



# **Empowering Teachers in a DEIS Primary School**

Collaboration and Team-Teaching in Literacy

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Recent reviews of Irish national literacy strategies have repeatedly underscored the unique challenges of the DEIS context where disparities in literacy attainment compared to non-DEIS counterparts were identified. Thus, it highlights the importance of exploring and developing tailored strategies that empower teachers and foster literacy excellence, particularly in these unique DEIS contexts.

This study explored mainstream and learning support primary school teachers' participation in a new collaborative and literacy team-teaching model in a DEIS primary school in Dublin, Ireland. The study aimed to investigate teacher empowerment through collaboration and team-teaching using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach. The key focus of the study was to understand how teachers are empowered through collaboration and team-teaching, what factors contribute to this empowerment, what the school's strengths and assets are, and, importantly, what role leadership plays in supporting successful literacy teaching and opportunities for teacher empowerment.

The research adopts a qualitative approach. AI interviews were conducted with seven teachers from the DEIS school to explore participants' experiences of success in literacy teaching.

Analysis of the AI interviews revealed common themes and shared experiences. The themes highlighted the collective belief in the value and strength of collaborative relationships, success and achievements in team-teaching, and impactful collaborative practices denoting collective efficacy, professional development, and growth. The role of supportive and effective leadership was explored in fostering these practices. Participants described teacher autonomy, flexibility, collective problem-solving, and generosity in sharing resources, ideas, time, and knowledge. Opportunities to participate in decision-making, forums for discussion and reflective practices were deemed valuable. The findings showed teachers experienced, increased motivation, confidence, pride, and enthusiasm. There was convincing evidence that teacher empowerment permeated the analysed themes as a direct result of teachers working together in a multifaceted collaborative way.

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Key words: empowering teachers, collaboration, literacy team-teaching, DEIS, Appreciative Inquiry

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**GLOSSARY or ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS (choose one or other)**

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
LAOS	Looking at Our School
NAER	National Assessments of English Reading
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NLNS	National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Children and Young People
NAMER	National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
OE	Organizational Empowerment
PE	Psychological Empowerment
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PL	Professional Learning
PLC	Primary Language Curriculum
SCT	Socio Cultural theory
SES	Socio Economic Status
SSE	School Self Evaluation

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Research Topic and Purpose

This thesis explores mainstream class teachers and Special Educational Needs (SEN) teachers' experiences of empowerment, using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, of a new collaborative and team-teaching model in literacy instruction. This thesis was undertaken in a Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (disadvantaged) primary school in Dublin, Ireland, where I, the author, am a teacher in a senior leadership role. It is imperative to acknowledge the strengths and achievements in collaboration and team-teaching in literacy instruction to create a future-orientated vision for addressing the disparities in literacy attainment in disadvantaged primary schools in Ireland, post-COVID-19. Developing and implementing innovative approaches that empower and uplift teachers in realising an inclusive and equitable education system is crucial.

While celebrating the DEIS initiatives successes, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) highlights the literacy achievement gap in DEIS primary schools across Ireland. There is an acknowledgement of the complex, multi-faceted nature of literacy challenges and the potential of collaborative practices as a driver for change. A holistic transformation in literacy instruction is vital in bridging the literacy gap in DEIS schools and creating greater classroom inclusion. (NCCA, 2020, p 21). Reports underscore the need for a comprehensive exploration of strategies that empower teachers to foster literacy excellence within these unique educational contexts in DEIS schools. Frymier (1987, p.9) states, "In any attempt to improve education, teachers are central". There is a focus in Ireland on teachers and schools as having greater flexibility and agency to respond to their needs and contexts. However, to do so, they need to feel empowered (Literacy Association of Ireland (LAI), 2022).

In the 'Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy- A Review of the Literature' (Kennedy, Shiel, French, Harbison, Leahy, Ó Duibhir & Travers, 2023), King (2019) identified several gaps relating to teacher empowerment in the national literacy strategy and the review of teacher empowerment. A

need to empower teachers to navigate the complexity of professional learning was suggested. The need to empower teachers to implement changes at an individual, collective, and organisational level is considered a necessary step to support their leadership in improving literacy pedagogy, student learning, and educational reform and improvement in teaching (Poekert, 2012; Kennedy et al. 2023, p. 180). What was not discussed in this literature review is the 'how' of empowering teachers or, what are teachers' experiences of empowerment and what factors influence its realisation.

This action research project seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the potential for empowerment of mainstream and SEN teachers working in DEIS primary schools by analysing teachers' experiences of collaboration and team-teaching in literacy in one DEIS Band 1 urban school in Dublin, Ireland. It seeks to answer how teachers are empowered at an individual, collective and organisational level through collaborative practices. This thesis seeks to facilitate the conversation on what teachers perceive as factors that successfully foster an empowering environment for all. While the school is evaluating the impact of the new collaborative and inclusive model on the children's learning in terms of literacy attainment, it is also important to analyse its impact on the teachers for sustainability and impact. According to Rosenholtz (1991), ". . . the culture of a school changes significantly when experienced teachers stop functioning in isolation and start solving problems related to students' learning collectively" (Short, Greer & Melvin, 1994).

## **1.2 Background**

### **1.2.1 DEIS Initiative**

In 2005, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in Ireland launched the DEIS initiative (DES, 2005), targeting all urban and rural schools designated as disadvantaged. Following the DEIS Review 2015, an objective approach identifying schools for inclusion in DEIS was developed. The essential data sources used in the DEIS identification process were data from the DES Primary Online

Database (POD) and Central Statistics Office (CSO) data from the National Census of Population as represented in the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for Small Areas (HP index). Included also are students who identify as members of the Irish Traveller or Roma community, students residing in International Protection Accommodation Services centres and students experiencing homelessness (DES, 2022).

The DEIS initiative aims to build on current successes in education in disadvantaged schools and address areas where there may be shortcomings. DEIS schools were obliged to create a three-year action plan to target literacy and numeracy achievement and develop plans for monitoring progress towards the targets set out in the DEIS plan (DES, 2005). This initiative was followed in 2011 by the first 10-year National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy for Children and Young People (NLNS) (DES, 2011), which was reviewed and revised in 2017. The NLNS was designed to impact all children's literacy and numeracy development positively. However, there was a particular emphasis placed on DEIS schools and initiatives addressing the needs of diverse and marginalised learners. (Kennedy et al. 2023). In the 2021/22 academic year, DEIS schools accounted for approximately 20% of the overall school population in Ireland; there were 884 schools (687 primary and 197 post-primary) in the DEIS programme serving over 180,000 students, with an imminent increase in September 2022 to 1,194 schools and over 240,000 students (DES, 2022).

As a result of pre-existing gaps in literacy attainment, school closures, the introduction of a new Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) in 2019 - widespread disruption to teaching and learning brought on by the Covid-19 Pandemic, recent Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reports indicate that students from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds attending schools with DEIS status are continuing to achieve lower scores on average in reading literacy. Of the students participating in PIRLS in Ireland, 78.3% were enrolled in schools without DEIS status during the testing period, categorized as "non-DEIS." Approximately 10.9% of students attended schools classified under DEIS Urban Band 1, indicating the highest level of disadvantage. A smaller fraction attended DEIS Urban Band 2 schools (6.9%) and DEIS Rural schools (3.9%)

(Delaney, McAteer, Delaney, McHugh, & O'Neill, 2023). The school participating in this action research project belongs to the DEIS Urban Band 1 group.

Students in DEIS Band 1 schools recorded an average reading score of 531, 56 points lower than their counterparts in non-DEIS schools (587). This discrepancy signifies a notable gap of more than half a standard deviation on the PIRLS scale, indicating a substantial and statistically significant difference. Among the reference countries, Singapore reported the widest achievement gap between pupils with higher versus lower socioeconomic status (SES), followed by Ireland (Delaney et al. 2023). The PIRLS Report 2021, The National Assessments of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) 2021, and the NAMER Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) reports noted that Irish primary-aged students, on average, remain among the best internationally when it comes to Literacy, except for DEIS students.

However, Kennedy (2010) reminds us, that caution is needed when addressing achievement gaps through a combination of reforms (DEIS initiative in Ireland; No Child Left Behind initiative in the United States), high-stakes testing and accountability measures. (Kennedy, 2010, p.384.) These may lead to a sense of disempowerment for teachers. Nevertheless, the reports serve as a call to action and emphasise the urgent need to address the disparities in literacy attainment, particularly in the context of disadvantaged DEIS schools. The chasm between DEIS and non-DEIS schools regarding literacy remains unequal in Ireland. Kennedy's (2010) own work in teacher empowerment in Ireland in DEIS schools, specifically in bridging gaps in literacy attainment, is rooted in collaborative Professional Learning (PL) and the need for a customized or context-specific approach to creating a balanced and research-backed approach to literacy instruction. (Kennedy, 2010, p. 386.)

Teachers working in DEIS schools in Ireland face many challenges daily in their quest to provide quality education and support to their students. Challenges include higher than national average student needs, lower than average attainment in Literacy and Numeracy, a national teacher shortage (Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), 2022), larger class sizes than the EU average (Education at a Glance, OECD, 2021) and culturally marginalised students. These challenges, combined with other societal factors such as poverty and an increase in

the number of children living in emergency accommodations, are examples of some obstacles that teachers working in disadvantaged schools in Ireland are currently facing.

### 1.2.2 School Context

The DEIS school in this research is a co-educational, Catholic, senior primary school under the patronage of the Archbishop of Dublin. It has an administrative principal, twelve mainstream class teachers and seven Special Educational Needs Teachers (SET). The school is a designated DEIS Urban Band 1 School. Since COVID-19, the educational needs of the children attending this school have grown substantially. The staff are engaging in the School Self Evaluation process using the Looking at Our School 2022 Quality Framework (LAOS) (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2022) to identify and target ways they can successfully target and cater for the significant needs in their school. Approximately 44 % of the children attending this school have a confirmed Special Educational Need (FIGURE 1). There are recorded discrepancies in Literacy and Mathematical attainment when compared with the assessed ability the school aims to address (FIGURE 2). A considerable number of children receive in-class and school support (FIGURE 3).

<b>Overall Needs:</b>	<i>Confirmed:</i>
No of Special Educational Needs:	206
<b>No of Children with SEN:</b>	<b>110</b>
<i>Percentage of School Population:</i>	<i>44%</i>
<b>No of Children with Complex Needs:</b>	<b>39</b>
<i>Percentage of School Population:</i>	<i>16%</i>

FIGURE 1. Overall Special Educational Needs.

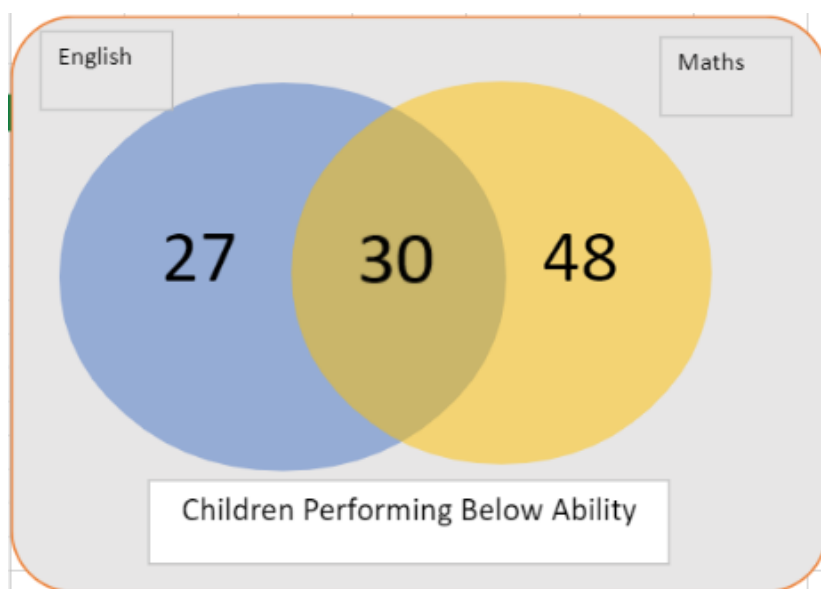


FIGURE 2. Number of children for whom there is a recorded discrepancy between the Standardised Test in Literacy (MICRAT) and Standardised Test in Non-Verbal Reading Test (NVRT).

Continuum of Support Breakdown:	
Pupils receiving Classroom Support:	33
Pupils receiving School Support:	70
Pupils receiving School Support Plus:	30
Pupils with Special Class Placement:	6

FIGURE 3. Number of children receiving various levels of support.

### 1.2.3 School Self Evaluation- LAOS Quality Framework

In 2022, there were numerous changes at the senior leadership level in this DEIS school due to several senior staff members retiring. The new school senior leadership team, of which the author is a member, carried out an internal survey as part of the School Self Evaluation (SSE) process using the Looking at Our School 2022 Quality Framework (LAOS, Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2022) to garner feedback from school staff, including Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), on areas of strength and potential future areas of development. The LAOS 2022 framework is organised into two dimensions: Learning and teaching

and Leadership and management. These dimensions are the most critical areas of the work of a school. Each dimension is structured using four domains and is underpinned by ten key guiding principles (FIGURE 4 and FIGURE 5) Leadership, school self-evaluation and the importance of providing quality teaching are contributing factors to the purpose of this thesis.

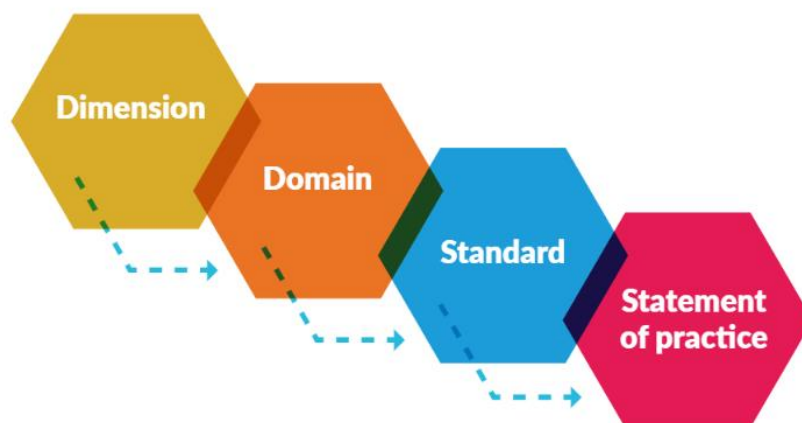


FIGURE 4. Overview of LAOS Framework. (DES, 2022, p.12)

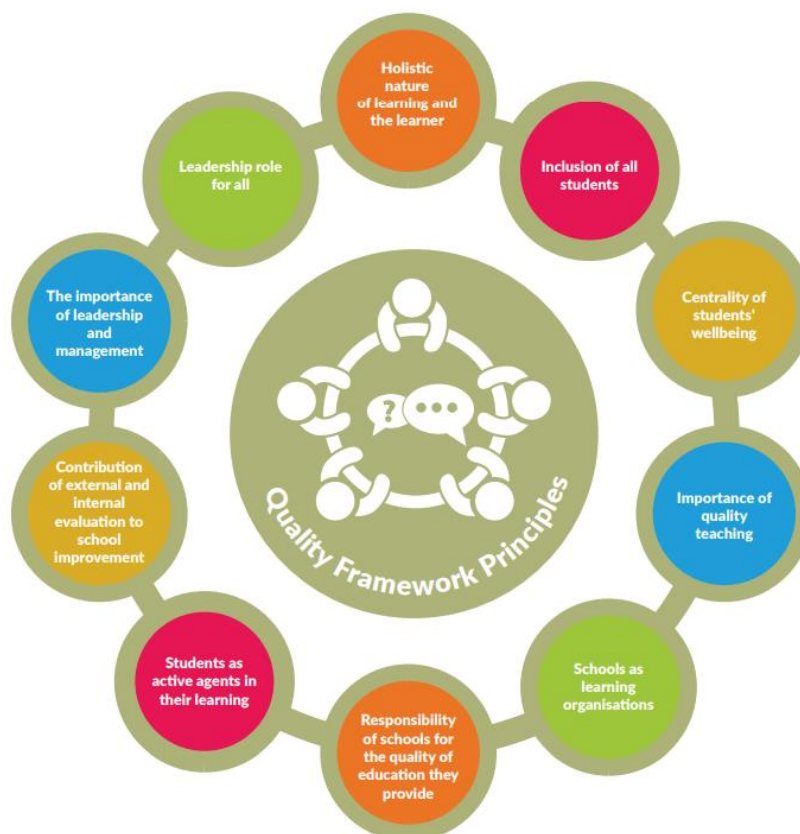


FIGURE 5. 10 Key Principles. LAOS Framework 2022: A quality framework for primary and Special Schools. (DES, 2022, p. 8)

The four domains are as follows:

- Learner Outcomes
- Learner Experiences
- Teachers Individual Practice
- Teachers' Collective/Collaborative Practice

Teachers were asked to self-evaluate using the LAOS Quality Framework individual and whole school practices of Teaching and Learning in Literacy under the two domains of Teachers' Individual Practice and Teachers' Collective/ Collaborative Practice, using the Standards statements of the LAOS 2022 framework as shown in FIGURE 6.

<b>Teachers' individual practice</b>	<p>The teacher:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has the requisite curriculum knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills</li> <li>selects and uses preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning</li> <li>selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the intended learning outcomes and to pupils' learning needs</li> <li>responds to individual learning needs and differentiates learning and teaching activities as necessary</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers' collective / collaborative practice</b>	<p>Teachers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>value and engage in professional learning and professional collaboration</li> <li>work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum</li> <li>collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices</li> <li>contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise</li> </ul>

FIGURE 6. Overview of two Domains and Standards of LAOS Framework. (DES, 2022, p. 25)

The teachers were asked to identify areas of strength in current practices and desired areas for future development. An overview of the results can be seen in TABLE 1 below. The results were discussed at a whole staff meeting and in focus groups. The staff expressed a powerful desire to improve these areas and build upon the school's strengths.

As can be seen in TABLE 1, the results show an average of 79% competency ratings regarding individual practice, suggesting that teachers feel this is an area of strength. Results further show that there were 83% competency ratings in subject and pedagogical knowledge, reflecting teachers' confidence in having the pre-requisite curriculum knowledge. Planning, preparation, and assessment practices were 71%. The use of appropriate teaching approaches was 83%, and

responding to individual needs by differentiating teaching and learning activities was 80%. These areas of strength are to be acknowledged and considered favourably for the school. However, the results concerning collaborative practices in the school are in stark contrast at an overall average score of 56% as seen in FIGURE 7 and FIGURE 8.

