interviewed stated that they felt overwhelmed. Some spoke of a never-ending-to-do-list; implementing a new curriculum appeared at the bottom of this list. Instead, teachers were more concerned with dealing with an increase in social and emotional demands and the more immediate needs of their pupils. One proposal was to grant teachers non-contact time away from their classes which could be used for planning, collaboration and professional development.

Conclusion

The approach taken in this study focused on listening to teachers' perspectives. Teachers play a fundamental role in the implementation of curriculum change and are a vital component in curricular rollout (Murphy, 2004). If teachers' perspectives are not listened to a curriculum may only be superficially implemented (Park & Sung, 2013). The Department of Education should be cognisant of the fact that the teachers who took part in questionnaires and interviews for this study did not respond well to the top-down approach taken to disseminate the *Primary Language Curriculum*. This top-down approach took the form of seminars in which an expert lectured teachers about the *Primary Language Curriculum*. Such seminars work well as a familiarisation tool and can be used to great effect to gather information and teachers' opinions during early consultation phases. However, other forms of PD should be used when it comes to embedding a curriculum (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). A dynamic top-down/bottom-up approach such as the sustained support model should be incorporated instead (Priesly et al., 2011; Ramberg; 2014). This model is inquiry-based, conducted over a long time, and allows feedback opportunities for teachers (King, 2011; King, 2016). Teachers interviewed for this study had a positive disposition towards the sustained support model.

The PD provided by the Department of Education and educational agencies is essential in implementing a curriculum; however, two other levels of support are also vital in ensuring a successful curricular implementation. These levels of support come from the leadership in a school and through peer support. If the leadership team in the school don't show any interest in the initiative or curriculum, then a curriculum may be superficially implemented. This could mean that the curriculum may only be implemented on a 'name-only' basis, e.g. learning outcomes will be included in teachers' planning, but the essence and spirit of the curriculum will be lost. Instead, teachers might revert to teaching as they always have done. The study found that leadership in a school should not impose curricular change on staff, as this could be met with resentment and resistance. Instead, school leaders need to encourage and embrace collaboration. They can empower teachers to set up professional learning communities and provide these with the support and trust they need to succeed.

Unfortunately, none of the above will guarantee a successful implementation unless individual teachers have the inclination and capacity to implement change. Worryingly, both the educational advisors and teachers interviewed in this study highlighted a lack of time in their interviews. This perceived lack of time was seen as an impediment to curricular implementation. Initiative overload, the pressures of everyday teaching, a never-ending-to-do-list and having to deal with the ever-increasing social needs of children were seen as hindering successful curricular implementation in the interviewees' classrooms. The Department of Education needs to tackle this perceived lack of time if they want future curricula to be implemented deeply throughout the Irish education system. Teachers need to be provided with adequate time to implement a curriculum successfully. One suggestion is that teachers are provided with non-contact time where they have opportunities for PD, to collaborate and plan with colleagues, and to discover ways to embed a new curriculum in the teaching and learning of their classrooms.

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