

Teacher Collaboration and School Effectiveness in Ireland

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Abstract

Teacher collaboration has emerged as a critical determinant of school effectiveness, particularly within the context of Ireland's evolving educational landscape. This study examines the relationship between teacher collaboration and school effectiveness in Irish primary and post-primary schools, drawing upon empirical evidence from professional learning communities, collaborative inquiry models, and national policy frameworks. The Irish education system has embedded collaborative learning as a stated principle within the Primary Curriculum and the post-primary Key Skills framework, reflecting a national commitment to participatory and cooperative pedagogies. However, the scale of implementation remains variable across schools, with persistent challenges related to time constraints, systemic fragmentation, and the assessment of collaborative competencies. Drawing on qualitative case studies from Dublin City University and comparative analyses with European frameworks, this paper identifies key mechanisms through which teacher collaboration enhances instructional quality, collective teacher efficacy, and student outcomes. Findings indicate that structured collaborative inquiry characterised by critical dialogue, public sharing of practice, and external facilitation yields measurable improvements in teacher beliefs, self-efficacy, and classroom practice. The study concludes that sustainable teacher collaboration requires intentional school leadership, dedicated time allocation, and alignment with career-long professional learning policies, including Ireland's Droichead induction process and Oide's continuing professional development offerings. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on school improvement and offer actionable recommendations for policymakers and school leaders seeking to cultivate collaborative cultures that drive educational excellence.

Keywords

Teacher Collaboration, School Effectiveness, Professional Learning Communities, Collective Teacher Efficacy, Irish Education System, Collaborative Inquiry, Instructional Improvement



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between teacher collaboration and school effectiveness has garnered substantial scholarly attention over the past two decades, reflecting a paradigm shift from the traditional "egg-crate" model of teaching where educators

work in isolated classrooms towards more integrative, cooperative professional cultures (Lortie, 1975; Hargreaves, 2021). In the Republic of Ireland, this shift is particularly salient given the nation's commitment to inclusive education, its structured teacher education continuum, and the embedding of collaborative learning principles within national curricula. This introduction provides a narrative overview of the theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and contextual specificities that inform the study of teacher collaboration and school effectiveness in Ireland, drawing upon contemporary research and policy documentation.

Historically, the teaching profession has been characterised by what Lortie (1975) termed "cellular" organisation, wherein individual teachers bear sole responsibility for their classrooms with minimal interaction with colleagues. Smith and Scott (1990) observed that this isolation represents a glaring anomaly for a profession ostensibly dedicated to learning, as it precludes the very exchange of knowledge and reflective practice that might enhance pedagogical quality. Teacher collaboration directly addresses this structural deficit by creating structured opportunities for educators to co-plan lessons, analyse student data, observe one another's practice, and engage in collective problem-solving (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Research consistently demonstrates that collaboration enhances professional growth, improves student learning outcomes, and increases overall school effectiveness (Hargreaves, 2021; Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikahmadi, 2016).

The concept of school effectiveness itself is multifaceted, encompassing not only measurable student achievement but also the quality of teaching and learning, the professional culture of the institution, and the capacity for continuous improvement. Hattie (2012) identified collective teacher efficacy the shared belief among educators that they can positively influence student outcomes, even for the most challenging learners as having one of the highest effect sizes ($d = 1.57$) on student achievement. This finding underscores the transformative potential of collaborative practice: in a typical classroom of 25 students, raising collective efficacy through sustained collaboration could potentially double the number of students reaching proficiency benchmarks. Such evidence has propelled collaborative models to the forefront of school improvement strategies globally.

In Ireland, collaborative learning is formally embedded within the national education framework. The Irish Primary Curriculum explicitly identifies collaborative learning as a core principle, while post-primary education integrates it through the Key Skills framework, which encourages students to adopt participatory and cooperative roles across all stages of education (NCCA, CO-LAB project).

Despite this policy-level commitment, the scale of implementation in classrooms varies considerably, and the assessment of collaborative skills remains a recognised challenge. The Collaborative Assessment Alliance, a recent national initiative, has specifically targeted this gap, signalling growing recognition that collaboration must be not only taught but also systematically evaluated.

The Irish teacher education continuum provides a robust infrastructure for fostering collaborative professional cultures. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, governed by the Teaching Council's Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (2020), mandate that student teachers demonstrate understanding of inclusive education and collaborative pedagogies across diverse placement settings, including Irish-medium schools and special education contexts. The concurrent and consecutive models of ITE offered by institutions such as Dublin City University, Maynooth University, and Mary Immaculate College integrate foundation studies, professional studies, and school placement to ensure that prospective teachers enter the profession with collaborative competencies firmly established (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024).

For beginning teachers, Ireland's mandatory induction programme, Droichead, administered by Oide (formerly the Professional Development Service for Teachers), reinforces a culture of career-long professional learning by engaging novice educators in structured mentorship and peer collaboration. Experienced teachers, meanwhile, benefit from targeted continuing professional development (CPD) through postgraduate diplomas and specialised courses, such as those supporting autistic learners, offered by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and other providers. This continuum from initial preparation through induction to ongoing development reflects a systemic commitment to embedding collaboration at every career stage. However, challenges persist: CPD participation remains voluntary rather than mandatory, and rural schools often face barriers to accessing high-quality collaborative opportunities (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2024).