TABLE 1. Overview of results from staff feedback on literacy using LAOS 2022

Domain: Teachers' Individual Practice		
Standards	The teacher:	% Compe- tency
1	has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills	83
2	Selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress pupils' learning	71
3	Selects ad uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning objectives and to pupils' learning needs	83
4	Responds to individual learning needs and differentiates teaching and learning activities as necessary	80
	Average	79
Domain: Teachers' Collective/Collaborative practice		
Standards	Teachers:	% Compe- tency
1	Value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration	67
2	Work together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum	56
3	Collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices	40
4	Contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise	60
	Average	56

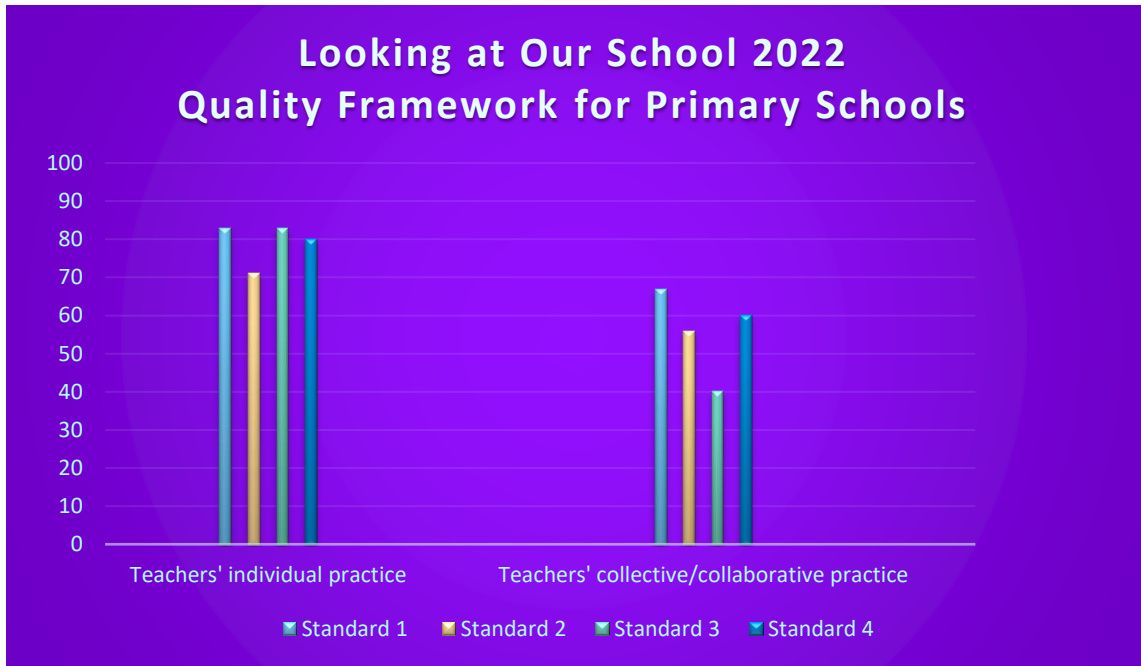


FIGURE 7. Comparison of teachers' feedback on individual and collective teacher practices in literacy using the LAOS 2022 Framework for Primary schools

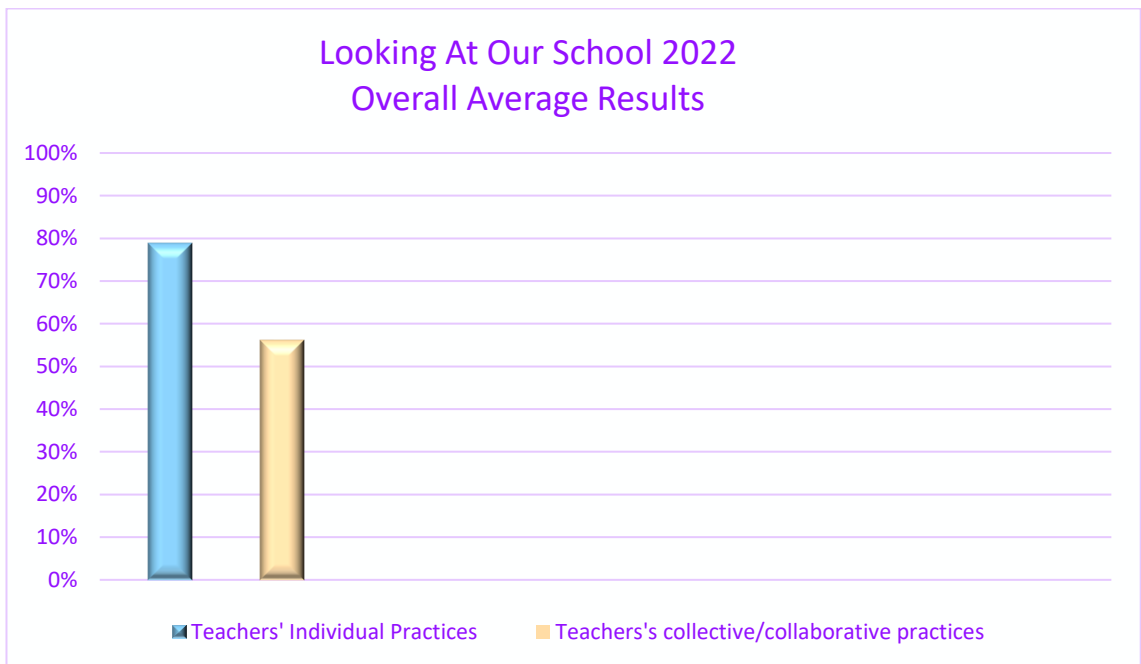


FIGURE 8. Comparison of average results of LAOS framework of Teacher Individual Practice and Teacher's Collective/Collaborative Literacy Practices

The two standards that scored significantly lower were:

- Working together to devise learning opportunities for pupils across and beyond the curriculum (56%)
- Collectively developing and implementing consistent and dependable practices in literacy and numeracy (40%).

Teachers' feedback showed that the staff of this school felt that whilst they cooperated well and shared resources, there was a lack of and a need for more profound collaborative practices. Teachers' feedback as shown in TABLE 1, shows that satisfaction in the contribution and sharing of expertise in literacy across the school to build whole staff capacity was at 60%. Valuing and engaging in professional development and professional collaboration was at 67%. After many senior staff retired, there was a feeling that expertise was lost before it was shared. The staff acknowledged that there was still much expertise and experience on the current staff and that it was important that there was an opportunity for this to be shared and to utilise this as a valuable on-site resource. The teachers expressed their wishes to collaborate further with external supports and experts in the field, such as the OIDE professional support team (DES) and other literacy experts in Ireland.

The school analysed the gathered data and utilised the evidence to form the basis of the school's DEIS plan for developing targets in Literacy. It is from this co-constructed data and reflective practice, using a best practice framework and regular formal and informal feedback and discussion from staff, that the identification of a need, and more importantly, a desire, for a newly designed collaborative and team-teaching model in literacy was identified. A Change Model Process was implemented start of the 2023 school year.

#### **1.2.4 Change Model: Team Teaching and Collaboration**

In 2022, the DEIS school gathered data from multiple sources about the student profile and school needs in the form of standardised testing, screeners, socio-economic and family history, SEN, formal reports and assessments, marginalisation factors – Roma and Irish Traveller Community and English as an Additional

Language (EAL) statistics. This work was done collaboratively between the junior and senior schoolteachers, mainstream and SET teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), school leadership and parents. The school identified the need for addressing the significantly lower than national average Literacy and Numeracy attainment, higher than national average number of students with SEN and behavioural difficulties in the 2022 school year. Through the structured process of SSE and using the LAOS framework in conjunction with the NCSE guidelines for inclusion in education, the school agreed that an innovative, collaborative approach, with a shared responsibility to address their context-specific growing needs, was required. Thus, began the design of a new collaboration model between mainstream class teachers and SEN teachers.

The school implemented Lewin's (1951) unfreeze and freeze change model (FIGURE 9). As this was a whole-school organizational change, school leaders needed to implement a change model to ensure a smooth and supportive transition to a new teaching model with the least resistance possible. Lewin's proposed three steps to bring about organizational change.

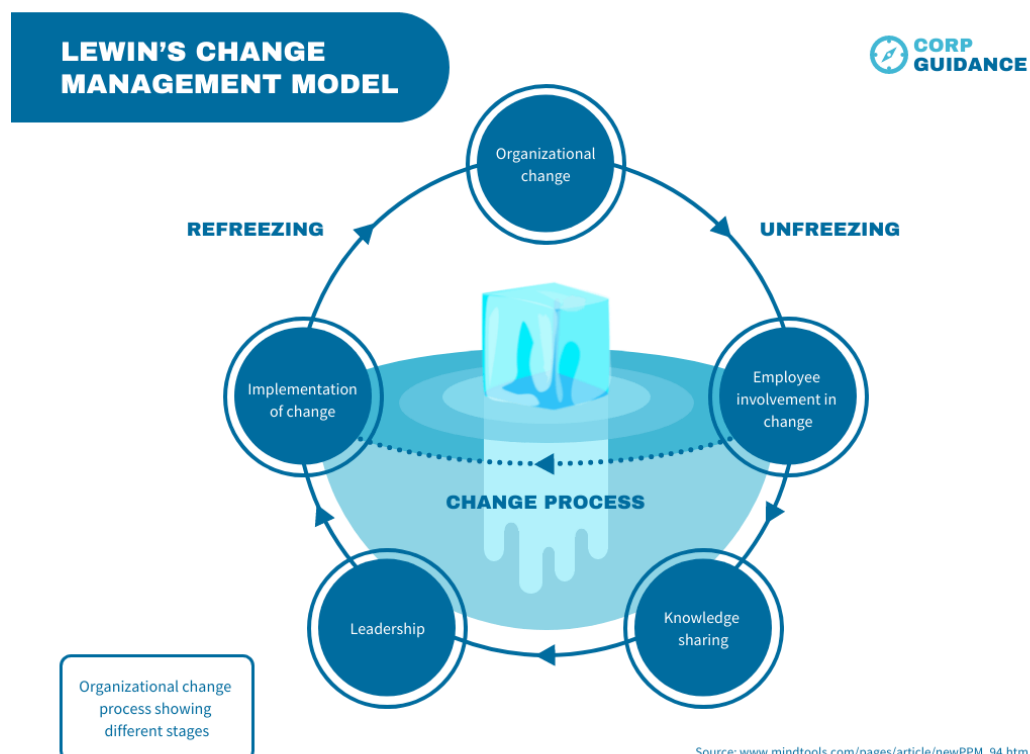


FIGURE 9. Lewin's Change Management Model. Retrieved from <https://venngage.com/blog/change-management-models/>

The first step is unfreezing, unfreezing 'the current state of affairs' (Cameron & Green, 2012, p. 121) as displayed in FIGURE 10. The school leadership acknowledged the need to unfreeze to create change and enable the staff to implement the new team teaching and collaboration model. The next phase is moving to a new state of change through active participation, collaboration, and involvement. The final phase is refreezing, whereby successes are acknowledged and celebrated, and stability is created. (Cameron & Green, 2012, p. 121-122).

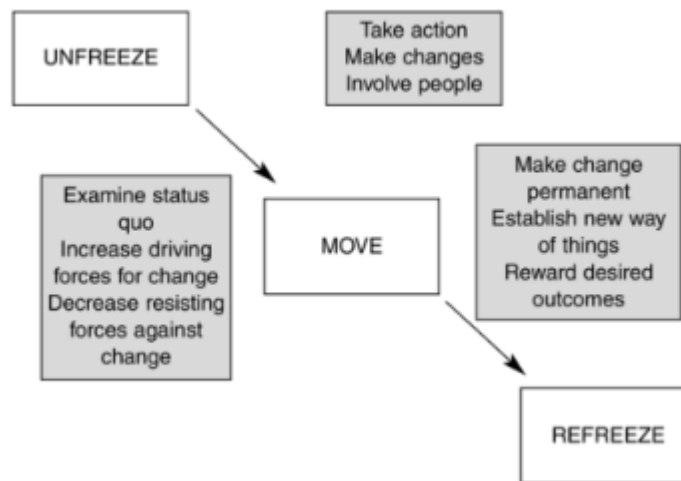


FIGURE 10. Lewin's 3-Step Model. Lewin (1951)

### Unfreezing

All staff members created the new model of team teaching through brainstorming sessions at monthly staff meetings, as well as SET meetings, and middle and senior leadership team meetings with staff members with specific curriculum leadership roles. The school principal and the SEN coordinator coordinated and facilitated the overall process.

### Step 1

SET teachers were assigned to specific class groups to work as team-teachers for Literacy and Numeracy. This was done to lessen the group withdrawals for children with specific educational needs and create a more inclusive education model with shared responsibility between the two teachers involved. Children

were identified for target teaching and support based on gathered data, evidence and teacher observations.

## **Step 2**

A new slot for collaborative planning for team teaching in Literacy and Numeracy was created, which had never previously existed. Every Thursday for 30-40 minutes, team-teachers would have the opportunity to plan, create and source resources, identify learning goals, and target children for additional in-class support. A new planning template was created and trialled. There was also an opportunity for corridor planning at the class level.

## **Step 3**

The school began implementing the Look Back and Look Forward approach to reviewing the new model and identifying and sharing successes at whole staff meetings. Teachers were encouraged to share systems and methods that were working well and those that needed to be adjusted. During these Look-Back sessions, teachers identified areas of desired professional learning. Many teachers identified that effective evidence-based literacy interventions have changed in recent times, and they wanted more Professional Development (PD) in this area. Teachers collectively requested more PD on team-teaching and how team-teaching could be used most effectively.

## **Step 4**

School leadership and the author of this paper, who is responsible for leading the Literacy Curriculum, organised a year-long support and PD with the DES Oide Department in terms of Literacy Interventions, team teaching, and planning. At these on-site PD days, staff form focus groups to review on current practices and successes or failures and adjust and adapt the model.

## **Step 5**

In addition to team-teaching collaborative planning, the SET team were provided opportunities to collaboratively plan, assess, and identify the needs of SEN pupils and share best practices, knowledge, and expertise. The school introduced regular SET as part of the new collaborative model.

### 1.2.5 Reflection on Change Process

This new team-teaching model has undergone numerous review and redesign stages over the 2023 school year. Initially, there was great enthusiasm for the change to team-teaching and collaborative planning. Nevertheless, it had its stresses and some resistance. Many new collaborative relationships were developed, and staff had to learn a new way of teaching and working together. Whereas previously teaching Literacy in the school was more individualistic, two teachers teaching together was a different dynamic that required teachers to work co-operatively with teachers of different teaching styles, expertise and experience. There were increases in paperwork expected regarding new collaboratively designed planning templates, many samples of which were tried and disregarded. The elevated levels of enthusiasm at the beginning began to wane as the process continued, and there were many moments of stress as the whole school navigated this new model. To change one thing, they were at risk of attempting to change everything within the first year.

There was a notable increase in the schools' collaborative, reflective, problem-solving, and collegiality on all levels, across year groupings, between mainstream and SET, and as a whole school. Weekly planning was reduced to bi-weekly planning as teachers were over-planning and then feeling burdened that they had not achieved their goals. At staff meetings, it came up in conversation that staff felt they were trying to change everything all at once and were feeling pressured to implement several new initiatives simultaneously. From this whole school reflective dialogue, leadership became aware of the risk of falling into an 'Acceleration Trap' (Bruch & Menges, 2010). Not only was a new team-teaching and collaborative model introduced, but a variety of new Literacy interventions were introduced to target the school's literacy attainment. There was a risk of burnout or over-acceleration of change, and it was necessary to slow the process down and freeze. This thesis asks whether teachers have felt empowered through these new whole school changes and, if so, in what way and how this can be developed and built upon moving forward.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This thesis aims to gather the participating teachers' and leadership's perspectives and experiences of teacher empowerment through developing, implementing, and reviewing a new model of collaboration and team-teaching practices in literacy in one DEIS urban school. This research will explore the possibilities of teacher empowerment in supporting change at the individual, community, and organisational levels in tackling literacy gaps (Kennedy et al. 2023), the challenges experienced and how they were resolved through the process. The purpose of this research is to leverage the feedback, and data collected to build upon and further improve collaborative practices throughout the school, informed by the theoretical framework of empowerment, socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and Freirean Principles (Freire, .

Grounded in the context of DEIS initiatives in Ireland (DES, 2017), this research seeks to address literacy gaps in Irish DEIS primary schools by enhancing an environment where teachers and leadership are empowered to participate in authentic and meaningful discourse and problem solving. By applying the theories of empowerment, socio-cultural theory and Freirean concepts, this research further aims to cultivate a school culture of agency and inclusivity enabling the school community to identify, understand and address the literacy challenges collectively. The results may be used to identify future areas for review and inform the development of a new collaboration and team-teaching policy in the school, which currently does not exist.

The main research question of this thesis is:

- **How has collaboration and team-teaching in literacy contributed to teacher empowerment in this DEIS school?**

The sub-questions that are being explored in this thesis are:

- What are the strengths and achievements of this DEIS school in literacy teaching?

- According to the teachers' perspectives, what are the key factors for the success of literacy teaching in this DEIS school?
- What role does leadership play in successful literacy teaching in this DEIS school?

By gathering teachers' perspectives and experiences of successful teaching in Literacy, the school leadership will gain insights into enabling others to act within the school. Leading to more effective, efficient, and collective decision-making that works toward a shared school vision resulting in greater teacher empowerment. Kouzes and Posner (2003) consider enabling others to act as one of the five practices of exemplary leadership. By fostering collaboration and the empowerment of others within an organisation, an effective team in the workplace can be created and sustained, resulting in an overall improvement in teachers' morale and whole school positive culture. (White, 1992.)

The research approach used in this thesis is Appreciative Inquiry, and qualitative data collection methods informed by Appreciative Inquiry principles are utilised. Appreciative Inquiry interviews were conducted to collect narrative data. The Appreciative Inquiry Interviews were conducted using questions that assume a positive bias, focusing on an affirmative topic or core that strongly aligns with the theoretical framework.

