

Article

Professional learning communities for inclusive pedagogy: how teachers and learning support professionals develop a coherent community in an inclusive school in South Africa

by

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Abstract

Collaboration is widely recognized as essential for implementing inclusive education, yet teachers are frequently hindered in their efforts to develop inclusive practices by structural and cultural conditions. This article examines how professional learning communities (PLCs) function as spaces where teachers and learner support educators (LSEs) negotiate these conditions and collaboratively develop inclusive pedagogies in a South African full-service school. The study asks: How do educators navigate structural and cultural conditions through PLCs to build a coherent community of inclusive practice?

The study employs a qualitative single-case design, with semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and two learner support educators (n = 14) at City Primary School (pseudonym), which is a full-service school in Johannesburg. The theoretical framework combines Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach to social realism, Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, and Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnography to examine inclusion across macro, meso, and micro levels of educational practice.

The findings reveal that PLCs created important opportunities for collaborative learning, professional identity development, and shifting teachers' understandings of inclusive pedagogy. Participants described PLCs as practical spaces supporting experimentation with inclusive teaching strategies, thereby strengthening relationships among professionals. However, these developments remained constrained by structural conditions, including resource shortages, inadequate staffing, limited time, and the bureaucratic demands of the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2015), which functions as a 'ruling text' mediating frontline support.

The evidence does not demonstrate structural transformation; instead, it indicates the potential for morphogenesis—emerging cultural and agentic changes that could contribute to wider transformation if supported by facilitative structures and policies. The study proposes an integrated multi-level framework for understanding collaborative professional learning in inclusive education and highlights the

importance of aligning policy, resources, and professional learning to support coherent communities of inclusive practice.

Keywords: inclusive pedagogy, professional learning communities, teacher agency, social realism, institutional ethnography, South Africa

Introduction

Inclusive education remains a critical agenda in post-apartheid South Africa. Inclusive schools, also called full-service schools (FSSs) (DBE, 2010), are positioned as key vehicles for promoting equity for learners with disabilities and learning barriers. South Africa's commitment to inclusive education through White Paper 6 (2001) and the Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy (DBE, 2015) positions FSSs as central institutions for this endeavor (DBE, 2010). Despite policy intent, teacher's professional learning for inclusion has been mainly provided through short-term workshops and seminars (Walton et al., 2014), which teachers themselves critique as individualized and disconnected from classroom realities (Materechera, 2020).

Collaboration is pertinent for implementing inclusive education and practicing inclusive teaching (Ainscow, 2020; Kimani, 2025). Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a vehicle for fostering inter-professional relationships between teachers and learning support professionals to benefit all learners in a full-service school. Achieving coherence in inclusive teaching practices is often impeded by systemic, cultural, and institutional challenges (Andrews et al., 2021). Although teachers have demonstrated their willingness to practice inclusive pedagogy (Walton et al., 2022, 2019), structural issues persistently hinder their intentions to actualize inclusion.

This article examines how PLCs function as mechanisms for discussing and developing inclusive pedagogy in one South African full-service school, navigating structural and cultural barriers. Using Archer's (1995) theory of social realism, and Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnographic work, the study explores how structure (institutional policies), culture (beliefs and assumptions), and agency (teachers and learner support educators) interact to support or hinder inclusive teaching. The study is guided by the following research question:

How do educators at a South African full-service school navigate structural and cultural conditions through professional learning communities to build a coherent community of inclusive practice?

The notion of a coherent community refers to a professional community where educators develop shared understandings, values, and practices concerning inclusion, and work collaboratively toward common educational goals (Wenger, 1998). Such communities are characterized by mutual engagement, collective responsibility, and a shared commitment to supporting all learners. The study argues that PLCs can become sites of potential morphogenesis. Archer (1995, p. 75) defines morphogenesis as “those processes which tend to elaborate or change a system’s given form, structure or state.” The potential for morphogenesis refers to processes that create conditions for social and structural transformation. In the context of this study, the concept does not imply that structural transformation has already occurred; rather, it refers to the evolution of new ways of thinking, collaborating, and practicing inclusion that have the potential to contribute to wider institutional change if they are supported by facilitative policies and resources.