#### **1.4 Structure of Thesis**

This thesis consists of a review of existing theories on Empowerment and Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) in conjunction with Freirean principles. It examines the conceptual aspects of empowerment by introducing existing theories and definitions. In addition, collaborative and team-teaching practices in educational settings are discussed. The research methodology is introduced. The results and analysis of the data gathered are presented next as part of the conclusion. The thesis concludes with some recommendations of possible future actions. The analysis may serve as data for the senior school leadership and staff to consider for their continued collective efforts in improving collaboration and team-teaching in literacy instruction, resulting in greater empowerment of the teachers in the

DEIS school. The research findings may be useful in informing the development of a whole school policy or framework on collaborative practices in the school.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This action research project is guided by a theoretical framework that draws on theories of empowerment and socio-cultural theories of learning. These theories emphasise the importance of collaboration, social interactions and collective learning in the overall professional development of teachers. By examining collaboration and team teaching through these theoretical lenses, this research will explore the possibilities for empowering teachers working in mainstream and special education roles and the role of school leadership in a DEIS school. The main research question asks how these newly implemented collaborative practices can empower teachers in DEIS schools by building on current successes and improving their instructional practices in literacy education. The theoretical framework is critical to informing the methodology used in this action research project.

### 2.1 Empowerment

Emerging from American social and educational psychology, empowerment has been widely discussed and debated in many fields of critical, liberational and community psychology (Freire, 1970, 2005; Rappaport, 1987; Sue & Sue, 2007). It has come to mean different things to diverse groups in society. While initially a concept about control over one's life, the theory of empowerment has shifted to other areas. As far back as the late 1980s, empowerment first appeared in educational research and writing (Edwards, Green & Lyons, 2002). In community psychology, empowerment has become a key factor in education (Keys, McConnell, Motley, Liao, & Mc Auliff, 2017).

No single definition of empowerment exists, and critics, such as Robert Adams (2008), have highlighted the limitations that any singular definition may have by its very suggestion of being definitive. It may, become disempowering by its very nature (Adams, 2008, p. 6). Adams (2008), although critical of defining empowerment, contributes to the discourse:

'Empowerment: the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and

collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives.' (Adams, 2008, p. xvi.)

Empowerment has become popular over the last two decades, and garnered much attention. It is both a concept and a process whereby individuals or groups are active and participatory to gain greater control over their lives, acquire equal rights, and lead to reduced marginalisation in society. Empowerment, when considered an action, enables people to identify the resources, skills, and strengths they have, and this can be the process of self-empowerment and the professional support of others to enable them to overcome adversity and challenges.

Rappaport's (1984, p.1-7) early definition states, "Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives." This definition focusing on mastery has been critiqued by many for not addressing social connection and community. Later, he addressed and revised his definition by emphasising empowerment involving more reflective participation in a community setting (Rappaport, 1995).

At the root of empowerment is the focus on problem-solving and active engagement in finding solutions to problems. Empowerment is a means of focusing on strengths, individually or collectively, such as within an educational organization. For scholars and other professionals in community psychology, empowerment is rooted in strengths-based approaches that are driven by those encountering the challenges and not by experts in the field. It highlights the capacity of individuals or communities facing demanding situations to identify and participate in solving the problems that arise. (Peterson, 2014, p. 1.)

### **2.1.1 Empowerment in Education**

In education, empowerment means a symbolic 'handing over of the reins.' A handing over of decision-making from those in greater power, the government and Departments of Education to school leadership, school leadership to teachers, and teachers to students. Therefore, **Empowerment** in schools can be defined as a process whereby school leadership, teachers and students develop

competence to take control of their growth and development to resolve their problems (Myrick Short, Greer & Melvin, 1994, p.38). As far back as 1986, Lightfoot defined empowerment for teachers as the opportunities they have in organizations to participate in decision-making and the opportunities for autonomy, choice, and responsibility (Lightfoot, 1986, p. 9.)

Many factors are associated with teacher empowerment, such as job satisfaction, teacher self-efficacy, experience, and teacher age. Some studies have suggested that empowered teachers are motivated and that this has a direct, positive effect on students under their remit and care. White (1992) reported that participation in more collaborative decision-making in schools resulted in a greater sense of teacher empowerment, thus improving overall positive school climate, teacher morale and teacher communication with colleagues. (White, 1992, p. 81.)

In DEIS schools delivering equality in terms of education and opportunity is central to their vision. It makes sense that empowering teachers and pupils is a crucial element of that vision being realised. The Department of Education LAOS 2022 Quality Framework identifies the role the principal and senior leadership in a school have in empowering staff to lead teaching and learning in the school through the effective use of distributed leadership models, reflective practice, fostering professional learning opportunities, collaboration and building whole staff capacity by sharing expertise. (DES, LAOS, 2022, p. 25-41.) While the DES have identified the need for collaborative models of professional learning and dialogue amongst teachers, they have not factored in an effective way of allocating the time and space for these reflective, professional, critical conversations to take place. (King, 2019, p. 1.) The proposed Action Research will examine one model for addressing these issues and teachers' perceptions of its value and effectiveness.

## 2.1.2 Levels of Empowerment

It is important to note that the empowerment of individuals, specifically teachers, cannot be addressed in isolation. The empowerment of teachers and school communities must be made on multiple levels, for effective and sustained positive changes to occur.

There are five widely regarded levels of empowerment; they are

- Individual Empowerment
- Psychological Empowerment
- Organizational Empowerment
- Community Empowerment
- Societal Empowerment (Balcazar, Keys & Fyrhof, 2019, p. 184-189).

### Individual Empowerment

Through individual empowerment, people may enhance their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy entails cultivating personal feelings of power, mastery, or strength resulting in an increased ability to navigate challenging situations or circumstances where one perceives a lack of influence or skill. (Balcazar et al. 2019, Ch 10.) Self-efficacy is often regarded as an individualistic or Westernised construct, suggesting that merely believing in one's capacity to achieve a specific outcome suffices. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that genuine empowerment involves a tangible transformation. A mere shift and self-efficacy cannot authentically be considered as empowerment. (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010.)

### Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment (PE) differs from individual empowerment in that it requiring greater awareness and reflection on numerous levels by examining and understanding the factors influencing our lives. (Keys et al. 2017.) The role that context and external influences play is a key element in PE. It is possible to initiate change at individual, community, or group level by examining the context with a critical lens reflected in the DEIS school in this action research project. A greater understanding of the current situation and challenges are identified through the SSE process and the use of the LAOS quality framework, critically reflecting on

individual practices, collaborative and collective practices, and the school context. A plan for moving forward can begin to become more empowered on all levels.

### **Organizational Empowerment**

Organizational Empowerment (OE) can be viewed in two separate ways: the empowerment of individuals or groups within an organization and the effective way in which an organization can work with outside agencies. It is important to highlight that for there to be organizational empowerment, we need to acknowledge that organizations have an influence and control over the individuals within their remit (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). Building on Zimmerman's (2000) theoretical framework on empowerment, OE moves from the empowerment of the interdependency of individuals, also referred to as PE, to that of the individual and the collective or 'community'. Peterson & Zimmerman (2004), describe OE as the 'organizational efforts that generate PE among members and organizational effectiveness needed for goal achievement' (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 3). In previous studies, Maton and Salem (1995), identified a few common elements through their analysis of case studies on organizations with perceived empowerment. They observed that:

A strength-based culture of growth, a role structure that afforded members opportunities for multiple and meaningful roles, leadership that was shared, inspiring and organizationally talented, and an encompassing, peer-based support system were vital aspects of an empowering organization (i.e., help to enhance member PE) (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 3).

### **Community Empowerment**

Community Empowerment works on increasing a community's influence over existing structure, constraints, and policies that have a direct effect on the lived experiences of its members. (Balcazar et al. 2019, Ch 10.) By building upon the community's relationships and external partnerships, there is a possibility that an increased influence may occur for the community members. While achieving this may be challenging as there are many obstacles to overcome, it may result in increased community empowerment.

## **Societal Empowerment**

Societal empowerment pertains to the structures and processes that affect the empowerment of individuals and organizations such as schools and communities. The fostering of empowerment interventions must consider the existing broader societal constraints. It is essential to reflect on, identify and analyse society and to what extent it prioritises equality and equity. (Balcazar et al. 2019, Ch 10.) In terms of education, this may be regarding funding in education at the governmental level, teacher- pupil ratios, teacher allocations and resources in special education. In Ireland, the DEIS government initiative has created several policies that support equality and equity in education, taking into consideration societal factors that may be a barrier to children in high-poverty areas receiving equitable education. Societal empowerment addresses society's ability to address its needs wisely and may be reflected in communities supporting each other to promote change.

### **2.1.3 Empowerment as a Process**

Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) proposed a model for the Process of Empowerment that seeks to build upon prior research and literature, emphasising empowerment as an iterative process requiring revision, reflection, and adjustment. It is worth noting that there are limitations identified in current models and theories of empowerment in current research. There exist many inconsistencies between both definitions of empowerment and the process of empowerment. These are worth noting in terms of this paper. Cattaneo and Chapman (2010) (FIGURE 11) identify the six core components of the process that they deem essential while also noting that empowerment and all components are heavily influenced by social contexts, thus creating a natural connection between empowerment and socio-cultural theory.

The six core components are:

- Personal meaningful and power-oriented goals
- Self-efficacy
- Knowledge
- Competence
- Action
- Impact

(Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010).

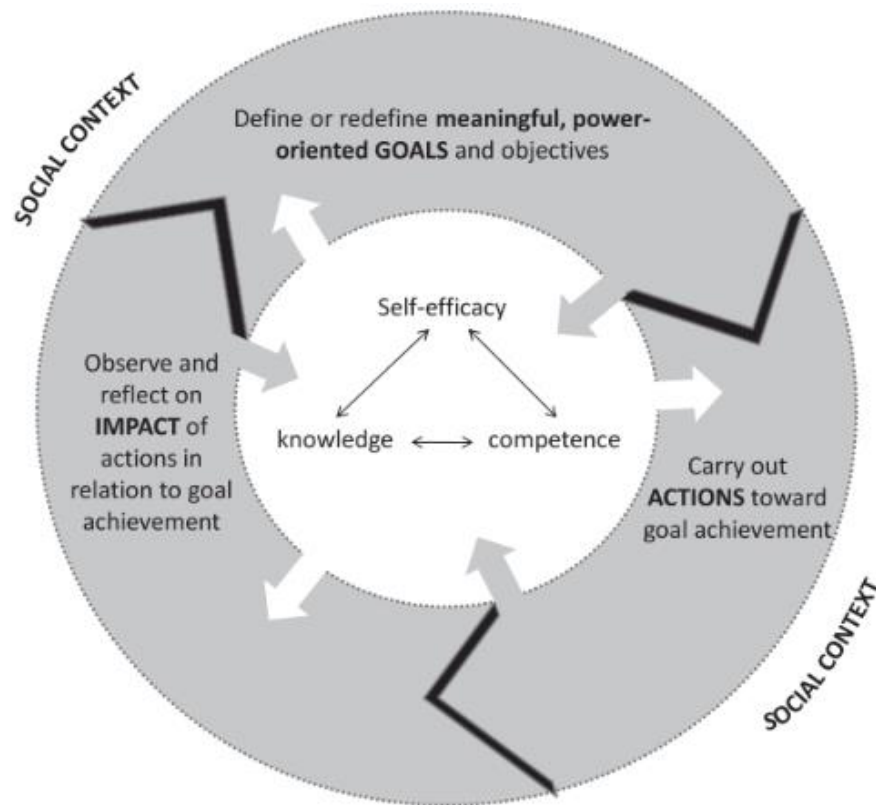


FIGURE 11. The Empowerment process model (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010, p. 647).

The levels of empowerment and empowerment as a process have in common the need for critical awareness and the importance of the social context. (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010.) Critical awareness being the ability of an individual, a teacher or school, to identify personal, organizational, or contextual factors that may result in the empowerment of individual teachers or a collective group of teachers. Please start writing here.

#### 2.1.4 DEIS and Freirean Principles

Empowering teachers in DEIS schools is a critical endeavour that aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) transformational educational philosophy. In his seminal work 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed,' Freire emphasises the potential of knowledge, hope and education in liberating marginalised communities (Van Heertum, 2010, p.211). An educational approach that transcends traditional teaching approaches and methods is vital and encourages critical thinking, participatory pedagogy, and dialogue in the context of teachers working in DEIS

schools. This Freirean philosophy strongly aligns with empowering teachers and the role of school leadership in this endeavour. (Freire, 2005, p.65.)

According to the DES (2017, p.7), the DEIS initiative aims to improve ‘the path of educational opportunity for those who come to education at a disadvantage and of strengthening the capacity of education and training to break cycles in communities with high concentrations of disadvantage.’ with an additional strong emphasis on ‘stemming’ inter-generational cycles of poverty, disadvantage, and social exclusion (DES, 2017, p.7).

One of the specified targets of the DEIS 2017 initiative is to provide teachers working in DEIS 1 schools with the necessary resources, support, and professional development opportunities. (DES, 2017, p. 90.) Freire’s philosophy suggests we can enhance teachers’ ability to address the unique challenges faced by school leadership, teachers, and students in disadvantaged educational settings. There is potential for teachers to become agents of transformation within their school communities, resonating with Freire’s vision of dialogical nature of education as a tool for societal change and freedom. (Freire, 2005, p. 95.)

Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970) stands out as a cornerstone influential piece of work advocating for empowering those in marginalised communities through education. Freire’s emphasis on a pedagogy that transcends traditional teaching methods aligns with more contemporary viewpoints on the importance of empowerment of teachers and students in disadvantaged schools or communities. (Freire, 2005, p. 95.) Enabling teachers to have autonomy and be agents of change in their schools, and providing resources, professional development, and support to educators in DEIS schools is a practical application of Freirean principles. Freire’s vision of education is essentially, that education has the potential to break the cycle of inequality and poverty. According to Freire for teachers attempting change through empowerment, ‘the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people’. (Freire, 2005, p.94.) Empowering teachers may enhance teacher’s professional efficacy but it may also contribute to creating a more equitable and inclusive educational environment.

Research consistently suggests that despite some of the constraints and barriers to achieving empowerment, if successful, teacher empowerment is a positive aspect in an educational setting. It is widely acknowledged that empowered teachers can improve both teaching and learning. Batra (2009) and Dee, Henkin and Duemer (2003) both highlight the benefits of teacher empowerment in terms of improvement in reforms in educational settings, schoolwork life, and the effect it can have on addressing broader societal issues and the actualisation of social goals. In order to meet the dynamic demands of a DEIS school and the modern educational landscape today, teacher empowerment cannot be ignored (Kimwarey, Chirure & Omondi, 2014) to enhance and improve the overall educational experience for all.

## **2.2 Collaboration: A socio- cultural approach**

Collaboration comes in many different forms in education. This action research project, will focus on collaboration in planning and team teaching, often referred to as co-teaching, informal mentoring, sharing of expertise, knowledge, and skills. The suggestion from the DES is that innovative and more inclusive solutions may be developed to meet the challenges that DEIS schools face regarding literacy instruction and attainment by teachers engaging with their peers in more in-depth collaborative efforts. (DES, 2022, p 16.)

Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) provides an appropriate framework for exploring teacher collaboration. SCT considers social interaction and collaboration as essential components of learning (Vygotsky, 1987). Embedded in the work of Lev Vygotsky, SCT is considered less to be an independent journey of learning and discovery and more so a collective or socially co-constructed path to knowledge. A key element of SCT is the mediated social process, affected by the physical resources and psychological tools at hand. Walqui (2016) identified several assumptions that underpin SCT:

1. Learning precedes development
2. Language is the primary vehicle (tool) of thought
3. Mediation is central to learning

4. Social interaction is the basis of learning and development. Learning is a process of apprenticeship and internalization in which skills and knowledge are transformed from the social into the cognitive plane
5. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the primary activity space in which learning occurs. (Shabani, 2016, p.2)

Vygotsky's (1978) SCT theory emerges as a pertinent framework for enhancing teacher empowerment in literacy instruction in the context of DEIS primary schools in Ireland. The SCT principles of Vygotsky (1978) suggest that social interaction and collaborative learning are essential for development. Vygotsky believed that community was at the core of 'making meaning' and that through collaborative dialogues with 'more knowledgeable others' problem-solving strategies can be developed. Vygotsky believed that greater knowledge can be achieved through scaffolding and mentoring with those with greater knowledge than can be achieved as individuals. SCT supposes that people's psychological development is shaped and guided by more knowledgeable others, which in a school setting may be in the form of a mentor or co-teacher. FIGURE 12, while referring to students, may also be applied to the teachers of the DEIS school in this research project undertaking a new collaborative and team-teaching model in literacy instruction incorporating mentorship as part of the process.

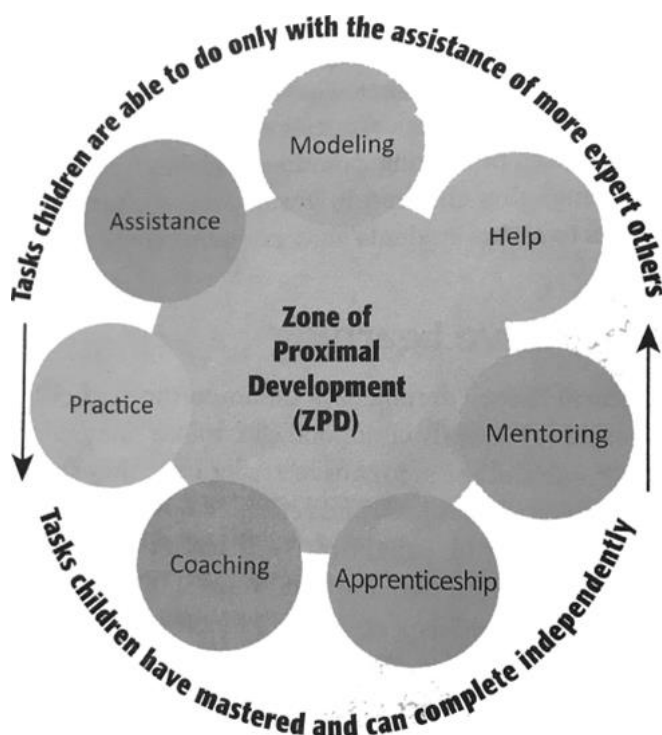


FIGURE 12. Zone of Proximal Development. Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum and Instruction: Pedagogy for Knowledge, Attitudes, and Value

It is plausible to believe to believe that greater knowledge may be achieved. through supportive collaborative practices, such as modelling, mentoring, coaching, and team teaching.

### **2.2.1 A Continuum of Collaboration**

Cook and Friend (1995, p.5) define collaboration as 'a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties...engaged in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal'. The PDST in Ireland developed a Continuum of Collaboration (FIGURE 13) drawing on research by Cook and Friend (2010) and Lacey (2001) to support schools in engaging with and promoting deeper levels of collaborative practices. The PDST Continuum of Collaboration emphasises the various levels of collaboration. In this action research the DEIS school identified its position before implementing the new model of team teaching and collaborative practices as between Liaison and Co-operation. There was a generous sharing of resources and advice but no shared teaching or planning to work towards a common goal.

## A Continuum of Collaboration

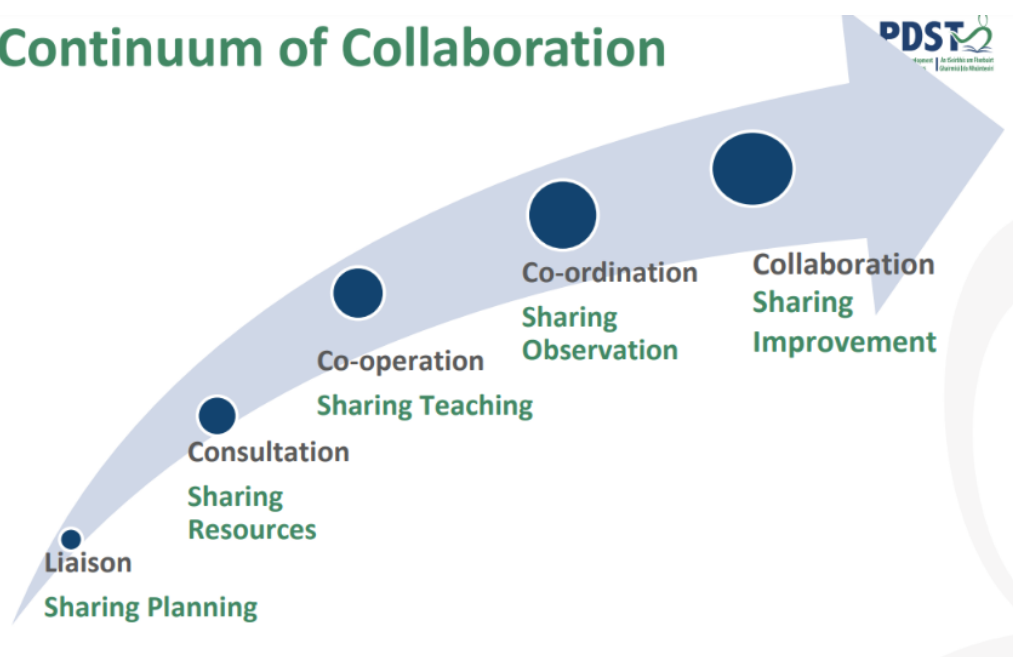


FIGURE 13. A Continuum of Collaboration (PDST, 2019, 9)

At the lower end of the continuum are the more informal collaboration levels. At this level, teachers share advice, resources, and strategies with colleagues. Sharing may occur during break times when passing each other on the corridor, or in the DEIS school in question 'in the staffroom at the photocopier.' Moving up the collaboration continuum, teachers at this level engage in a more structured collaboration either at class, corridor level or with the SET teacher working with students in the class in a withdrawal support setting. (PDST, 2019, pg. 9.)

At the co-ordination and co-operation level profound collaborative practices are present. At these levels, mainstream teachers, SET and leadership may meet regularly to analyse student data, discuss and decide on effective interventions or instructional practices, and collaborate on improving students learning outcomes. At these higher levels of collaboration, critical dialogue and PLCs create a culture of collective responsibility and continuous professional learning and improvement. The final level on the continuum is achieved, when, collectively the school staff not only address specific teaching and learning difficulties, such as literacy attainment in this DEIS school, but also engage in collaborative inquiry or action research working towards a common goal of shared improvement. (PDST, 2019, pg. 9.)

### 2.2.2 Collaboration through Professional Learning

In Ireland, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) is often used interchangeably with Professional Learning (PL). However, King et al. (2022, p.3-5) clarify that PL is not something that is 'done' to teachers but instead that they are active participants in their learning and may be formal or informal. On-site informal PL in the form of social interactions, workshops, and courses are reflective of the Cosán Framework for Teacher Learning (Teaching Council, 2016), which advocates for teacher agency, autonomy and collaborative and reflective practice for transformative learning. (King et al. 2022).

Research shows that creating collaborative school cultures in resource-strained educational settings, such as DEIS schools, aligns with SCT and fosters both an individual and collective sense of efficacy amongst teachers. King (2014) reiterates that collaborative cultures are the cornerstone for implementing and sustaining new practices for school improvement and the importance of collaborative professional learning communities (PLCs) in DEIS schools. Thus, providing teachers with authentic opportunities for shared planning and reflective practices. At a time in education that is results-driven by the influence of global standardised testing and reports, there must be a change in direction from a more traditional isolationist and individualistic teaching approach to a collective and collaborative shared creation of a supportive community of practice. (King, 2019, p. 169-170.)

The Towards a New Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Strategy: A review of the Literature (DES, 2022) found that teacher communities, professional learning communities and collaborative inquiry are necessary in initiating and opening the practice of critical dialogue amongst colleagues in schools (DES, 2022, p. 193). The research acknowledges that there are some challenges to establishing effective collaborative communities in schools. Some aspects may challenge successful implementation of collaborative practices in a school are 'time, space, access to learning resources and dedicated staff whose expertise contribute to the effectiveness of PLCs.' (King et al. 2022, p. 193.)

The LAOS policy framework (DES, 2022) and the NCCA's Primary Curriculum Framework (2020) identify and reflect on the concept of teacher agency as a prominent, necessary element in the empowerment of teachers. School leadership and management need to develop leadership capacity is deemed essential by 'empowering teachers to take on leadership roles and to lead learning' (DES, 2022, p14; King et al. 2022). Empowering teacher leaders to develop and become teacher leaders to support the PL of colleagues can implement change at an individual, community, and organizational level. Through her extensive research, Kennedy (2008, xxi) found that teachers reported greater self-efficacy, confidence, and competency in addressing literacy difficulties in DEIS schools because of a myriad of factors at not only class but also school level. On-site professional development, shared collaborative planning and professional reflective and critical dialogue were stated as contributing factors. (2008, xxi.)

### **2.3 Team-Teaching**

Team-teaching is an approach where two or more teachers collaboratively plan, teach, and evaluate learning and critically reflect on teaching in lessons. Goetz (2000) defined it as 'a group of two or more teachers working together to plan, conduct and evaluate the learning activities for the same group of learners.' In comparison, Welch, Brownell & Sheridan (1999, p.38) define team teaching as:

The simultaneous presence of two educators in a classroom setting who share responsibility in the development, implementation, and evaluation of direct service in the form of an instructional or behavioural intervention to a group of students with diverse needs.

The definitions agree on the collaborative nature of team-teaching and the assumption of benefits for both teachers and students (Buckley, 2000, p.4.) The term team-teaching falls under a vast dearth of synonyms, for example, collaborative teaching, co-teaching, collaborative team-teaching, and co-operative teaching. In this paper, team-teaching refers to the mainstream teachers (general education teachers) in a senior DEIS primary school and their assigned special education teacher teaching together using various team-teaching models in literacy instruction. Team teaching is a method whereby two or more teachers can

work in a collaboratively with a class to address the diverse needs of the students. (Inclusion of Students with SEN Post Primary Guidelines, 2007.)

Team-teaching assumes that the two teachers involved create a shared responsibility and accountability for students learning (Friend, 2008, p. 9). Friend (2008) acknowledges the innovation and complexities of team-teaching which, many may not have acknowledged in prior research. According to Decuyper, Tack, Vanblaere, Simons and Vanderlinde (2023, p.2) teachers engaging in team teaching report many benefits such as, personal and professional growth and support, as well as greater emphasis on reflective dialogue and sharing best practices.

### **2.3.1 Team-Teaching Models**

The DES in Ireland and Oide, formerly known as the Professional Development Support Team (PDST), consider there to be five models of team-teaching (FIGURE 14), which are

- Lead and Support (One lead, one assist)
- Station Teaching
- Parallel Teaching
- Alternative Teaching
- Team-Teaching (Teaming). (PDST, 2019, 32.)

# Models of Team Teaching

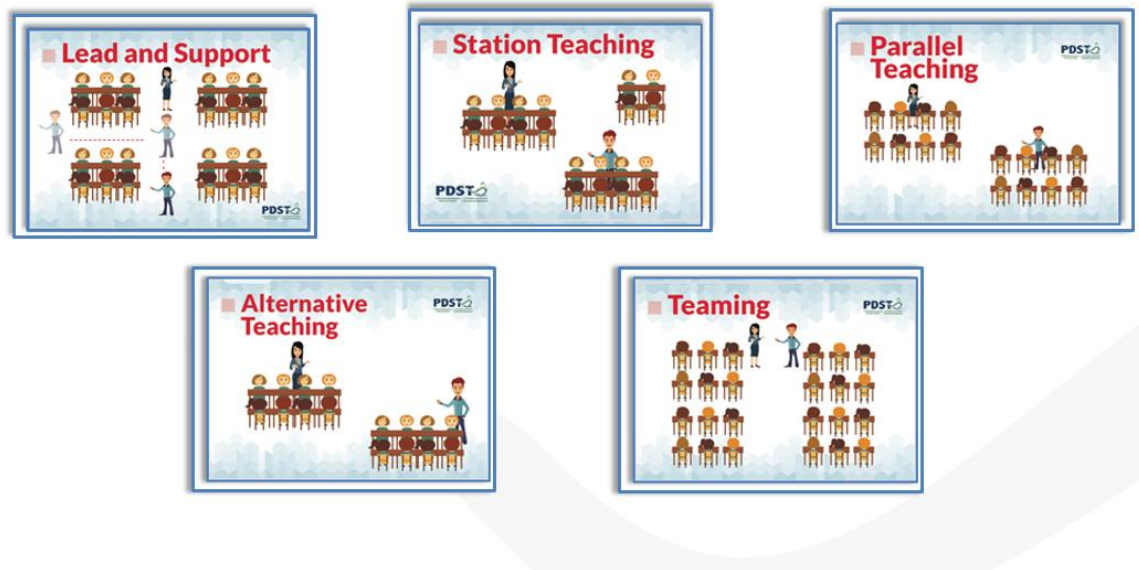


FIGURE 14. PDST Making Connections: Inclusion, Team Teaching and Literacy (PDST, 2019, 32)

## Lead and Support

This model entails one teacher taking the lead in the instructional element of the lesson while the other teacher supports the students. The lead teacher can take on the support teacher role and vice versa. (PDST, 2019, 32.)

## Station Teaching

A variety of independent and teaching stations are set up with a shared responsibility and a clear goal for instruction. The teachers then rotate to the next group, ensuing small group instruction for all children throughout the lesson. This model enables teachers to create greater individualised instruction with a small student-teacher ratio. (PDST, 2019, 32.)

## Parallel Teaching

Teachers teach the same content to two groups in the same classroom space. Ensuring a smaller teacher pupil ration and the possibility of more individualistic instruction. Co-Planning is necessary for this model as both teachers are teaching the same content. (PDST, 2019, 32.)

### **Alternative Teaching**

One teacher has the responsibility for instructing a large group of students in the classroom. In contrast, the other teacher teaches a smaller group of students an alternative lesson or the same lesson with differentiated resources and instruction to cater to their needs. This model allows for a smaller teacher-student ratio allows a greater identification of misunderstandings or misconceptions, and a greater understanding of concepts. Students may benefit from varied teaching styles, and through teacher collaboration, more targeted lessons may be developed. (PDST, 2019, 32.)

### **Teaming**

Both teachers are responsible for the planning and teaching all children in the class. Both teachers are actively engaged in the behavioural management of the class, the conversation and teaching equally. Both teachers are active and considered equal in this model. (PDST, 2019, 32.)

### **2.3.2 Why Team-Teaching?**

In the current research the term team-teaching has been portrayed in a positive light with an assumption that it is a progressive and worthwhile pedagogical method of instruction in educational settings (Friend, 2008, p.9). However, it is surprising that there is still limited empirical research on team-teaching, a method and approach widely advocated for in education. Team-teaching has been promoted as an appropriate approach to create greater inclusion in schools in addressing the diverse needs of learners in classrooms today, those with specific special educational needs and those with significant difficulties in literacy and numeracy attainment. Team-teaching can facilitate effective collaboration between SET and classroom teachers, leading to improved outcomes for the learners, learning experiences and teacher practices. (PDST, 2019, p. 3.)

DEIS schools have more significant educational needs, and it is imperative that to address these needs, an inclusive model of literacy instruction is provided through the most necessary and effective methods or interventions. Team-teach-

ing has been identified as one such strategy in DEIS schools. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland deemed truly inclusive education in DEIS schools as ‘the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements (NCSE, 2010) in which teachers can address and respond to learner’s complex diversity of needs. Providing effective literacy interventions and structures can lead to the removal of educational barriers in and from education for students where they may exist. (NCSE, 2011, p.14; Winter & O’ Raw, 2010: 39.) Inclusive methods and approaches to teaching literacy invoke a particular emphasis on learners at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement. Teachers working in DEIS schools strive to create and foster the most effective inclusive practices to ensure students can access an equitable education.

## **2.4 Summary of Theories**

The theoretical framework provides a broad overview (TABLE 2) of some of the theories pertinent to this thesis. The theories complement each other in their endeavour to empower those working in DEIS schools. It proposes that collaborative practices and team-teaching can enhance the empowerment of teachers in a DEIS school. The theoretical framework informs the methodology of this thesis and the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) positive action research approach. The AI process may result in further empowerment of teachers and guide school’s leadership to build upon current strengths, celebrating the school’s current achievements. With the additional opportunity to lead the school in a positive future-orientated direction to navigate the complex landscape of literacy attainment in a DEIS school.

TABLE 2. Summary of Theoretical Framework		
Theory/Model	Definition	Assumptions
<b>Empowerment Theory</b>	The process by which <b>communities or individuals are enabled</b> to gain greater control over their lives or situations. (Freire, 1970, 2005; Rappaport, 1984,1995; Lightfoot, 1986; Sue & Sue, 2007; Adams, 2008; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010.)	That people have the capacity to gain greater control over their lives through increased decision making and acting to improve their lives or that of their communities or organizations
		Recognises the importance of <b>collaboration and participation</b> as key to empowerment, as well as access to necessary resources.
		Seeks to create a more equitable society through the redistribution of power and resources to marginalised groups in society or to those that work with the oppressed. Acknowledges power structures that may be in play.
<b>Socio-Cultural Theory</b>	The importance of the <b>social and cultural context</b> and tools that shape a person's development and knowledge. (Vygotsky, 1978,1987; Shabani, 2016.)	Social and cultural contexts and <b>interactions with others</b> shape and form an individual's knowledge and development. Stresses the importance of interactions with others and society. (Walqui, 2006.)
		Recognises the importance of language, culture, and historical contexts in terms of shaping and influencing learning and development.

<b>Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed</b>	The importance of developing and utilising <b>critical awareness</b> of one's situation, particularly those marginalised or oppressed and to identify the <b>potential for change</b> that exists. (Freire, 1970, 2005.)	Believes education to be a tool for <b>transformative</b> change and <b>liberation</b> in oppressed groups in society.
		Emphasises <b>critical dialogue and reflection</b> of actions as necessary in transformative education or truly transformative change.
<b>Collaboration and team-teaching Models</b>	Collaboration the process and act of working as a <b>collective</b> to achieve a <b>common goal or vision</b> . (Cook & Friend, 1995, p.5.)	Assume that collaboration is beneficial for both students' learning outcomes and <b>teachers' professional development</b> and growth through the sharing of responsibility, expertise, support, and resources. (Friend, 2008; King et al. 2022.)
	Team teaching- A teaching approach where two teachers <b>share responsibility</b> for planning, teaching, and assessing. (Goetz, 2000.)	Emphasises greater support, shared decision making and communication.
<b>Delivering Equality of Opportunities in School (DEIS) Initiative</b>	<b>Targeted interventions</b> that tackle educational disadvantage in Irish school that have been identified by the DES. Educational disadvantage as obstacles that may hinder a student's ability to access or fully participate in education. (DES, 2005, 2022.)	Emphasises <b>collaboration</b> amongst all shareholders, schools, supports, community, and family to create <b>supportive and inclusive</b> learning environments for marginalised students.
		Assumes that research backed, sustained, <b>supportive initiatives and interventions</b> are needed to tackle educational disadvantage.

		Recognises that <b>holistic approaches</b> are needed to address the complexity of educational disadvantage in terms of socio-economic, cultural, social, emotional, and educational factors.
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### **3 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Methodological Approach**

This study utilises an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology, under the umbrella of Action Research (AR), to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions of empowerment through a new collaboration and team-teaching approach in literacy instruction in a DEIS school in Dublin, Ireland. The new team-teaching and collaborative models were introduced in September 2023 and were reviewed at several stages during the school year through informal feedback at staff meetings.

This thesis investigates the current new model towards the end of its first year of inception to guide and inform the future of collaboration and team-teaching in the school. Through qualitative methods teachers' successes, achievements, and their vision or Dream for the future will be explored. Qualitative research is most useful when exploring individuals' meaning of a phenomenon or problem. The qualitative research process involves emerging questions and procedures, usually on-site participant data collection, inductive analysis, beginning with specific themes to emerging and more general themes. An inductive analysis style is used whereby the researcher interprets the meaning of the collected data emphasising the contextual complexities. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 4.)

#### **3.2 Appreciative Inquiry**

An AI approach was adopted to allow for active engagement and collaboration of teachers in the research process. It is a deliberately applied focus on an issue or need to improve (Creswell, 2012, p.577; Cohen, Mannion & Morrison, 2017, p. 441) and is 'hand-on' or practical. There are both constructivist and transformative worldview roots in the AI approach and are; collaborative, change-oriented, power and justice-oriented and is open to multiple meanings or interpretations, bringing forth the researcher's own philosophy (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 7.), as can be seen in FIGURE 15.