To examine these processes, the study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach to social realism, Wenger’s (1998) theory of communities of practice, and Nichols’ (2016) institutional ethnography. Together, these perspectives allow an analysis of inclusive practice across three interconnected levels of social reality. At the macro level, the framework examines how policies, resources, and institutional structures condition professional practice. At the meso level, it considers how professional learning communities facilitate social learning, identity formation, and collaborative meaning-making. At the micro level, it explores how everyday practices are coordinated through texts, procedures, and institutional processes such as the SIAS policy.

This multi-level framework is used to analyze educators’ accounts of the macro, meso, and micro conditions discussed in PLCs. It also supports an empirical examination of how educators negotiate the structural and cultural conditions of inclusion in one South African full-service school. The findings indicate that PLC participation supported collaborative learning, reflexive practice, and possible shifts in professional identity, although enduring structural conditions constrained these developments. The article therefore treats PLCs as sites of morphogenetic potential, where conditions for change may emerge but sustained transformation depends on wider structural and policy reform.

Literature Review

Inclusive education in South Africa is grounded in the global disability rights movement and formalized through international charters such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Initially focused on integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream education, the concept has evolved to address broader educational injustices and marginalization (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Ongoing debates about what constitutes inclusive education (Dyson, 1999)—whether as ideology, discourse, or practice—have resulted in inconsistent policy and implementation (Walton, 2016). In South Africa, the inclusive education policy, particularly Education White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001), articulates a vision of support for all learners, but implementation has been constrained by inadequate resources, legislative ambiguities, and entrenched discriminatory attitudes (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Mamabolo et al., 2021). Alongside the legacy of apartheid education—a system that was built on deliberate inequality, separate resourcing, and racialized exclusion—these factors complicate the transformation of schools into genuinely inclusive environments (Engelbrecht et al., 2016).

Teacher education for inclusion is widely regarded as essential to the development of inclusive schools (Florian & Camedda, 2020; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Yet many professional learning programs remain fragmented and focused on special education, thereby reinforcing deficit-based models (Beaton et al., 2021; Florian, 2020). Inclusion may consequently be reduced to superficial accommodations rather than pedagogical transformation (Ainscow, 2020). Persistent gaps in teacher preparation also contribute to the conflation of inclusion with segregation (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Short-term workshops have limited influence on sustained practice when school environments do not support inclusive teaching (Forlin, 2012; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) highlight the value of collaborative, dialogic, and contextually embedded learning strategies that engage teachers in reflective practice and collective problem-solving (Beaton et al., 2021; Florian, 2012).

Such approaches foster ownership of inclusion and support teachers in negotiating the complex challenges of diverse classrooms. In South Africa, professional learning for inclusion has largely been shaped by the legacy of special education (de Jager, 2013; Engelbrecht et al., 2016). Teachers who participated in long-term, school-based programs reported that collaborative relationships provided motivation, encouragement, and practical strategies for inclusion (Kempen & Steyn, 2016; Nel et al., 2011). PLCs emerge as a model for professional development and as a vital strategy for transforming inclusive pedagogy in South African schools.

Full-service schools (FSSs) are mainstream schools that are expected to act as catalysts for inclusive education by providing additional human and material resources for learners with mild to moderate support needs (DBE, 2010). An FSS:

is a school with good leadership that sees itself as a beacon of the transformation process in education by developing cultures, policies and practices that celebrate diversity, respect difference and value innovation and problem-solving... should strive to achieve access, equity, quality and social justice in education. (DBE, 2010, p. 8)

FSSs are therefore potentially important sites for the sustainable development of inclusive practices, provided that policy is accompanied by operational support. However, research identifies constraints such as limited knowledge of policy requirements. The Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support (SIAS) policy is intended to provide a rights-based and standardized approach to identifying and responding to support needs (DBE, 2015).

The implementation of SIAS is constrained by the administrative burden of completing support needs assessment forms and by insufficient training (Maree et al., 2023; Sibuyi, 2023). Educators report difficulty in screening, identifying, and assessing barriers to learning, while the paperwork adds to already demanding workloads (Matolo & Rambuda, 2021). Limited interprofessional collaboration compounds these difficulties (Maree et al., 2023). Although SIAS is intended to increase participation and support, complex documentation and limited practitioner preparation can create delays between identifying a need and providing assistance.

PLCs offer a promising means of supporting teachers' professional agency in relation to inclusion (Kimani, 2021). The analysis of PLCs requires attention to both structural conditions and professional agency. Archer (1995) rejects structural determinism, which treats action as wholly controlled by social structures, and voluntarism, which

treats individuals as unconstrained. Instead, structure, culture, and agency are analytically distinct but interact over time.