Postpositivism	Constructivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination</li> <li>• Reductionism</li> <li>• Empirical observation and measurement</li> <li>• Theory verification</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Multiple participant meanings</li> <li>• Social and historical construction</li> <li>• Theory generation</li> </ul>
Transformative	Pragmatism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political</li> <li>• Power and justice oriented</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Change oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consequences of actions</li> <li>• Problem centered</li> <li>• Pluralistic</li> <li>• Real-world practice oriented</li> </ul>

FIGURE 15. Overview of four worldviews. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 7)

The premise of traditional AR is that it is participatory and collaborative, whereby the collective solves a necessary practical problem, effects change and improvement at a local level (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 441). According to Ferrance (2000, p. 4) and Mc Niff (2010, p.11), it is important to acknowledge that AR is not solely problem focused, but rather ‘a quest for knowledge about how to improve’ (Ferrance, 2000, p.4). (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 442.) Like traditional AR, the AI approach is a collaborative and practical process, however it differs from traditional AR by assuming a positive bias and seeks to ‘create a language of the positive’ (Srivastva & Cooperrider, 1990; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom & Vianello, 2019, p. 163).

The AI approach serves two purposes in this thesis, it is both the research methodology but also part of the possible path to empowerment of individuals or groups through encouraging collaborative reflective practices (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 441; Creswell, 2013, p. 578). By focusing on strengths, positive experiences of collaboration and team teaching in an educational setting, AI complements the

action research framework, thus fostering a culture of continuous improvement and empowerment, moving from a problem-centric approach to a more strengths and solution-focused process. It is a type of inquiry or 'exploration for shared meaning that can lead to powerful images of the future that then call for action to realize that preferred future.' (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008, p. viii.)

### **3.3 Theory of Appreciative Inquiry**

AI is considered a narrative-based process of AR or positive change (that involves prominent levels of participation and engagement to bring about positive organizational or community change, by nature, it is fully appreciative. (Whitney et al. 2019, p. 163). The concept was developed by researchers Srivastva, Fry, Cooperrider, Barrett and others at Case Western University in the 1980's. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) considered AI as a "a positive revolution in change" (p. viii). It is a narrative based approach.

AR pertains to enabling practical change in an organization and emancipatory and collaboration (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 441), ensuring that it is an appropriate methodology for exploring the empowerment and socio-cultural theoretical frameworks in this thesis. Kemmis and Mc Taggart (2005, p.578) describe participatory action research endeavours as those that create conditions where people can work collaboratively together in an authentic manner that brings about greater understanding or participation in the world around them. For this reason, a thesis that wishes to explore collaboration and empowerment of teachers utilising a collaborative methodology is imperative. A methodology where the teachers involved are given an opportunity to voice their opinions, where their perspectives are given consideration, and their voices are heard is most suitable.

AI focuses on the possibilities of positive change and empowerment of individuals and groups and is recognised as a transformative approach to change in organizations (Cooperrider et al. 2008, p. x). Therefore, these methodologies provide teachers opportunities to identify and provide insightful and invaluable opportunities on issues that address empowerment within their specific school context. This is particularly important in a DEIS school context where delivering equality

and equity in education is the core of the school vision. AI has the potential to explore empowerment of teachers on both a personal and collective level. The practical application of solutions to an identified area of need or problem within a real-world-context directly acknowledges success in a school, but also addresses challenges it may be facing, such as in Literacy instruction. By identifying strengths within the school, teachers and school leadership can build on these strengths and enhance their professional practice by bringing out the best in people so that they may co create 'a preferred future together that is more hopeful, boundless, and inherently good' (Cooperrider et al. 2011, vi).

AI has three key aspects that inform the process by which it is applied. Whitney et al. (2019, p.163) identified three key features of AI, that it is appreciative with a positive bias, inclusive and participatory, and finally future-focused. The first crucial and 'most strategic' step in the process (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, Ch 3) is that an affirmative topic is chosen and a 'positive change agenda' has been identified (Whitney et al. 2019, p.165). The affirmative topic is at the centre of the AI approach, it informs the questioning for AI interviews and steers the direction of the process through all four phases of the Appreciative Inquiry process known as the 4-D cycle, as can be seen in FIGURE 16.

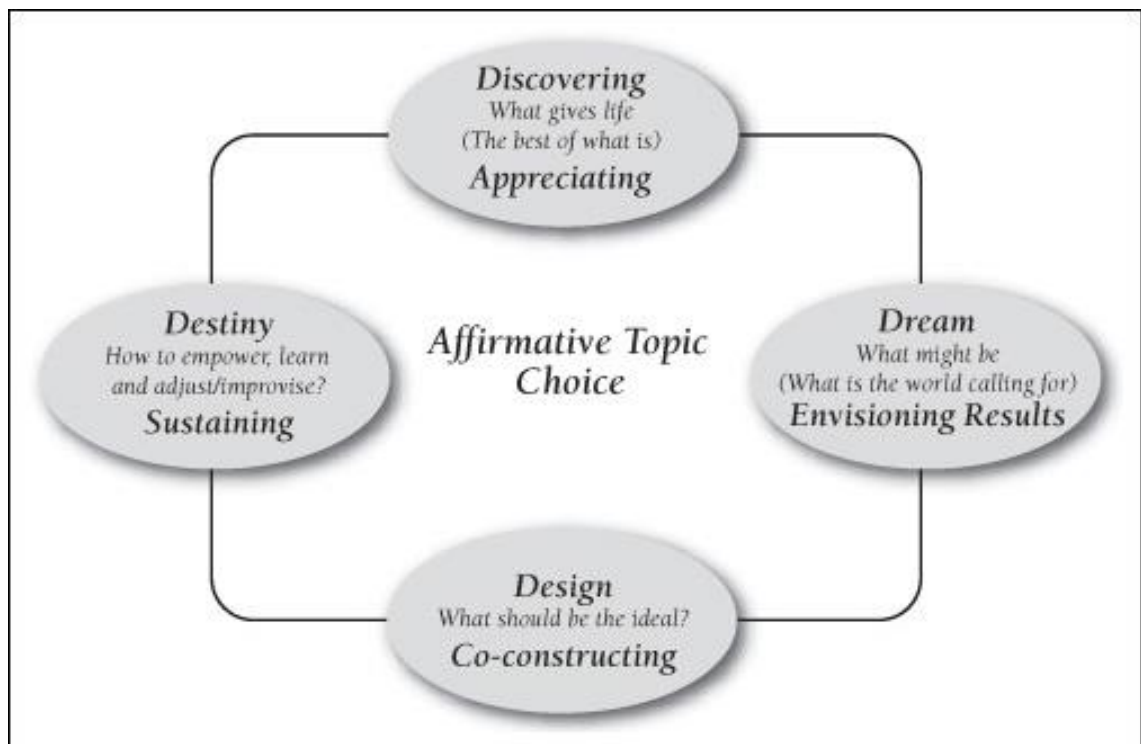


FIGURE 16. Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005)

The 4-D cycle has four distinct phases: Discovery Phase, Dream Phase, Design Phase, and the Destiny Phase (FIGURE 17). The primary phase of the 4-D cycle is the Discovery phase. At this stage of the process the emphasis is on remembering or rediscovering, sharing, and gathering accomplishments, successes, and achievements of the organisation at its best. It involves appreciative interviewing across the organisation to enable participants to admire, be inspired and appreciate all that is good about their colleagues, themselves, and the organisation. In the **Discover phase** an appreciation is shown for the positive history of the organization and all the elements that they wish to retain moving forward. At the centre of this phase is the Appreciative interview, where all questions posed are positive and appreciative, thus enabling those being interviewed to reflect on and discover what is working well and what 'gives life' to their organization. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, 'Overview of the 4-D Cycle', para. 3.) The flexibility of the 4-D cycle ensures it is a method that can be adapted to multiple contexts.

In the second phase, the **Dream phase**, there is a move towards 'What might be,' an opportunity to create a desired, ideal vision for the future based on the best of the organisation as it was or is. This phase is unique in that it builds upon the strengths and achievements of the organisation and enables the participants to create a vision of the future as they would like it to be, encompassing the organisation's potential in the hope of enhancing the positive core. The Discover phase informs the Dream phase, and challenges the participants to identify processes, best-practice to create their plan for realising their dream or vision for the future. (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, 'Overview of the 4-D Cycle', para. 2.)

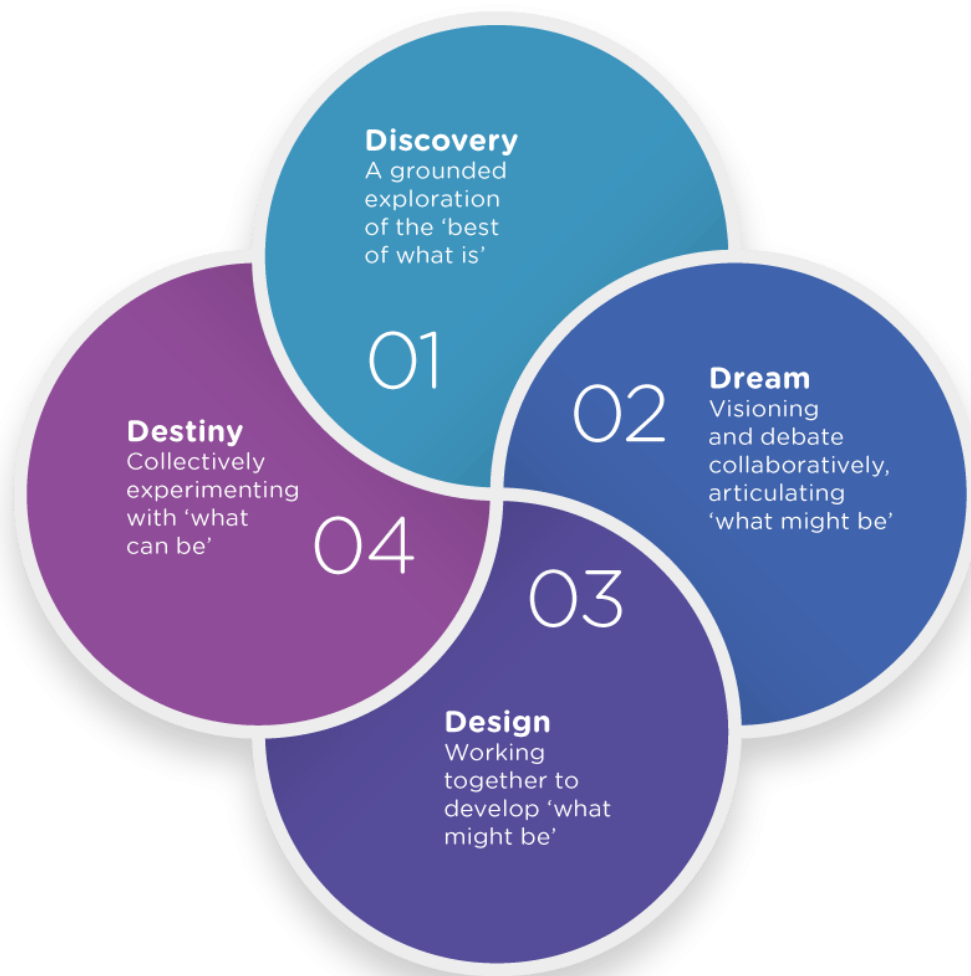


FIGURE 17. The 4-D cycle. (Sharp, Dewar & Barrie, 2016)

In the **Design phase** the participants create processes and structures with the aim of enacting the vision they have created in the Dream phase. In this phase, specific goals are set, that will enable the participants to bring to fruition their co-created visions. The participants will work collaboratively in this phase to ‘develop what might be.’ (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005.)

Finally, the **Destiny phase** is concerned with sustaining ongoing positive change by establishing strategies and processes, accessing, and distributing necessary resources to ensure the vision created in the dream and design phase is realised. It is at this stage that practical plans are developed and implemented. AI provides both formal and informal opportunities of co-constructing meaning and a deliberate and intentional process whereby the narrative and data is analysed. Through positive, reflective shared dialogue, organizations can empower the participants

to move in the direction of its positive core and achieve transformation (Bushe & Kassam, 2005) in terms of how they think about their organizations. (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 168; Sharp, Dewar & Barrie, 2016.) According to Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010, p. 175) AI has the possibility of empowering others to ‘make meaning of, and in the process transform – themselves, their organizations, and communities’ hence it is pertinent to this thesis.

Figure 18 succinctly illustrates Priest, Kaufman, Brunton, & Seibel summary of AI (2013, p. 22) in its four distinct stages of Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. Each phase possesses key questions, purpose, task and possible outcome that contribute to the overarching goal of realising a desired future linking back to socio-cultural and empowerment theories through co-creation of desired futures as a collective, and increased ‘voices of hope’. Through the Design stage when action is considered there is an enhanced sense of empowerment.

Stage and Key Question	Purpose	Task	Outcomes
1. Defining “What is the focus of inquiry?”			
2. Discovery “What gives life?”	Discover and appreciate personal and organizational “high point” stories and experiences.	Gathering stories and key ideas that identify the organization’s “positive core.”	Stories as evidence of values and best practices; greater sense of openness and listening skills, builds trust, generates positive energy.
3. Dream “What might be?”	Co-create a desired future from collective, imaginative and innovative capacity of the group.	Co-create visions of all the elements participants want to introduce into communities or workplaces.	Clear statements and images of members “idealized” organization; increased creativity; amplifies voices of hope.
4. Design “How can it be?”	Choose the design elements that will support and develop the organization structures to bring the dream to life.	Participants identify which projects they want to be a part of to make the dream happen.	Begin to submit basic project plans for consideration and refinement; begin to see shifts in behavior and mindset; increased empowerment.
5. Destiny/ Deliver “What will be?”	Sustain momentum in organization; build capacity of participants to continue the process themselves.	Continued learning and adapting, consider new iterations of the cycle, engage in possibility thinking and looking for “opportunities” vs. problems.	Participants become “appreciative leaders” who champion self-sustaining change; cultural shift towards strength-based appreciative practices.

FIGURE 18. Summary of AI stage descriptions, purpose, task, and outcome. (Priest et al. 2013, p. 22)

### **3.4 Research Methods**

This thesis used a qualitative method through recorded, on-site, AI interviews. Qualitative research is often defined as a combination of predetermined topics and open-ended questions (Bryman, 2016). Unlike more structured interviews, which are dictated by set questions, semi-structured interviews allow for more in-depth probing, exploration, and clarification of the participant's responses. (Creswell & Ploth, 2017). The qualitative research method was used to discover re-occurring patterns and themes in the narrative responses (Creswell & Ploth, 2017). Interviews tend to concentrate more on the process of discovery of a phenomenon, such as that of empowerment, by looking at the participants quality of experience in terms of how they felt or what they thought about it. (Reed, 2007, p. 53.)

AI interviews are a valuable research method in terms of exploring and understanding the strengths, success, and positive experiences of the individuals or school organisation, particularly on the concept of empowerment. Data gathered and analysed from this thesis will later inform the Destiny phase for the DEIS school in terms of future goals and vision as determined by the staff collectively. For exploring the complex theme empowering teachers, under a co-constructed, socio-cultural theoretical framework, interviews are most suitable for this thesis, Kvale (1996) states interviews are, by nature, social and interactional (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 506).

#### **3.4.1 Appreciative Inquiry Interviews**

AI interviews have deep roots in positive psychology and individual or organisational change, growth, and development. AI interviews are intent on eliciting stories or the 'telling process' (Reed, 2007, p. 48), narratives whereby the emphasis is on bringing people together to share stories of positive development. (Reed,

2007, p. 48-49.) The premise of an AI interview is to bring forth examples of what has worked well in the past, 'the best of what is' and 'the best of what might be'. Participants are invited to reflect on experiences that resulted in a feeling of success or pride in an achievement and identify factors that contributed to these positive moments.

By providing participants the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perspectives in their own words, from lived experiences, it becomes possible to capture more nuanced data. This provides researchers with an advantageous opportunity to uncover both expected and unexpected insights, that may not have emerged during a more structured method of data collection. In addition, the flexibility of this approach allows for a more diverse exploration of viewpoints. (Creswell & Ploth, 2017).

After the initial form was sent to teachers seeking voluntary participation in the AI interviews, a sample of 7 participants were chosen for interview. The interviews took place during the last term of school in March and April 2024 after seven months of experiencing the new collaborative and team-teaching model. The interviews were conducted on-site with the participant school's full co-operation and interviews were facilitated during the teaching day at the convenience of the school and interviewees. This required significant collaboration, co-ordination, support and understanding from all staff members as interviewees' classes were supervised during this time. Interviewing participants in an environment that is familiar to them, may result in greater levels of comfort, resulting in them responding more openly.

An interview protocol was planned and created to ensure the interviewer followed and maintained a consistent procedure for all interviews. This protocol includes an introduction, the questions with note taking spaces, the content questions with probes, and closing instructions. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 203). See Appendix 1 and 2. In AI interviews the open-ended questions are given and can be tailored to the responses of the interviewees using prompts and probes. (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 511.) AI interviews aim to be:

### **Appreciative**

The AI interview assumes appreciation and a positive bias and seeks to discover, identify, describe the achievements, innovations, talents, and successes in an organization.

### **Applicable**

Effective and competent analysis of the AI interviews can lead organizations to new understandings within an organization and can be applied in action.

### **Provocative**

AI interviews have the possibility of acquiring knowledge that is both visionary and pragmatic that may lead an organization to where it could potentially be.

### **Collaborative**

The interviewer and the participants work collaboratively through the AI interview in a consensual manner. (Troxel, 2002, p. 6-7.)

Each interview was recorded on a digital device with informed consent using the built-in voice recording application. This allowed the interviewer to engage fully in the interview process and allow the audio file created to be transcribed using a transcription tool. The use of audio recording was agreed collaboratively prior to the interviews with participants, as they did not wish to have the interview video recorded stating various levels of discomfort and self-consciousness. Each interviewee was provided with an information sheet prior to the interview stating the:

- purpose of the AI interview
- format
- details of how to withdraw at any stage of the process
- anonymity and confidentiality
- and signed consent option.

Each interview began by creating a comfortable beginning, first establishing the background of the teacher in terms of their career, what motivated them to teach in a DEIS school and what motivated them to stay teaching in a DEIS school. The interview questions were developed with a positive bias informed by the four phases of AI. The AI interview questions, are closely related to the research questions of this thesis are listed in Appendix 1.

By valuing and acknowledging the participants' contributions, the interviews may contribute to cultivating an empowering and collaborative atmosphere. The views and perspectives of the participant and the questioning, interpreting and analysis of the interviewer co-construct meaning. This approach requires the interviewer to exercise reflexivity and to reflect on and evaluate their own questioning and bias. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019, p. 436.)

### **3.4.2 Population and Participants**

The overall school population and demographic of the school comprises of 12 mainstream teachers, 8 Special Education Teachers, a Home School Liaison Teacher (HSL) and an administrative principal. The staff has 7 male teachers and 15 female staff members. Of the 22 staff members, 21 are permanent employees, 3 of which are Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Access to carry out the Action Research and gathering of data from a voluntary sample of participants was sought in writing and permitted by the Board of Management (BOM) of the school and the school leadership in 2023. The school principal is the thesis commissioner, showing co-operation between the school and the author researcher who is a staff member in a senior leadership position in the school.

It was mandatory for all school staff members to participate in the new whole school model approach to collaboration and team teaching in Literacy instruction between mainstream and Special education teachers. However, participating in the research and data collection was voluntary and the participants consented to allow for the collection and analysis of their responses, both pre and post, from previous internal surveys, to form part of this study.

At regular staff meetings, the researcher presented the research and created awareness of the process and purpose of the research, as well as providing opportunities for the participants to ask questions in a formal and informal setting throughout the research. This was done in cooperation with the school leadership as the research is viewed as being of value in terms of future development in the school. Volunteers were sought to participate in the interviews. A form declaring

interest in participating in an AI interview was sent to all staff on the internal school management system, Aladdin. 90% of the school staff replied, declaring an interest in participating in the AI interviews. All participants in the interviews are Irish nationals where their first language is English.

### **3.4.3 Qualitative Sampling**

Qualitative research is guided by a paradigm of interpretation where the goals and purpose differ to that of quantitative research and so purposeful sampling was utilised. The researcher invited all staff members to participate in the interviews and then chose a careful selection of participants to gain a variety of more effective detailed perspectives (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2008, p. 213) on empowerment in the school to compare experiences and perspectives. By gathering various perspectives, a larger picture is created, and this larger picture, is more reflective of real life and how events are in the real world (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 194). Purposeful sampling is flexible and can evolve through the course of the research, thereby strengthening the diversity of the sampling, resulting in a richer depth of understanding. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020, p. 92.)

Purposive sampling was used to provide 'data richness and sample diversity' (Hennink et al. 2020, p. 329). Participants were sampled from a variety of teaching positions with varying degrees of experience, to gather broader perspectives on empowerment in the school. The participant sample in this research was a mixture of mainstream and special education teachers with varying years of experience, teachers with no formal leadership roles in the school, and those with formal middle/senior leadership roles. An overview of the demographic of the participants can be seen in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Respondents

<b>R#</b>	<b>M/F/ X</b>	<b>Number of Years of Experi- ence</b>	<b>Leadership Role</b>	<b>Main- stream/SET Teacher</b>
1	F	10-15 years	No	SET
2	F	15 + years	No	MS
3	F	15 + years	Yes	MS
4	F	10-15 years	No	SET
5	F	15+ years	No	MS
6	F	15 + years	No	SET
7	M	>5 years	No	SET

#### **3.4.4 Ethical Considerations**

For any research, there are multi-faceted ethical considerations at all stages of the research process, and it is essential that the researcher be aware of and sensitive to ethical considerations. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 201). Ethical considerations are situated contextually, culturally, socially, organisationally, or personally. (Cohen et al. 2017, p. 111.) The context-specific background data collected and used in this thesis is compliant with the Irish Data Protection Act 2018 and European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation as well as the participant school's ethical data protection guidelines. Interviews are interpersonal interactions that require a building of trust and respectful questioning and finally rigorous ethical considerations to be contemplated.

Informed consent was obtained prior to the participants engaging in the research process and the purpose, process, potential risks, and benefits were all fully disclosed. To ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality were maintained to the highest ethical standards, all identifying information was removed from data collection and stored securely by the researcher who had sole access to the data stored. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their data from the research at any stage up to a certain date in the process. During all interactions with participants, they were reminded that their participation and data would be

kept confidential and anonymous. Codes were used for the participants names to preserve anonymity.

Due care was given to the ethical aspects of the researcher in terms of their position as a member of the participant school, who is in a school leadership position. This was particularly necessary during the data collection stage of the research where there were the highest levels of engagement between the participants and the researcher. (Creswell & Creswell, 2022, p. 195.) Ethical considerations were identified, reflected upon, and adhered to at all stages of the research process, not solely during data collection, to ensure the highest standards of research ethic were maintained. By maintaining the research ethics in this manner, the research is both highly credible and the findings of the research trustworthy.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The on-site, semi-structured, AI interviews were recorded on a digital device used solely for the research. A trial interview was completed using Microsoft Word as the transcription tool and found to be inadequate and inaccurate in terms of transcribing the Irish accent and dialect. The interview audio was then uploaded to a transcription application: Transcribe, and transcribed and saved as both a PDF and Word document. The recordings were listened to in their entirety and compared to the automated transcription on Transcribe to ensure accuracy. All identifiable, and personal data was removed from the transcript to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis of qualitative data is an iterative process and required the researcher to engage in data reduction and interpretation (Tesch, 1990, 2013). The data underwent 4 steps of analysis to 'systematically transform' the substantial amounts of qualitative data collected into an organised and concise summary. The four steps of data analysis used were:

1. The data was initially read in its entirety to garner meaning of the whole.
2. The text was divided up into smaller meaning units, as seen in FIGURE 19.

3. The meaning units were condensed further while keeping the core meaning
4. The meaning units were used to create codes and then grouped to create categories and themes. (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017, p.94.)

Theme	Code	Category	Text
Success	Team teaching	New model of teaching successful	- I think like team teaching kind of is new to us this year
Success	Team teaching	Time needed to be successful- it's a process	- <u>I think definitely with literacy, I've seen it really working quite well.</u>
	Team teaching	Benefits for Students-Enjoyment	- <u>Like, it actually worked with the class and just the kids enjoyed it.</u>
Collective Motivation	Team t	Working hard – putting in effort	- but I think we are working <u>really hard</u> .
Collective Success	TT	Discussion around whether it's working or not	- there was a kind of a discussion that we found that the teachers thought that the team teachers with working better with the younger classes
Collab	Support, shared resources	Better able to teach more challenging aspects of literacy.	- I think it's kind of just having access to loads of different results, resources and having the personnel to be able to do things. - If you want to do a chunk of like, you know, you're looking at writing and you have someone in the room every day, because that's just so hard to do, and just having that kind of support
Support	Support and freedom to address needs/ challenges		- Like help from colleagues like, I remember that year had like an SNA work in this class that was like, pivotal to what we were doing because we just didn't know what to do. The learning support teacher was very helpful that year, I think it was just kind of myself about just trial and error, keep trying. -

FIGURE 19. Sample Analysis of data to create meaning units, codes, categories, and themes.

The data was systematically analysed using open coding. The initial preliminary set of codes, both predetermined and emergent was developed, as seen in TABLE 4 below, resonating deeply with theories of empowerment and socio-cultural theory and Freirean Principles (Freire, 1970, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Through the lens of empowerment, flexibility, autonomy, efficacy, knowledge, competency and agency were identified as possible codes. (Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010.) In addition, further codes were predetermined in alignment with socio-cultural theory emphasising collaboration with others, social interactions and the social context as important factors in individual's experiences. (Vygotsky, 1978.)

After developing a narrative storyline with the data related to the research question (Stuckey, 2015, p. 8) this preliminary set of codes was further revised. Kerlinger (1970) defined coding as the process whereby data is analysed by translating and interpreting participants' responses to form specific categories to enable further in-depth analysis. (Cohen et al. 2017, 575.) The concepts and themes of the research questions informed the preliminary categorisations and codes.

These codes were then grouped and categorised into more general codes. The next phase of the analysis identified the major themes of the collected data and further subdivided these themes into sub-codes informed by the theoretical framework of this thesis. Stuckey (2015) reiterates that the analysis process of coding is both structured and linear, iterative, and creative with the purpose of breaking the data into more manageable parts and then rebuilding to create a narrative in response to the research questions. (Stuckey, 2015, p. 10.)

TABLE 4. A preliminary set of pre-determined themes and codes

Shared Vision	Understanding of DEIS
	Happiness
	Acknowledgement of Challenges
	Empowerment of Students
Benefits of Collaboration & Team Teaching	Professional Learning (PL) & Growth
	Increased Self & Collective Efficacy
	Shared responsibility & workload
	Increased teacher motivation and morale
	Benefits for students
	Informal mentoring
	Sharing expertise /ideas/ resources/ mistakes
Success of Team Teaching	Autonomy & Flexibility
	Sense of belonging & community
	Support
	Teacher retention
	Team teaching models
Collaborative Relationships	Problem Solving
	Staff Meetings
	Shared planning and preparation
	Corridor planning
	Sharing of ideas and resources
	On-site professional Learning Community

	Collective Efficacy
Leadership	Trust
	Autonomy
	School Culture
	Support

## 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

By asking open-ended Appreciative Inquiry (AI) questions based on the 4D Appreciative Inquiry model a vast range of codes and themes emerged. The themes pertained to teachers' perceptions and experiences of success, strengths, assets, and other contributing factors in literacy teaching in the Delivering Equality of Opportunities in Schools (DEIS) school. There were both predetermined and emergent themes and codes in relation to teacher empowerment through collaboration and team-teaching informed by the theoretical framework in this thesis.

The iterative analysis of the AI interviews produced the following five central themes based on the participants' experiences and perspectives. Firstly, analysis revealed the strength of a welcoming and supportive school culture through valued collaborative relationships. The impact of these collaborative relationships on staff retention, efficacy, and happiness, particularly in this DEIS school, was apparent. Secondly, participants unanimously spoke about their experiences of success in the team-teaching approach in Literacy in terms of the benefits for both students and teachers. Thirdly, the analysis identified impactful collaborative practices in literacy across a variety of levels in the school. Fourthly, a willingness to engage in on-site relevant professional development and growth was seen as essential to the empowerment of teachers in bridging the literacy gaps. Finally, effective leadership was considered by all as playing a pivotal role in supporting effective teaching practices, collective agency, and creating structures whereby teachers were enabled to act. Permeating all the five themes is the overarching theme of teacher and student empowerment through a socio-cultural framework as seen in FIGURE 20 below.

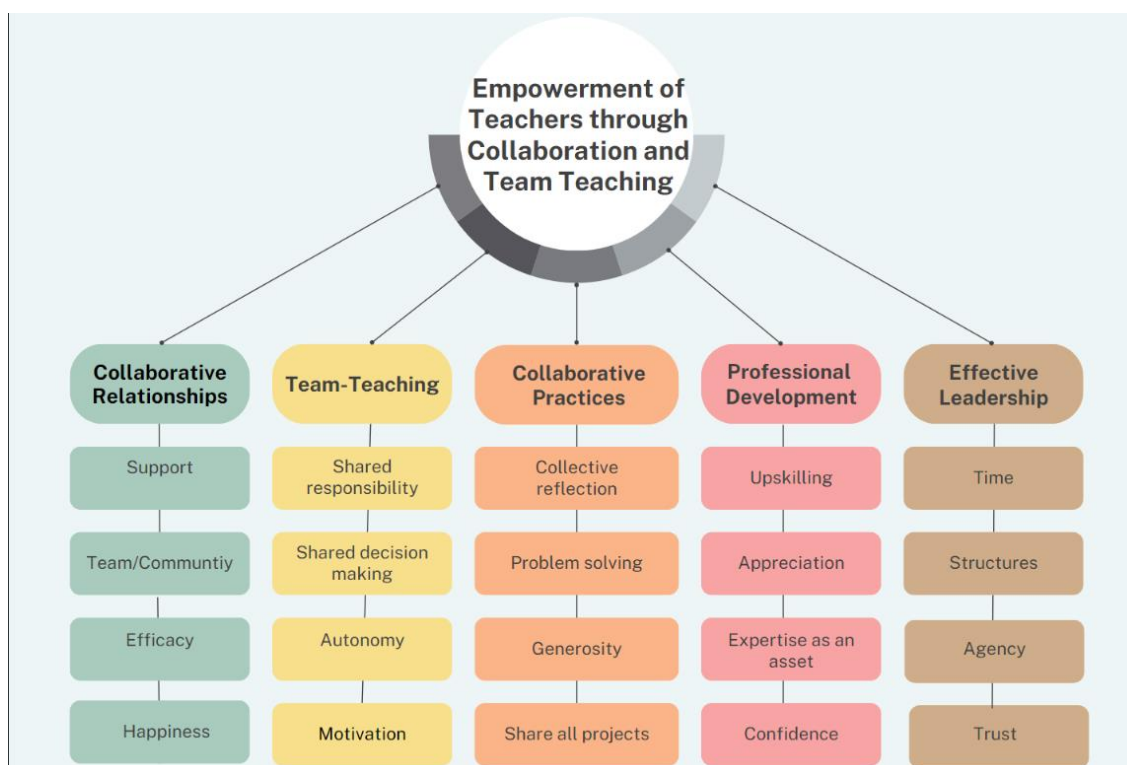


FIGURE 20. Coding Tree and Thematic Overview.

#### 4.1 Strength of Collaborative Relationships

To establish the background of all participants, they were first asked questions about their experience in teaching, why they began teaching in a DEIS school and why they remained teaching there, despite acknowledged challenges. All participants responded similarly to these questions, stating that they were not aware of the meaning of DEIS and the challenges that teaching in these schools entailed prior to starting work in a DEIS school. Many of the participants stated that they merely *'fell into it.'*

However, when asked the background question: 'What motivated you to stay teaching in this DEIS school?' all the participants referred to their relationships with colleagues and the **atmosphere** of the school created by the staff. The teachers interviewed felt **welcomed and supported** and shared a keen sense of **teamwork and belonging**. Teachers felt that from the time they started working in the school, *'everyone was so welcoming.'* Some referred to *'making good connections'* and becoming *'part of the team'* or having *'formed friendships and*

*bonds together.*' The teachers described the supportive atmosphere that this collegiality and connectedness created in a challenging educational context. One participant stated they had stayed teaching in this school for many years with many challenges because *'as a staff, we look after each other...that's why I've stayed here so long'* and *'we support each other quite a lot.'* The importance of support from colleagues, as well as having a good sense of humour, was mentioned several times by participants. The participants discussed a wide variety of valued collaborative relationships from: student and teacher, mainstream teacher and learning support teacher, school leadership and teachers, community and school, mainstream teachers, and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs):

*'The vibe in the school was totally different. The relationship between the principal and the staff was amazing. The staff were so friendly and the children had such a lovely relationship with the teachers.'*

*'Honestly, the staff here were amazing. I'd never experienced people working together, helping each other \_\_ I think without the colleagues, I wouldn't have got through it. I liked working here, even though it was hard.'*

There was an acknowledgement by participants that this may not be the case in all schools. There was a feeling of luck with some participants that they found a school that had such a warm and inviting supportive atmosphere that resulted in happy teachers and as a result, happy children despite their challenges or circumstances. The following responses from participants demonstrate this sentiment well:

*'I loved the atmosphere in the school \_\_ The got on so well. But I also loved the children. The atmosphere filtered down through them. It's circular. Once the staff are happy, the children tend to be too, or vice versa. There was just a gorgeous atmosphere. \_\_ It isn't everywhere, possibly.'*

*'despite changes in management and staff we've managed to keep that nice kind of spark \_\_ it does come down to the fact that staff overall are happy here and have even formed friendships and bonds together.'*

One participant described when they were a substitute teacher in some of the local schools before they received their first contract and that their experience of the support in this school was like no other experience they had before. There was for a few of the participants a realisation that this supportive environment

that they had experienced, was not always present in other working environments:

*'I always felt really welcome. \_\_ I'd be coming in to sub, and the teachers on the corridor would give me whatever they were doing that day, constantly checking in on me, really nice. I was subbing in other schools, that didn't always happen. You were often left to your own devices.'*

*'Having the support of colleagues is a huge draw. I do know going to other places and from speaking to friends or other people who are teachers as well, they don't necessarily get that kind of support elsewhere or where they are.'*

Support from colleagues to face the acknowledged challenges encountered teaching in a DEIS school was rated highly, especially for less experienced and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) with one participant stating:

*It didn't come without its challenges, especially when you're a new teacher, but the backup of the other staff members, you never felt like you're on your own or you never felt like you couldn't ask somebody for help and they'd come to you rather than you even having to go and ask.*

External supports and collaborative relationships with professional support organisations, such as OIDE, were deemed essential and useful to the staff interviewed. The collaborative relationship with OIDE was perceived to result in greater open communication about the approaches and challenges of bridging the literacy gap in this DEIS school as described by one participant:

*X really opened up the floor to be like 'what worked?', 'what didn't work?.' I thought it was good to chat with her and she just was very easy to work with. I think we got lucky. That relationship was easily built up, there was a forum, it was great. It was opened up that you could talk about it.'*

In conclusion, from the AI interviews it can be said that collaborative relationships were experienced by all teachers. Collaborative relationships were considered, valuable, supportive, and helpful. Resulting in happier teachers that felt part of a team or school community. These collaborative relationships were deemed as key to self and collective efficacy and collective problem solving. By examining the data through the lens of both Vygotsky's SCT (1978) and Peterson and Zimmerman's (2004) Organizational Empowerment theories we can discern clear

parallels between our findings and the theoretical constructs, reinforcing its applicability to empowerment of teachers. Through effective collaboration and team-teaching, organizational empowerment can be achieved.

## 4.2 Success and Achievement through Team-Teaching

Teachers were asked to reflect on and share in as much detail as possible something they deemed successful in their Literacy teaching this year as part of the Discovery phase of the AI interview. The question 'Tell me about something that went well this year in your teaching or that you felt was successful?' was used to explore this. A follow up question of 'What factors do you believe contributed to this success?' was asked to elicit deeper responses from the participants.

In the responses to these questions, both Mainstream (MS) and Learning Support (LS) teachers reported team-teaching as being a success for a variety of reasons, with many participants declaring they '*absolutely love it.*' Progress over the year was discussed and teachers interviewed felt that '*to look back and see where we are now, is great*' and declared that '*we can see now that we've progressed.*' This example of a collaborative relationship in the school created a wealth of benefits. Primarily, the teachers considered the success of team-teaching in terms of the benefits of students learning, progress, opportunities, and experiences. Secondly, the teachers spoke about successful team teaching in relation to themselves or the school.