Theoretical Perspective

An Integrated Multi-Level Framework

The integrated framework combines Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach to social realism, Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, and Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnography. Table 1 summarizes the lens and focus used at each level of analysis.

Table 1
An Integrated Multi-Level Framework

Level of Analysis	Theoretical Lens	Analytical Focus
Macro	Archer's morphogenetic approach	Policies, institutional structures, resource allocation, and cultural conditions shaping practice
Meso	Wenger's communities of practice	Professional learning communities, collaborative learning, identity formation, and shared practice
Micro	Nichols' institutional ethnography	Everyday work practices, SIAS documentation, textual mediation, and institutional processes

The three perspectives address different but interrelated dimensions of professional learning for inclusion. They support analysis across macro, meso, and micro levels at which inclusive teaching is enacted in a full-service school. At the macro level, Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach examines how policy systems, resource allocations, and cultural norms condition educators' actions. At the meso level, Wenger's (1998) communities of practice illuminate how social learning unfolds within PLCs through shared meaning-making, identity formation, and collaborative practice. At the micro level, Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnography reveals how texts, including SIAS forms, referral procedures, and administrative requirements, mediate teachers' and LSEs' everyday work. Together, the perspectives retain educators as agents while locating their actions within structural and institutional conditions. The application of the theories in the integrated framework to post-apartheid South African schooling requires critical consideration. They were largely developed in Global North contexts, whereas South African schooling is characterized by historically unequal provision, continuing resource scarcity, and varied

understandings of disability. Global policy aspirations therefore need to be considered alongside local material realities and both medical-model and Ubuntu-informed conceptions of community (Akabor & Phasha, 2022). The framework is used here to provide adaptable analytical tools for examining how institutional conditions shape professional learning, how educators negotiate them collectively, and how policy texts mediate everyday practice.

Archer's Morphogenetic Approach to Social Realism

Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach provides a framework for understanding the interaction between structure, culture, and agency. The morphogenetic cycle theorizes social change as occurring through three analytically distinct but temporally overlapping phases: structural conditioning, cultural elaboration, and agential action. In this study, structural conditioning refers to pre-existing systems (e.g., SIAS policy framework), bureaucratic procedures, staffing norms, and resource allocations that form the conditions that teachers and LSEs inherit and where they must act. Cultural elaboration denotes the dominant beliefs, values, and assumptions about disability and inclusion that are held by educators and institutions, including deficit-oriented views that conflate inclusion with remedial segregation. Agential action involves teachers' and LSEs' responses to participation in PLCs, and how they navigate, challenge, and endeavor to transform the conditions around them (Kimani, 2021).

In Archer's terms, morphogenesis refers to structural transformation over time rather than changes in attitudes or individual practices alone. Participants reported shifts in understanding, greater pedagogical confidence, and new collaborative practices. These are meaningful cultural and agentic developments, but the structural conditions they described—SIAS bureaucracy, resource shortages, large classes, and limited LSE staffing—remained largely unchanged. The interview data therefore do not support a claim that the PLC achieved morphogenesis. Instead, the analysis concerns morphogenetic potential: developments that might contribute to wider change if accompanied by appropriate structural support.

Wenger's Communities of Practice

Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice (CoPs) underpins the meso-level analysis of how social learning unfolds within PLCs. The theory challenges traditional notions of learning as an isolated cognitive process, conceptualizing learning instead as a social phenomenon created through participation in communities where individuals engage with shared activities, practices, and contexts (Brodie & Borko, 2016; Wenger, 1998). The theory identifies four interrelated components that define the learning process and are mutually constitutive: community entails learning as belonging, practice as doing, meaning as experience, and identity as becoming.

Identity formation occurs through three modes of belonging: alignment (conforming to and negotiating community norms), engagement (active involvement in mutual meaning-making), and imagination (envisioning oneself and others in broader social worlds) (Wenger, 1998). In this study, these modes show how teachers move from peripheral membership to full participation in the PLCs, how shared repertoires of inclusive strategies are constructed and contested, and how individual professional identities shift in relation to new understandings of inclusion. Through this situated learning, individuals transition from peripheral to full participation, shaping and being shaped by the evolving practice and shared understandings of the community (Lave, 2009). When combined with Archer's morphogenetic approach, the framework enables analysis of how collaborative social learning both enables and is limited by structural conditions.

Nichols' Institutional Ethnography

Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnography complements Wenger's account of learning by examining how texts and organizational processes shape everyday action. Developed from Smith's (1987) work, institutional ethnography begins with people's daily experiences and traces how those experiences are coordinated by social relations and texts that extend beyond the immediate setting. Its central insight is that everyday professional action is not merely personal or local; it is organized through institutional and discursive practices that may not be visible from an individual's standpoint. In this study, institutional ethnography provides a micro-level lens for examining how apparently routine administrative processes organize frontline

inclusive practice and connect educators' local experiences to wider institutional priorities.

In this study, institutional ethnography is applied in two interconnected ways. First, SIAS documentation, with its referral forms, baseline assessment requirements, and procedural compliance mandates, is analyzed as a “ruling text”—forms that record professional decisions and actively organize and constrain them. Texts coordinate what professionals do by embedding institutional priorities into the material form of daily work (Nichols, 2016). Teachers and LSEs at City Primary cannot provide support without completing the correct form, regardless of the urgency of a learner's needs—a concrete instance of textual mediation. Second, Nichols' concept of institutional capture (2016)—a process whereby professionals unconsciously internalize the priorities of institutional accountability regimes, reproducing exclusion even while intending inclusion—explains why well-intentioned PLCs may inadvertently preserve problematic practices. Teachers with internalized medical models of inclusive education, reinforced through SIAS procedures that frame learners as individual cases to be assessed rather than as members of a community to be included, exemplify this capture.

Nichols' (2016) study concerns researcher–activist collaboration in Canadian human services, whereas this study concerns PLCs in a South African full-service school. Its relevance lies in three ideas: strategic collaboration as a means of acting within constrained conditions, a critique of explanations that individualize structurally produced problems, and activist ethnography as a way of making institutional relations visible. These concepts are applied cautiously to the South African context rather than assumed to be transferred unchanged.

The framework identifies the constraints that educators face, the collaborative opportunities afforded by PLCs, and the ways in which policy texts coordinate practice. It enables PLCs to be examined both as professional learning spaces and as institutional sites where inclusion is negotiated.

Methodology

A qualitative research design facilitated an examination of how teachers and learner support educators (LSEs) engage with inclusive pedagogy through participation in PLCs. The research aimed to explore how participation in PLCs for inclusive pedagogy supported participants' perceptions of inclusion and how they constructed responses to contextual demands. The setting was City Primary School (pseudonym), which was designated as a full-service school by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2010). The learners in this school included children who spoke different first languages and children with mild to moderate support needs. The school was selected by the provincial Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) for a three-year local university community engagement PLC for inclusive pedagogy project because, unlike other full-service schools, it did not have access to a nearby special school to serve as a resource center. All teachers at the school were expected to participate in the PLC meetings. The researchers obtained ethical approval from the relevant university ethics committee and the provincial Gauteng Department of Education. Over the three-year period, 12 PLC group meetings were held, where teachers and LSEs discussed various topics related to inclusive pedagogy.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with 12 teachers and two LSEs (N = 14). Purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018) identified teachers who had attended PLC sessions regularly. Participants represented different grade levels and varied teaching experience; the LSEs coordinated support services and worked with classroom teachers to address learners' support needs. The interviews enabled participants to describe their experiences of collaboration and inclusive pedagogy in depth.

I conducted all interviews at the end of the three-year PLC project period. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided with written information on the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured through pseudonyms and obscuring identifying information in transcripts and reports. Interviews were conducted at the school for

participants' convenience, and duration varied between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants agreed to audio-recording. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain participants' experiences and perspectives. Interviews explored experiences of participating in PLCs, understanding and implementing inclusive pedagogy, working collaboratively with colleagues, responding to structural and policy challenges, and supporting learners who experience barriers to learning.

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Themes were developed through active engagement with the data, using both inductive and theoretically informed coding. An audit trail and analytic memos documented the iterative process (Nowell et al., 2017), and prolonged engagement and peer debriefing supported trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The analysis remained attentive to the researcher's interpretive role rather than treating themes as simply discovered in the data.