Teachers considered the new team-teaching model to be more **inclusive** of students with special educational needs in comparison with previous learning support models in the school. One teacher interviewed felt that it resulted in the children's needs were catered to in the classroom as they were not '*constantly being drawn out of the room*' neither were they '*aware that they're the ones being targeted for support.*' Participants considered the feeling of inclusiveness to be important and in line with best practice as described by the NCCA (2020) guidelines. Cattaneo and Chapman (2010, p.647) emphasise one of the core components of the process of empowerment as 'meaningful and power-orientated goals' which is evident from the co-created goals in terms of literacy attainment of the MS and

LS teachers in this research. Through socio-cultural and Teachers felt a greater cohesion and shared vision between the MS and LS teachers identifying and meeting the specific needs of students in Literacy attainment as two participants shared:

*'When children would have been withdrawn to go and catch up on certain topics, you'd always be telling the learning support teacher or the Special Education Team, this is what we're covering. The learning support side, know now what we're doing because they're in there and they see the approach or how the children are working on things themselves. There's not that gap. In that way I find team-teaching successful.'*

*'Being able to work with someone that you get on well with, you're both working towards the same thing.'*

Although initially, teachers expressed feeling pressure and **accountability** with the new team-teaching model, it is apparent from participants' feedback that this stress soon dissipated, and the benefits of team-teaching and accountability were identified:

*'You do feel you're accountable to the other person. You want to be organised, which is a good thing. It's very positive. At the start a bit of a pressure because you were so afraid that the other person might be judging you. I think it's worked that you both work together. It wasn't just on one person.'*

*'I think you are accountable. There can be stresses with that, but if you work well together and take the time to do it together, I think it works a lot better.'*

There was greater **support, achievement, and opportunities** for all students through valuable learning experiences in literacy that may not have been possible without the team-teaching model. Teachers responses showed that there was a feeling that they were able to collectively act in order to create transformational change, strongly aligning with Freire's (1970) principles, where he believed that together with others change can take place through action. (Freire, 2005.) This ability to take-action resulting in transformative change resulted in greater enjoyment, enthusiasm, confidence, motivation, and academic success for the students. One teacher felt that team-teaching was *'working in the support of weaker children.'* Participants shared that all children received greater support:

*'The fact that the learning support teachers are there nearly the whole time for literacy and numeracy, where they really need it, it's more intense. You can get around everybody in a lesson in literacy. The class themselves are more motivated to learn \_\_ they're more engaged.'*

*'Where they were at the start and where they were at the end, it felt like we could really see progression. We felt that the team teaching, and the planning had done that.'*

*'Down to the nitty gritty of is it working best for the children? I do believe it is.'*

One teacher described how one of the marginalised students through a particular team-teaching multi-disciplinary literacy lesson experienced a sense of pride and empowerment at being able to impart what he had learned to his parents. This was particularly important as the parents' educational background was limited. Yet another example of a valued collaborative relationship, creating a greater connection between home and school. The teacher considered this to be a direct success of team-teaching, she responded:

*'A boy from a minority community came back to me the following week. He had been to the city centre, and he brought his dad to the statue and had given his dad the story and history. He had said that in all the years that his dad had lived in Dublin, that he didn't know what the statue meant. He was very happy to be able to teach his dad something.'*

The participants referenced the benefits for the teachers themselves and the opportunities it afforded them in tackling the literacy gap in the school. This successful use of a team approach to literacy teaching emerged as a dominant theme. Participants identified that successful team-teaching requires collaborative relationships and practices, sharing of ideas, mutual support of the MS teacher and the LS teacher, and the ability to solve problems together.

Teachers described a variety of team-teaching models and Literacy activities that they felt were successful from 'group work,' 'stations,' 'Circus time' and 'parallel teaching,' to shared and scaffolded writing experiences, as well as literacy life skills brought to the classroom, such as cooking and letter writing with a purpose. Teachers felt that although the new team-teaching model 'took a while' to get used to there were numerous benefits and that it worked well for addressing the Literacy needs of the children. As found in previous studies by Kennedy et al. (2023, p.191), collaborative shared reflection, open communication, autonomy,

and problem-solving were necessary for transformative learning. The participants deemed these key elements a part of the successful new teaching model:

*'It was a bit like we were feeling our way through. \_\_ It definitely took time to get there. It took a while, but we figured it out what would work for the class \_\_ Reflecting back on my practice from before, and just seeing how much better it worked, what I thought was team teaching before that, definitely wasn't. We finally got down to the crux of it. It worked well with the class and the kids enjoyed it.'*

*'We were able to nail down exactly what we wanted to do, really plan it, and know exactly what each other's roles were. I think it has worked really well.'*

*'Obviously there's always room for improvement but I really genuinely believe we're doing a great job.'*

*'The communication between the teachers is even better now because we know the class that we're working with and we're able to try and tailor what we want to do around them.'*

Three of the teachers interviewed stated that they felt **less lonely** and isolated dealing with the challenges of closing the Literacy gap in this DEIS school. There was a sense that as a team, there was increased confident, shared decision-making, especially when something was not going well in a literacy lesson. Walqui (2016) identified 'Language as the primary tool of thought' and social interaction as a basis for learning and development in SCT. (Shabani, 2016, p.2.) The data collected and analysed supports this assumption. Through shared reflective practice and communication as a team, the participants felt they could find a better approach or share ideas on what might work better and lessen the feeling of isolation when working in the classroom:

*'I think a big success is the team-teaching this year in taking the loneliness of being on your own in a class. You can second guess yourself. \_\_ Whereas when you have a colleague working alongside you, you can think they see what I see. Or I didn't see that, but my colleague has a good idea.'*

*'When you've another adult or teacher, it's even nice when you have an SNA (Special Needs Assistant) or someone else in the classroom to bounce off of. \_\_ They step in with their lovely idea that you had never thought of or seen before, \_\_ it brings a bit of life to the lesson and you can think, we're getting somewhere now.'*

One teacher reported greater opportunities to be creative and innovative by sharing and discussing ideas with their team-teacher in literacy teaching and the enthusiasm that comes with being able to do so. Trying out innovative ideas that may not have been possible were the teacher teaching on their own is an additional benefit, *'I've been excited to try something that you couldn't do on your own.'* Despite the change model in the school to one of team-teaching for literacy and the additional workload that has brought in its first year, teachers felt a sense of achievement. One teacher shared, *'while it does take a long time to plan and to embed, we feel that it has helped our class.'*

The increased **motivation** and sense of **enthusiasm** for both the teachers and the students was described as a direct impact of the team-teaching collaboration. A number of studies by Amundsen and Martinsen, and Chan, Scott Nadler & Hargis indicate that similarly, a positive correlation was found to exist between psychological empowerment and work effort or motivation and job satisfaction. (Kõiv, Liik & Heidmets, 2018, p. 1504.) Interestingly, this teacher refers to the class as 'our class' and not 'my class' suggesting a genuine sense of shared responsibility and ownership from both the teachers, a sense of team:

*With the colleague that I work with X, we know each other quite well. We work well together, and I think we both know where we're coming from in our approaches to how we teach things. I think we can bounce ideas off each other. We get enthusiastic. We get excited about things, about trying something different.*

### 4.3 Impactful Collaborative Practices

When the participants were asked what was going well in terms of teaching this year and what factors contributed to this success, participants unequivocally considered both collaborative relationships and practices a success and strength of the school. Regardless of teaching position, experience, or leadership role in the school, responses were similar, and all interviewed considered the schools ability to effectively collaborative as an asset. Collaborative practices in the school such as sharing of planning, ideas and resources were expressly desired. (Cook & Friend, 2010). They were considered important to teachers on a personal and collective level. Participants attributed the effective collaborative practices as a

driving factor in the success of the school, in terms of teaching and learning in Literacy.

Participants identified several benefits that they experienced through collaborative practices in Literacy this year. Through their experiences, teachers discussed benefits arising from collaboration with colleagues on a personal basis, at class level, corridor level and across the whole school. The participants described their experiences of collaboration as multi-layered, similar to that of the Continuum of Collaboration. (PDST, 2019, 9). Shared planning and reflection between Mainstream teachers (MS) and their Learning Support (LS) team teachers, class level planning and sharing, and whole school collective planning meetings and reflective practices were described:

*'We've been using a model of collaborative planning that's new and I do find that really helpful that you're thinking in advance.'*

*'Now we all sit down together and then the shared planning means someone else says, 'Oh I have a worksheet that I've done before that works well on this.' I feel has helped me feel more confident. I think the changes we've made in planning and prep have been really helpful for me anyway.'*

The teachers interviewed referred to collecting ideas from their colleagues over the years and accessing them repeatedly. Equally they felt that sharing was reciprocal. Sometimes this idea gathering or sharing, was quite informal. For instance, the staff room was identified as a safe place for sharing successes, ideas, and resources with colleagues. One participant stated:

*We share an awful lot of resources, and we talk about things in the staffroom, like what worked. \_\_ I think that's really good. The staffroom is a great place for the sharing of 'I did this and this works'. Nobody is trying to keep other ideas to themselves. People are willing to share and talk people through how you teach them.*

The concept of 'open door' teaching was expressed, with no teacher keeping their ideas solely for themselves. One participant felt, 'We're open in the way we work. We share ideas. It's not a very closed-door environment.' The interviewees considered their colleagues to be generous in terms of **sharing ideas, advice, and resource** (Cook & Friend, 2010). Three teachers spoke about the reciprocal generosity of staff and improvement to teaching because of sharing:

*'Working very closely together, being happy to share ideas, resources. You know that the ideas go out, they also come back. I think that that's a great asset as well. To know what might or might not work within our class or our school. I think we share resources quite willingly, which I know in other schools doesn't always happen. There is a generosity, among the staff. — You're willing to share ideas, resources. You're happy for that to happen.'*

*'I suppose with X going into the three X classes, X was able to bring any ideas we had and share them with the others and bring back any other ideas as well, which I think really helps improve our teaching. X could see what was working well, what wasn't working.'*

*'If you're teaching something in Literacy, you will say 'I'm using this down in X class. Would you like to join me to watch how I use it?'*

*'I've learned so much being in different classes that if I see something really good in one of them, I'll bring it back to the other. It's all sharing. We're all learning. It's great. I'm really enjoying it.'*

Another type of collaborative practice that teachers mentioned in their responses as a strength, was that of collective and shared **problem solving**. Vygotsky's (1978) theoretical concept of SCT was instrumental in interpreting the observed patterns in responses relating to collective problem solving by participants, underscoring the importance of the theoretical framework. Vygotsky's credence in the value of problem-solving strategies being co-created through collaborative dialogues and others with more expertise and knowledge was reiterated by the participants. (Vygotsky, 1978.) Participants felt that they could approach and be approached in an open manner should someone need help. There was a positive expression from many participants about their ability as a team, to solve problems that *'two heads are better than one.'* This can be interpreted as referring to a sense of collective efficacy and autonomy in tackling literacy challenges in the school and develop a range of solutions together . While problems and challenges were acknowledged they were generally not regarded as repressive. Two participants in this regard stated:

*'There's definitely a very shared feeling that there's never kind of a problem we can't fix together or bring to people. You would never have to deal with things on your own. There's always someone would give you a dig out with something or help you out with something.'*

*'When it's a whole school approach I think that was quite good as well. Knowing that you weren't the only one doing it. That you weren't doing the*

*wrong thing, that you can try something. Being given the space to try and being able to try it. If it didn't work, it didn't work. You move on talking to other teachers on the corridor, what worked, what didn't work.'*

*'If you're collaboratively working with someone. Then all of a sudden, you're not on your own, you're part of a team and you're thinking, okay, they didn't understand this today, but what can we do that's going to make it work.'*

However, there was a desire for more consistent collective problem solving in a safe forum, as not all participants felt as valued and supported in this regard. One participant felt that:

*We have to make sure that our staff do feel valued and that they're not left to try and solve a very difficult problem on their own. Perhaps that's when the leadership team, the management team come. Or have an open forum where you can feel like you can say something and not be judged or worried. Where you feel you're a valued member and all opinions are necessary.*

Overall, the teachers were happy with the new collaborative practices. However, there was an expressed desire that for the ideal vision of teaching in the school in the future that this collaborative planning needs to be further developed. A collaboratively designed, whole school plan focusing on progression in Literacy was desired and that this could be a step for next year:

*To see the progression from third to fourth, fifth to sixth. \_\_ I hope that team planning, collaborative planning, it will filter up that way that then over the years. \_\_ Looking at the overall, big picture of planning.*

#### **4.4 Professional Development and Growth**

On-site and external professional development and growth was a dominant theme in the data analysed. All participants commented that they felt supported by their colleagues and that everyone on staff had some expertise that could be utilised and shared through team-teaching, that *'in a way you're upskilling all the time because you're learning what works well for another teacher.'*

There was an acknowledgement that expertise comes in many forms, regardless of years of experience in teaching. Participants also regarded themselves as being contributors to the collective expertise on staff. Teacher agency reflective of the NCCA's Primary Curriculum Framework (2010) is clearly evident from participants' responses, in particular in terms of empowering teachers to become teacher leaders to support the PL of their colleagues (Huang 2016, Kennedy et al. 2023, p. 192). LS teachers felt that by working across classes, they were in a unique position to share successful activities and ideas from other classes. Notably, the participants interviewed expressed a conscious desire, enthusiasm, and willingness to learn from each other in terms of professional development and were highly motivated in this respect:

*'I think there's a real willingness, people are very interested in upskilling, learning new things, taking on new programmes. There's never really much reluctance, even from people who have been here a long time. When new things come in, we are interested in learning about them if they benefit us.'*

*'I'm really enjoying it. I'm learning so much from other teachers as well because it doesn't matter how many years you're teaching, every day is a teaching day, and you'll learn something new. I love it.'*  
*'I think you can learn from each other.'*

The participants felt that team-teaching and formal mentoring created a structure that provided on-site opportunities, in the form of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for sharing of expertise, knowledge and skills. Those interviewed felt that professional development contributed to the success of the new literacy team-teaching approach. The new model of collaboration and team teaching has resulted in this expertise being used and shared to a far greater extent this year than previously and a form of informal on-site professional development has taken place in conjunction with the formal collaborative mentoring Droichead process for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Participants considered PL important regardless of experience and this is reflective of the concept that PL is a continuum that whereby teachers move through a variety of learning stages throughout the entirety of their career. (Kennedy et al. p 191.) This is in line with the LAOS (DES, 2022) framework whereby teachers become empowered to lead teaching and learning (p.41).

Collaborating with external supports for professional development such as the Department of Education professional support team OIDE (formerly PDST), was found to be beneficial by those interviewed. It was viewed as a benchmark of best practice and evidence-based research practices in literacy teaching. It provided an opportunity to celebrate successful practices in the school and created a safe forum for sharing. Teachers reported their experiences of this external professional development as beneficial and a factor that resulted in team teaching success:

*'Even talking to her about what worked and what didn't, helped. \_\_ It was an external support. It was almost like a baseline\_\_ I think it was nice for her to come in and she worked with the whole staff, and we're all given the same information.'*

*'Honestly, I think even starting with knowing what team teaching is, like the sessions we had (with OIDE) helped. Like learning this is parallel teaching, this is alternate teaching, this is station teaching. Starting out looking at the different models, talking and getting the confidence.'*

#### **4.5 The Role of Effective Leadership**

The role of effective leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2003), both past and present was a theme that presented itself throughout the interviews. It was both implicitly discussed by participants and explicitly. When asked about factors that contributed to successful teaching in the school many participants reflected on the importance of support from a variety of school leaders. A follow up question was asked to identify specifically what role leadership played in supporting successful teaching in literacy? Middle, and senior leaders were referenced as important in terms of leading the way and enabling teachers to act in an autonomous and collaborative manner. One participant felt that it was vital for leadership to lead by example and encourage collaboration:

*'If you as a leader are getting stuck in and you're on the ground with the team\_\_ I think you have to set a good example. Leading by example first. Secondly, I think that it's up to leaders to make sure that everybody is getting involved.'*

*'I think Senior leadership are fabulous at that and that we're very lucky*

*In having somebody like X in literacy. I think we're very lucky to have somebody as dedicated and motivated who just has a passion for teaching and learning. I think by watching people like X, I know I've personally learned an awful lot.'*

*'I know they'd be very accepting of ideas, we're lucky that we can share things. Continue to share and encourage each other \_\_ we need to keep our staff happy too. That if we're one big happy family, more learning will go on.'*

**Trust, appreciation and respect** between leadership and staff was considered as an essential element for teachers to feel free and confident to try out new innovative ideas, be they successful or not. There was an expressed feeling of ability to problem solve and trying new strategies and ideas in teaching to bridge the literacy gap of students, especially in this DEIS school. Teachers expressed that leaders enabled them to take risks and that failure could be shared and learned from in a safe and open forum. There was no fear of failure, merely an emphasis on the importance of self and collective reflection on what did not work and seeing how it could be improved upon. Through effective distributive leadership roles, the school principal has empowered the staff to take on and carry out leadership roles by encouraging teamwork in all areas of school life. (DES, 2022, p. 41). The existence of trust and sense of **collective agency** shows that teachers' sense of empowerment is being facilitated, scaffolded, and encouraged by leadership. One teacher described this trust between teachers and leadership as:

*'X created such a wonderful environment \_\_ X appreciated that it was a hard enough area to work in, and there was no judgement from him. That's how he led. He trusted us as a staff to respect each other and to respect him by doing our job\_\_ He created a wonderful place to work.'*

*'X was a fantastic leader, if you went to X with a problem, X let you figure out how you were going to fix the problem. X didn't have to get involved. X didn't micromanage. That's what a good leader is. A really strong leader is somebody that's not trying to manage and control everybody. X wanted us to be independent, X trusted us as professionals to do it.'*

The **supportive and welcoming school culture** identified in the interviews was attributed to both former and present leadership and the relationship that had been built with staff. Staff felt that although there had been some changes in senior leadership in recent years that this positive and supportive school culture

had continued to be fostered amongst the staff. There is a feeling from the participants that they are lucky to be working in this school where such a supportive school culture exists and is actively encouraged and promoted. For all participants, it was the defining reason they have stayed teaching for a considerable number of years, in a school that faces many challenges. This welcoming and supportive school culture and leadership was not taken for granted and many interviewed compared it to other experiences they had of workplaces where this did not exist.

Teachers feel trusted to make relevant decisions. This was considered vital to the improvement of the school through the collaborative creation of a school vision and plan for literacy improvement and development. Through staff, corridor, leadership, and special education meetings, participants were openly encouraged to share their successes in teaching and learning, participate in **collective decision making** and contribute to the ongoing discourse of improvement in literacy.