Findings

Structural Conditions, Cultural Shifts, and Emergent Agency

The findings suggest that PLCs created important opportunities for collaborative learning and professional growth, but their transformative potential remained constrained by enduring structural and cultural conditions. Four themes were constructed through analysis, mapping a circuit from structural conditioning through cultural elaboration to constrained but real agentic action:

1. Structural conditions obstructing inclusive practice,
2. Deficit understandings of inclusion,
3. PLCs as spaces for professional learning and identity development, and
4. Persistent policy–practice tensions.

Theme 1: Structural Conditions Obstructing Inclusive Practice

Participants consistently identified structural conditions as integral to the implementation of inclusive pedagogy, operating through resource scarcity and textual mediation. These conditions could have an adverse effect, including large class sizes, insufficient time for planning, and teaching learners with diverse needs, inadequate staffing, and competing professional responsibilities.

Teachers repeatedly described feeling overwhelmed by the demands of teaching increasingly diverse classrooms with limited resources. Teacher 2 explained:

If we had more time to interact with different topics ... you end up forgetting them easily.

Teacher 3 highlighted the difficulties of responding to learner diversity in overcrowded classrooms:

Now, even sixty learners—you're one teacher. You cannot accommodate them all.

Teacher 4 concurred:

One hour or forty-five minutes is not sufficient. We need more time.

These teachers were willing to enact inclusive practices but were pre-empted by logistical and material conditions: structural conditioning is lived, daily experience, not abstract theory. The absence of adequate staffing is a structural condition that no amount of attitudinal change in a PLC can resolve without corresponding staffing decisions. Insufficient specialist support was also a major concern. Teachers and LSEs explained that shortages of personnel limited opportunities for collaboration and reduced the support available to learners who experience barriers to learning.

Policy mandates were not always understood by those expected to implement them.

Teacher 9 explained:

No one told me it is a full-service school. I only realized when I saw a child from a special school here.

This reflects a structural failure of induction: institutional knowledge embedded in policy was not transmitted to frontline practitioners—the kind of gap that Nichols (2016) identifies as characteristic of institutions where ruling texts circulate at organizational levels far removed from daily practice. The SIAS policy provides the clearest instance of textual mediation. SIAS forms function as a ruling text: they do not merely document support needs but actively organize and sequence what support can be provided and when. LSEs explained:

We are not allowed to support learners if the teacher has not completed the forms. Process only works when [the] teacher identifies and fills out forms in SAIS. (LSE 2)

Some learners we currently support will have to stop. (LSE 1)

These accounts suggest that the SIAS process coordinated teachers' and LSEs' activities but could introduce delays that may have negative consequences for

learners awaiting support. Educators' efforts to develop inclusive practices were therefore mediated by institutional procedures and resource decisions beyond their immediate control.

Theme 2: Deficit Understandings of Inclusion

Participants persistently appeared to have a deficit understanding of disability and inclusion. Several teachers described inclusion primarily as providing additional support to learners perceived to be struggling academically rather than as a broader commitment to participation and belonging for all learners. Teacher 10 reflected:

I never gave slow learners a chance.

Similarly, LSE 2 explained:

Teachers think support is that you take the learner from the desk onto the carpet and group them with other kids that can't do the work.

These accounts suggest that educators continue to equate inclusion with remediation and segregation rather than with differentiated teaching and participation in shared learning environments. Participants acknowledged that their understandings influenced their classroom practices and shaped expectations regarding learners who experience barriers to learning. The findings suggest that cultural assumptions about disability and learning remain an important influence on inclusive practice.

Theme 3: PLCs as Spaces for Professional Learning and Identity Development

Despite challenges, participants consistently valued PLCs as spaces for learning and collaboration, employed as sites where cultural elaboration—the second phase of Archer's morphogenetic cycle—became manifest. Teachers emphasized the practical and contextually relevant nature of PLC activities. Teacher 2 explained:

PLCs are practical. I can implement the ideas immediately in my classroom.

Similarly, Teacher 4 stated:

PLCs are user-friendly. The other workshops are too theoretical.

Participants described how PLCs encouraged experimentation with new teaching strategies and reconsideration of previously-held assumptions about learners.

Teacher 10 reflected:

PLCs shifted my mind. Now I see if you give learners an opportunity, they can amaze you.

Teacher 2 explained:

I used to focus only on the learners who performed well. Now I find pleasure in helping those who struggle.

Teachers also reported changes in their professional identities. As Teacher 8 explained:

I can now call myself an inclusive teacher.

Participants described developing practical strategies through collaborative discussions, including mixed-ability grouping, differentiated activities, scaffolded writing approaches, and classroom routines that promoted participation.

Teacher 11 commented:

I mix high and low achievers. It works.

Teacher 10 explained:

After PLCs, I googled inclusive learning because I wanted to know more.

This self-directed learning is particularly significant: it illustrates agency extending beyond the PLC itself, with the collaborative space generating a reflexive disposition that carries into individual practice—the kind of cultural elaboration that, under the right structural conditions, could become the foundation for morphogenesis. Taken together, these accounts suggest that PLCs encouraged collaborative learning and individual reflection, creating opportunities for educators to develop new understandings and practices related to inclusion.

Theme 4: Persistent Policy–Practice Tensions

Although participants valued PLCs, they also described ongoing tensions between policy intentions and everyday practice, where agency remained constrained and uneven. Several participants indicated that they had not received adequate induction regarding the school's status as a full-service school nor its expectations concerning inclusive education. Teacher 9 explained:

No one told me it is a full-service school. I only realized when I saw a child from a special school here.

Participants also expressed frustration regarding the administrative demands associated with the SIAS policy. LSEs explained:

We are not allowed to support learners if the teacher has not completed the forms.
(LSE 2)

Some learners we currently support will have to stop. (LSE 1)

Teachers described SIAS documentation as time-consuming and difficult to complete, particularly in the context of already demanding workloads. Participants further indicated that multiple and overlapping professional development initiatives often reduced opportunities for sustained engagement in PLC activities. Teacher 5 commented:

There are too many interventions.

Similarly, Teacher 3 explained:

There were all these trainings. You end up not knowing where to take this information from.

New staff members were inconsistently integrated into existing collaborative structures, as Teacher 9 explained:

New teachers were not formally informed about PLCs. Our group was confused.

Leadership workload further constrained coherence. Teacher 10 observed:

Our HODs can't manage PLCs with their workload. We're forever busy.

These findings suggest that although educators developed collaborative relationships and new understandings of inclusion through PLCs, institutional and policy conditions frequently disrupted continuity, including the absence of protected time, overlapping training interventions, and fragmented policy implementation. This constrained the coherence that Wenger (1998) identifies as essential to a functioning community of practice.

Discussion

PLCs as Sites of Potential Morphogenesis

The findings show that educators at City Primary practice inclusion as an ongoing negotiation of structural, cultural, and institutional conditions, rather than as a straightforward policy implementation process. Participants emphasized resource shortages, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient time, and limited specialist support as major challenges to their practicing of inclusion. These findings affirm previous South African research that identified resource constraints and inadequate support systems as persistent obstacles to the realization of inclusive education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014; Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Mamabolo et al., 2021). These teachers'

experiences suggest that inclusive pedagogy is shaped by teachers' intentions as well as the material and institutional conditions where they work.

Institutional circumstances constitute the structural conditioning that preceded and shaped professional action. The teachers and LSEs worked within institutional arrangements characterized by resource scarcity, bureaucratic demands, and accountability mechanisms that limited what they could achieve in practice. However, the findings also demonstrate that structural conditioning did not influence the educators' practice in a deterministic manner—the educators exercised agency by engaging in collaborative efforts through participation in PLCs, enabling them to navigate these constraints. This reinforces Archer's argument that structure and agency are distinct analytical concepts that continually shape one another, with social change emerging from their interaction over time.

Many participants initially held deficit-oriented understandings of inclusion, often equating inclusive pedagogy with special educational needs or remedial support. These perceptions mirror concerns in the literature that inclusion is frequently reduced to individual accommodations or segregated interventions, rather than perceived as a broader pedagogical commitment to participation and belonging (Florian, 2020; Ainscow, 2020). This cultural conditioning (Archer, 1995) reflects the pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, and ideas that shape professionals' responses to learner diversity.

Participation in PLCs created opportunities to question and renegotiate these assumptions. Teachers described how discussions with colleagues and LSEs expanded their understanding of inclusion, encouraging experimentation with new pedagogical approaches. The evidence suggests that processes of cultural elaboration, where existing beliefs about disability and inclusion, were challenged and in some instances, reconfigured. These shifts were cognitive *and* relational, growing through collaborative engagement and dialogue.