However, there was an expressed desire for shared decision making to be further built on and developed. Many of the participants interviewed when asked 'What is your vision for the school?' replied they would like to see even greater shared decision making and celebration of successful teaching and learning. A collaboratively created school literacy and DEIS plan, led by leadership, was considered integral in creating a whole school approach in the improvement of literacy in this DEIS school.

Participants were appreciative of the new structures that Leadership put in place. These structures were seen to have encouraged and provided opportunities for self and collective **professional development**, collaborative planning, mentoring, sharing of resources and ideas. Leadership actively encouraged sharing expertise and skills. Provision of access to on-going training, external supports and necessary resources provided opportunities for teachers to reach their full potential and become empowered through the socially constructed collaborative school environment. Many participants when posed the question 'What would your ideal vision of teaching be?' responded by saying they would like to further build upon sharing of ideas more across the school than is happening at present:

*'I think if we do share those ideas with the rest of the school. Then other classes who may not have had the same experience this year might be able to take some new ideas.'*

*'It'd be great to at a staff meeting share a bit of a synopsis of the year where we share our ideas and say what did go well and what didn't go well. But sometimes it's great to share up or share down with the other year groups.'*

One of the main factors in the new collaborative structure that leadership afforded the teachers, was the provision of **time**. Participants felt that *'the time to plan helps'*. By allocating time, giving support, and providing class cover, *'you can go and witness the other lessons taking place'* and see other *'teachers in action.'* King et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of availability of 'time, space and access to learning resources and dedicated staff with expertise' in order for PL on site to be effective. It is clear from participants feedback that this was supported and provided by leadership. Time to collectively reflect and to authentically collaborate. One participant felt that the leadership could lead the way with new plans for the school and that staff meetings provided an opportunity for shared decision making:

*Leadership, they would be the ones bringing that forward to the staff, that we need to take a look at this. We're going to plan by putting focus groups together, looking for volunteers who'd be willing to sit down and make up a little grid or targets. The management would need to instigate that, put that together in some way. \_\_ Initiate it \_\_ Give time to it at staff meetings.*

Opportunities were provided by leadership for feedback on the new structures of collaboration during staff meetings and through surveys/ questionnaires. Adaptions were made by leadership based on staff **feedback and discussion**. Teachers felt part of the shared decision-making process in making effective changes that they deemed essential.

The leadership facilitated teachers' participation in this research as it was considered a valuable opportunity for reflective practice. Participants felt that it was good that leadership *'allowed it to happen'* and that leadership was *'supportive'* of the teachers' participation in the research. It provided research participants an anonymous platform for open communication. In addition, it provided an opportunity to reflect on the successes and achievements in teaching and learning in literacy

this year. By promoting a culture of continuous improvement by supporting teachers and colleagues, the school leadership is leading the school to strive for excellence. (DES, 2022, p. 34)

### **Summary of Findings**

In summary, increased levels of confidence, motivation, and enthusiasm in literacy teaching were experienced through professional development, team teaching and collaborative relationships and practices. In addition, teachers expressed greater autonomy, and collective decision-making and problem solving, resulting in a feeling of increased self and collective efficacy. Finally, the findings show that as a team, success can be achieved in bridging the literacy gaps in a DEIS school when the school openly engages in the creation of an authentically collaborative and supportive environment where everyone works and learns together. The inter-relational themes that emerged were experienced across the school at a variety of levels from classroom to class level to whole school and from both mainstream and learning support teachers.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The importance of bridging the literacy gap in DEIS primary schools has been highlighted in recent reports and research, as has the emphasis on empowering teachers in DEIS schools. (Kennedy et al. 2023.) Under the theoretical lens of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) and theories of empowerment (Rapport, 1984,1987,1995; Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004; Adams, 2008; Cattaneo & Chapman, 2010) informed by Freirean principles (1970, 2005), this thesis sought to explore teachers experiences and perceptions of a newly implemented collaborative and team-teaching model in literacy.

In alignment with the Freirean principles of critical pedagogy (1970), rather than focusing on the perceived problems of literacy instruction in a DEIS primary school, I elected to take a positive stance using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Srivastva & Cooperrider,1990, Whitney et al. 2019, p.163). Using AI afforded a deliberately positive exploration of teachers' experiences in the teaching of literacy to gauge empowerment, which is itself rooted in a positive, hopeful stance. This approach encouraged reflection, critical dialogue, and in turn greater critical consciousness. (Freire,1970) Through the research questions , informed by a theoretical framework in Chapter 2, it asked, what is going well in the school? What are the successes, strengths and assets, and what factors are attributed to the success? This is not a denial or minimalization of the many challenges of a DEIS school and literacy attainment. However, in line with DEIS ethos, it was an opportunity to explore the possibilities of empowerment through a solution-focused, positive viewpoint.

Seven teachers were interviewed, working in either mainstream or special education teaching roles in the school. The experience levels of the teachers or varied and some of the participants held middle leadership roles. Regardless of differences in teaching roles or experience, there were some common prominent valued experiences and practises. The importance of supportive relationships was considered meaningful to all participants in facing challenges, collective

problem solving, support and creating a welcoming school community in alignment with perceived organizational empowerment where 'peer-based support systems' were considered integral (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004, p.3).

In accordance with findings by Peterson and Zimmerman (2004, p.3), participants clearly expressed shared feelings of self and collective efficacy. Most notably, this was apparent from all participants' feedback and was not limited based on teacher experience or teaching role. Participants expressed a strong belief that together as a team, problems can be solved. Through discussion, shared planning, and collective reflective practices there was an enhanced feeling of confidence and belief in their capabilities and collective power to act and achieve desired outcomes. (Bandura, 2001). Confidence to try new targeted literacy teaching approaches to meet the needs of the school.

Participants' responses in what was working well under school were unanimous, and team-teaching and collaboration were identified by all participants. The benefits of collaboration and team-teaching were all consistent with the theoretical framework of this thesis on empowerment and socio-cultural theory. There was growth and development in confidence, skills and knowledge and greater shared decision-making. In addition, feeling valued and appreciated but also valuing the expertise and support of others was reported. There was a general sense of collective success and achievement from the teachers interviewed. By enhancing students' literacy skills and meeting the significant special education needs of the school in a more inclusive environment (NCCA, 2020, p.21).

The generated sense of empowerment through social opportunities with colleagues cultivated a variety of positive emotions. The teachers interviewed experienced an increased sense of enthusiasm, pride, happiness, excitement, and motivation through their participation in the new collaborative and team-teaching model. These positive emotions were also reflected at classroom level amongst the students, suggesting a correlation between empowerment of teachers and empowerment of students.

While participants recalled collaborative practices from the past, it can be said that when placed on the continuum of collaboration (Lacey, 2001; Cook & Friend,

2010) they were merely reaching the stages of liaison, consultation, and cooperation. A lack of consistency and continuation was also mentioned by participants of previous attempts at team teaching. However, when comparing the participants responses to their experience of the new team-teaching model in literacy they are placed at a level of authentic collaboration. (Cook & Friend, 2010.) Authentic collaboration reflecting a collective sense of improvement in literacy attainment and teaching in this DEIS school.

This thesis does not present any strategies for empowering teachers. However, it does reflect that through consistency of collaboration and team teaching, there is a noteworthy sense of agency and sense of team. All participants responded to questions posed to them in terms of 'we' not 'I,' apart from the two initial questions about their own personal background. Throughout the interviews, it was abundantly evident from the consistent use of 'we' that collective success, agency, and efficacy was experienced.

Participants talked about what they do well, more importantly, what they do successfully together. When discussing team-teaching and corridor collaboration collective efficacy was evident in the ability to address the specific literacy needs in the school. Participants were positive in their outlook on their ability to problem solve. During lessons. To be adaptable and flexible, creative and to engage in '*trial and error*' practices. Access to staff with experience and expertise was considered a strength of the school. In this regard, willingness to share, learn and support played an integral role.

Finally, leadership was discussed as a contributing factor to successful collaboration and team teaching. School leadership not only facilitated but encouraged and supported authentic opportunities to work together. By restructuring the school day and changing the special education teaching model, the change process to a more inclusive teaching model was realised. The provision of 'time and space' to meet, communicate, plan, co-teach and collectively reflect was created by leadership and has the potential to achieve transformative results and empowering in increasing the capacity of teachers in addressing the diversity of needs in a DEIS school. (Kennedy et al. 2022). It is worth noting however, that this should be evidence and research based. The cultivation of a supportive, trusting

environment by leadership, where teachers are valued and respected, resulted in further empowerment of teachers.

The findings of this research show that although in its infancy, in this DEIS school, through consistent, structured collaboration and team-teaching in literacy, empowerment of teachers was possible. Thus, illustrating the importance of autonomy, self and collective efficacy, ability to problem solve and valued professional development. Participants stated the significant role that leadership plays in providing opportunities for success in teaching and learning. Without collective action, progress and change are not possible in tackling literacy gaps in DEIS schools. Although the new collaborative and team-teaching model is considered a 'work in progress' there was, nevertheless, individual and collective success experienced by teachers and students alike.

## **6 RECOMMENDATIONS: AI DREAM PHASE**

Based on the findings and insights from the Appreciative Inquiry Interviews Dream and Design Phase, several recommendations emerge for this DEIS school regarding further development of collaboration and team-teaching in Literacy for teacher empowerment. All participants in this research declared that their Dream vision of literacy teaching and improvement in the school involved continued collaboration with colleagues and team teaching.

### **Ongoing Professional Development**

Teachers expressed a fervent desire to expand on-site professional development opportunities with colleagues with expertise in specific areas of literacy and with external professional development providers. While these structures are already in place for NQTs to observe a cross-school selection of teachers in action, it was felt by many that this opportunity would be of value to all staff. King et al. (2022) highlights the necessity of teachers as active participants in this learning. In addition, teachers wished for greater opportunities to be part of the decision-making process for what professional development was focused on as they felt this would be of more benefit to them. This autonomy in terms of professional development is keenly in line with the Cosán Framework (TCI, 2016), whereby teachers are considered best placed to determine the learning that is of most benefit to them, be that through collaborative reflection, team-teaching, mentoring or engaging in professional conversations. (p. 7.)

### **Celebration of Success**

In line with Kouzes and Posner's (2003) acclaimed principles of effective leadership it is not only paramount that leaders acknowledge school success in terms of teaching and learning, but more importantly be active participants in celebrating success. Some teachers interviewed wished for 'on the ground' celebration of learning achievements in classrooms from school leadership. More presence in the physical classrooms from leadership to witness first-hand the successful learning and in turn teaching would in turn foster a greater culture of appreciation and support. Participants interviewed believed that this celebration of achieve-

ments would be beneficial to the students and their sense of pride in their accomplishments, but also as a form of appreciation for the teachers' efforts. By 'encouraging the heart' this would serve as a direct affirmation of the collective efforts and accomplishments of the school, 'by celebrating people's accomplishments visibly and in group settings, leaders create and sustain team spirit'. (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 7.) There was an acknowledgement and sentiment of empathy with school leadership that their day is extremely busy and overloaded. However, the teachers interviewed reiterated that they felt it would be affirmative of all that is going well in the school for school leadership. This was thought to be particularly important in a DEIS school where daily challenges are faced by school leadership.

### **Collaboratively Designed School Plan**

According to King et al. (2019, p. 169-170.) collective and collaborative shared practices in the development of communities of practice are vital. The collaborative development of a new whole school plan in Literacy would be beneficial. Many teachers expressed how planning of an excessively broad Primary Language Curriculum was often stressful. This stress was alleviated by collaborative planning at corridor level, however there was a desire for improvement in this area moving forward. Focus groups where cross-corridor teacher discussions take place to design a whole school literacy plan that works towards a progression from 3<sup>rd</sup> class to 6<sup>th</sup> class. Leadership 'Enabling others to Act' in the creation of a collaboratively designed whole school plan would foster a stronger team and lead to more effective action. (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 5). Teacher voice and participation in the design of this plan would create a greater sense of ownership and facilitate easier planning for teachers on a yearly basis. One teacher declared with such a broad curriculum it is better to 'go an inch wide and a mile deep' and that this may be possible with a collaborative school plan that progresses literacy skills through all class levels.

### **Open forums**

Teachers interviewed desired more open forums, where everyone felt safe and confident in sharing ideas and opinions and teachers played a bigger role in decision-making than at present. Spillane (2010) reiterates the importance of dis-

tributive leadership, by involving teachers in decision-making processes and collaborative planning which acknowledges and uses the expertise and contributions of all staff members in shaping the direction of the school for future growth and improvement. The development of smaller focus groups that could feed back suggestions with leadership would be beneficial in this regard. Facilitated focus groups in collaboration with DES professional supports in developing a whole school plan where everyone's opinion matters regardless of years of experience. Greater opportunities for staff to decide what collaborative planning will take place at staff meetings and be beneficial to them in the classroom.

### **6.1 Limitations, Bias and Validity**

It is necessary to consider limitations to this study when interpreting the results. The context and scale of the study need to be carefully kept in mind. This small-scale research was conducted for a specific DEIS school in a specific context. DEIS school contexts are unique and affected by the complexity of challenges that they face daily. Therefore, it is imperative to consider generalisations carefully. There is also a significantly disproportionate number of males to female participants which may have impacted on generalisations of the research.

The researcher for this thesis has been a colleague for many years of the participants and holds a senior leadership position in the school with a direct responsibility for the development and implementation of the Primary Language Curriculum and literacy. This may have impacted how the respondents answered. However, relationships of trust were already in existence between the researcher and participants through many years of collaboration and support.

There is a potential for bias in the interpretation of qualitative data collected as the leader for literacy. To mitigate this potential bias, the researcher carefully utilised open-ended questions to not influence specific outcomes and responses based on their own beliefs, experiences, and assumptions. The research process and analysis went through iterative cycles of critical reflection. and the research process and analysis went through iterative cycles of critical reflection. The credibility and validity of the research was ensured through scrupulous endeavours to

identify bias and identify and adhere to all ethical considerations through the entirety of the research.

## **6.2 Future Research**

This study was limited to a small number of participants in one DEIS school. Conducting research to include a larger group of teachers across more DEIS schools would afford the opportunity to compare teacher empowerment in DEIS contexts. A more balanced gender sample and including other stakeholders, for example, senior leadership, to gather other perspectives could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of empowering teachers through collaboration and team-teaching.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1. Interview Questions and Protocol

1(2)

AI Guide	AI (Appreciative Inquiry) Interview Questions and Probes
<b>Opener</b>	<p>Welcome and introduction script- Describe purpose and process of interview/research and the Appreciative Inquiry Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you tell me about your background of experience in teaching in general and background of teaching in a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school specifically?</li> <li>• What <b>motivated</b> you to teach in a <b>DEIS school</b>?</li> <li>• What <b>motivated</b> you to <b>stay</b> teaching in a DEIS school?</li> </ul>
<p><b>DISCOVERY</b></p> <p>Positive Experience Exploration</p> <p>Strengths and Assets</p>	<p><b>Q1: Reflecting</b> on the past year, in terms of your teaching, can you tell me about a time when your literacy teaching went well, and you were proud of it? Try and tell me in as much detail as possible please.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Why</b> you think it was successful?</li> <li>• What <b>factors or support contributed</b> to this do you think?</li> <li>• Is there anything else that contributed to the success?</li> <li>• How did this success/ experience impact on you personally/ professionally?</li> </ul> <p><b>Q2:</b> In your opinion, what are the <b>strengths and assets</b> that mainstream and SET teachers in this DEIS school possess, despite the challenges, in terms of literacy instruction?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you <b>recall a time</b> when these strengths were <b>particularly impactful</b> and evident?</li> <li>• <b>How</b> do you and your colleagues <b>use these strengths</b> to overcome obstacles/challenges and bring about positive change?</li> </ul> <p>PROBES: Can you tell me more about that please?</p>

2(2)

<p><b>DREAM</b></p> <p>Aspirations and Visions</p>	<p><b>Q 3:</b> Looking forward to the future, what is your <b>ideal vision</b> for the school/yourself <b>in terms of teaching</b> in literacy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is your vision of the ideal scenario in terms of literacy teaching in this school?</li> <li>• How do you believe this would positively impact the school and the school's vision?</li> </ul>
<p><b>DESIGN</b></p> <p>Actions to be taken to make it happen</p>	<p><b>Q4:</b> In your opinion, <b>how</b> might this vision be <b>achieved</b>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can the vision be brought to life?</li> <li>• What would <b>facilitate/support this vision</b> being realised?</li> <li>• What <b>actions</b> can the school take to make it happen?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Reflection and Insights on AI Interview</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on our chat, what <b>insights</b> have you gained about literacy teaching in this DEIS school or in disadvantaged school contexts with challenges?</li> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to add or share about the literacy teaching in this school that we have not discussed?</li> <li>• What did you think about the <b>AI interview approach</b>?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Closing</b></p>	<p>I would like to <b>thank you</b> for taking the time out of your busy day to participate in this interview and sharing your experiences and insights.</p> <p>Is there <b>anything else</b> that you would like to add before we conclude?</p> <p>Do you have any <b>further questions</b> for me?</p> <p>Thank you once again for your time today.</p>

## Appendix 2. Interview Script

First, I would like to welcome you to this interview and say Thank you for participating. I know how busy the school day is and I am grateful to our principal for facilitating these interviews during school time and to you for taking part in this interview. It is appreciated as both a researcher and a colleague.

I would like to tell you a little about the topic that I am researching for my master's Thesis in Business Administration and Educational Leadership at TAMK University, Finland.

The topic I have chosen to explore is Empowering Teachers in a DEIS School: Collaboration and Team-Teaching in Literacy. The purpose is to explore your experiences, insights, and perspectives on literacy teaching in this school.

I am using an approach called Appreciative Inquiry. I will explain a little about what we are going to do during the interview. I am going to ask you some questions about the times when you have experienced or seen literacy teaching working at its best in this DEIS school. Oftentimes interviews like this for research purposes can ask questions about the problem or what is not working well, something that needs to be fixed. However, today we are going to try and identify what is working well in terms of teaching in this school and what you would like more of going forward.

At the end of the interview, I will ask you to reflect on this AI approach and your experience of it today.

I want to reassure you that all responses will remain anonymous and that you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. All identifying information will be redacted and anonymized from the recordings as stated in the information sheet provided. If you need a break at any stage, please just let me know. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