Wenger's theory of communities of practice provides a lens for understanding the processes of cultural elaboration. The PLCs functioned as communities where learning occurred through participation, mutual engagement, and developing shared

repertoires of practice. Teachers' accounts of learning from one another, sharing strategies, and developing confidence in responding to learner diversity demonstrate how professional identities could be reshaped through collective participation. The PLCs became spaces where educators increasingly saw themselves as members of a community committed to inclusive practice.

Importantly, the findings suggest that identity development was closely connected to teachers' sense of agency. As educators engaged in collaborative problem-solving, they reported increased confidence in adapting their teaching and supporting learners with diverse needs. Wenger's notion of learning as becoming illustrates how participation in communities of practice can contribute to the development of professional identities oriented toward inclusion. The findings also reveal the limits of collaborative agency. Despite changes in understanding and practice, educators remained constrained by institutional arrangements beyond their direct control. The persistent challenges associated with the SIAS policy are particularly significant in this regard. The administrative demands of SIAS documentation were described as burdensome and time-consuming, often delaying support for learners.

Nichols' institutional ethnography provides an important explanation for these experiences. The findings illustrate how policy texts and administrative procedures determine how everyday work is performed. SIAS forms did not just record educational decisions; they actively shaped what teachers could do and when they could do it. The participants demonstrated how institutional processes mediate inclusive practice and may inadvertently reproduce exclusion even when educators are committed to inclusion.

Viewed through Nichols' (2016) lens, the findings may be interpreted as illustrating institutional capture. Although SIAS is intended to systematize support, participants experienced its procedures as emphasizing compliance and delaying assistance. The administrative processes appeared to constrain the support that teachers and LSEs could provide. This interpretation suggests that the design of SIAS may reinforce an individualized, compliance-oriented view of support by positioning need within learners and directing educators through prescribed referral pathways. The study's

interview data do not establish the effects of SIAS policy in general; rather, they show how the participants experienced its operation in one full-service school.

Taken together, the findings indicate that PLCs did not automatically produce institutional transformation. They nevertheless provided sites where educators could negotiate constraints, develop collaborative practices, and construct new understandings of inclusion. The findings therefore indicate the potential for PLCs to contribute to cultural and agentic change, whilst broader structural transformation remains contingent on policy reform, adequate resourcing, and sustained institutional support.

Toward Coherent Inclusive Communities

The PLC at City Primary appeared to demonstrate characteristics of a coherent community (Wenger, 1998) by supporting shared understandings and practices of inclusive pedagogy. Social realism highlights how such coherence was shaped by structural enablers and constraints. Viewed through Nichols' (2016) concepts of textual mediation and institutional capture, participants' accounts suggest that compliance procedures could restrict inclusive action despite educators' agency. PLCs may therefore offer spaces for praxis-oriented reflection in which educators make institutional constraints visible and consider collective responses. This interpretation remains provisional because the study relies on retrospective interviews rather than observations of change over time.

The integrated framework points toward a set of interrelated recommendations, grounded in the specific structural and cultural conditions of a South African full-service school. These are not additive suggestions; rather, they are structurally necessary conditions for the morphogenetic potential (evidenced in the data) to become realized transformation.

First, policy guidelines must reduce the bureaucratic burden of SIAS to ensure that learners receive timely support. Matolo and Rambuda (2021) also recommend that professional development be incorporated into SIAS rollout. SIAS' current textual architecture embeds delay into the support process; policy reform must redesign this

architecture to prioritize learner welfare over procedural compliance. This requires simplifying the documentation and ensuring that teachers receive adequate training to use SIAS tools effectively (Maree et al., 2023; Sibuyi, 2023). Without reform, SIAS will continue to function as an accountability mechanism rather than a support mechanism, reproducing the exclusion it was designed to overcome.

Second, the findings support greater structural investment in learner support, including additional LSE capacity, protected time for PLC participation, and clear induction for new staff. Participants identified time, workload, staffing, and class size as barriers. Professional learning alone is therefore unlikely to compensate for the absence of basic conditions for collaboration and inclusive practice. Policy makers and school leaders should consider human and material resources alongside professional development.

Third, PLCs must be structured to include classroom-based follow-up, embedding the praxis orientation that teachers themselves identified as the distinctive value of PLC engagement. Teachers consistently contrasted PLCs' actionable, praxis-oriented character against the theoretical abstraction of conventional workshops. As Teacher 2 explained, "PLCs are practical. I can implement the ideas immediately in my classroom." PLC sessions that remain decontextualized from classroom practice risk replicating the theoretical abstraction that teachers critiqued. Structuring PLCs to include classroom observation, co-teaching, and collaborative planning could enable the cultural elaboration—developed in PLC discussions—to be translated into sustained changes in classroom practice. This requires leadership support and a school culture that respects collaborative learning as integral to professional practice.

Fourth, collaborative structures beyond PLCs (e.g., co-planning and in-class collaborative teaching proposed by LSEs) could help bridge the macro–micro divide between policy and classroom practice. LSE 2's proposal to "go into the classroom not as an observer. I would do what the teacher is doing," suggests a structural reconfiguration of support, moving from pull-out remediation to embedded collaborative support. These structural innovations require leadership support and policy flexibility to become sustainable. School leaders must create the conditions for such collaboration to occur, including timetabling that enables co-planning and co-

teaching, and professional development that builds the collaborative dispositions and skills necessary for effective inter-professional work.

Future research in South Africa could consider how collaborative learning for inclusion can be integrated throughout the teacher education continuum, not only as an in-service option (Brennan & Gorman, 2023). Pre-service preparation that builds the collaborative dispositions and institutional ethnographic awareness necessary for navigating the South African full-service school contexts could strengthen newly qualified educators who can, in turn, sustain PLCs as morphogenetic sites. This would require teacher education programs to move beyond fragmented short courses and embed collaborative, reflective, contextually embedded learning opportunities throughout initial teacher preparation. It would also require ongoing research that tracks the implementation of PLCs over longer periods, examining how sustained engagement in collaborative learning shapes professional practice and learner outcomes.

Realizing the morphogenetic potential of PLCs requires policy reform, structural investment, and sustained reflexive engagement with practice. Without these enabling conditions, PLCs risk becoming spaces where professionals accommodate rather than contest institutional conditions, thereby reproducing the very exclusion they intend to overcome (Nichols, 2016). With adequate structural support, PLCs can become more than spaces where inclusion is discussed: sites where inclusive teaching can be genuinely developed, ensuring the learning and inclusion of all learners.

Limitations of the Study

As a single-case qualitative study, this research prioritized depth over breadth. The findings are context-specific and are not statistically generalizable, although readers may assess their transferability to similar full-service school contexts (Yin, 2009). This article draws exclusively on individual interviews; claims about PLC activity therefore rest on participants' retrospective accounts and may be influenced by social desirability or hindsight. The one-off interviews capture narrated changes in identity and practice rather than longitudinally observed change. Purposive sampling of

regular PLC participants may also have favored educators who were positively disposed toward PLCs. Finally, my prior relationship with City Primary supported access and rapport but may have influenced interpretation. An audit trail and peer debriefing were used to address this risk.

Conclusion

This study examined how teachers and learner support educators in one South African full-service school navigated structural and cultural conditions through PLCs. Participants described PLCs as supporting reflection, experimentation, collaborative learning, and reconsideration of inclusive pedagogy. They also identified persistent constraints, including resource shortages, limited staffing and time, and the bureaucratic demands of SIAS, which restricted their capacity to enact inclusive practices.

The integrated framework combining Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach, Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, and Nichols' (2016) institutional ethnography enabled an analysis that illuminated the conditions that educators must negotiate to enact inclusive pedagogy. Archer's morphogenetic approach addressed how pre-existing structures and cultural conditions shaped professional action and how educators exercised agency within these constraints. Wenger's theory explained how collaborative learning and identity development could occur through participation in PLCs, and Nichols' institutional ethnography revealed how texts and institutional processes controlled everyday practice.

The evidence did not demonstrate morphogenesis as precisely as Archer defines structural transformation. Morphogenesis refers to processes that elaborate or change existing social structures over time (Archer, 1995). The data instead pointed to the potential for morphogenesis: the emergence of new forms of collaboration, shifts in professional understandings, and the development of greater agency among educators. These developments may contribute to wider transformation, but only if supported by facilitative policies, adequate resources, and institutional reform.

The principal contribution of this study therefore lies in its integrated theoretical framework as well as an empirical demonstration of how educators negotiate inclusion in their everyday work. The experiences of teachers and learner support educators at City Primary underscore that coherent communities of inclusive practice are possible. Their sustainability depends on aligning professional learning with broader structural and policy conditions to enable inclusive education to flourish.

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