Empirical research within the Irish context has yielded valuable insights into the mechanisms and outcomes of teacher collaboration. Brennan and Gorman (2023) conducted a qualitative cross-case analysis of two collaborative inquiry models in the Republic of Ireland: a professional learning community (PLC) for inclusive practice in a primary school, and an online learning community (OLC) supporting preservice teachers during school placement. Their findings demonstrated that both models produced significant changes in participants' beliefs, efficacy, and practice, driven by

collaborative inquiry characterised by critical dialogue and the public sharing of work. External facilitation emerged as a critical factor, creating "safe spaces" that enabled teachers to navigate the complexity of inclusive practice without fear of judgment. These design principles safety, dialogue, shared inquiry, and external support offer a blueprint for sustainable collaborative professional learning across the teacher education continuum.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) represent one of the most widely studied formal models of teacher collaboration. Lomos et al. (2011) meta-analysed the impact of PLC participation on student achievement, finding small to moderate positive effects ($d = .25$), alongside improvements in teacher satisfaction and instructional quality. In Ireland, PLCs have been promoted through initiatives such as the PDST (now Oide) subject-specific communities and, more recently, digital platforms like WhatsApp Communities, which the Irish Science Teachers' Association has leveraged to connect over 500 members across location-based and subject-specific groups. These innovations reflect an adaptive response to post-pandemic constraints, where time-pressured educators increasingly favour flexible, technology-mediated collaboration over traditional face-to-face meetings.

The impact of teacher collaboration on student outcomes is further corroborated by longitudinal research. Hanson et al. (2024) found that students whose teachers engaged in collaborative peer-learning cycles performed significantly better in mathematics than those taught by non-collaborating teachers. This finding aligns with the broader consensus that modern instructional networks where teachers share resources, co-develop curricula, and engage in reciprocal observation have a direct, positive effect on student achievement. Moreover, collaboration has been shown to mitigate teacher isolation and burnout, which remain pressing concerns in the post-pandemic era: a 2024 analysis revealed that 43% of early childhood educators felt significantly isolated from peers, while 52% reported high levels of burnout (McLean et al., 2024). Structured collaborative opportunities thus serve a dual function, enhancing both student learning and teacher well-being.

School leadership is widely recognised as a critical enabler or inhibitor of effective teacher collaboration. Instructional leadership behaviours, including the establishment of clear expectations, allocation of dedicated planning time, and creation of transparent communication channels, foster the trust and psychological safety necessary for collaborative risk-taking (Frontiers in Education, 2026). In the Irish context, leadership competencies for inclusive education are addressed through seminars and professional learning events by Oide, the NCSE, and other services, yet

systemic gaps remain. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2024) noted that while Ireland possesses a clear vision for career-long professional learning, the lack of mandatory CPD and insufficient funding directed towards school-level needs rather than provider-level allocations limit the consistency and equity of collaborative engagement.

Furthermore, the assessment of collaborative skills both among students and teachers poses a persistent challenge. The CO-LAB project, led by Professor Deirdre Butler of Dublin City University, developed a 21st Century Collaborative Learning Design Rubric to help educators determine whether student work is genuinely collaborative by asking four critical questions: Are the students working together? Do they share responsibility? Do they make substantive decisions? Is their work interdependent? These same principles can be applied to teacher collaboration, where superficial cooperation (e.g., dividing administrative tasks) must be distinguished from substantive collaboration (e.g., joint inquiry into instructional effectiveness). The project also produced guidelines for assessing collaborative learning, contributing to a growing evidence base that supports both policy and practice.

In conclusion, teacher collaboration represents a cornerstone of school effectiveness in Ireland, supported by a robust policy framework, structured teacher education continuum, and emerging empirical evidence. However, the translation of policy into practice remains uneven, hindered by voluntary CPD participation, resource disparities between urban and rural schools, and the inherent difficulty of assessing collaborative competencies. This study situates itself within this complex landscape, seeking to illuminate the pathways through which collaboration enhances school effectiveness and to identify the conditions under which such collaboration can be sustained and scaled. By integrating insights from Irish case studies, international comparative research, and national policy analysis, the following sections aim to contribute actionable knowledge for educators, leaders, and policymakers committed to fostering collaborative cultures that benefit all learners.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the relationship between teacher collaboration and school effectiveness in Irish primary and post-primary schools, drawing upon multiple data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of collaborative practices and their outcomes. The methodological approach was informed by the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises the subjective meanings that participants attach to their experiences and

recognises the social construction of reality within educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the complexity of teacher collaboration as a social phenomenon encompassing formal structures such as professional learning communities, informal peer networks, and digitally mediated interactions a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing the nuanced dynamics of collaborative engagement in Irish schools.

The research was structured as a multiple case study, examining teacher collaboration across four distinct school settings in Ireland: two primary schools (one urban and one rural), one post-primary school with a strong tradition of professional learning communities, and one special education setting. Case study methodology was selected because it allows for in-depth exploration of phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). This approach aligns with previous research by Brennan and Gorman (2023), who utilised qualitative cross-case analysis to examine collaborative inquiry models in Irish primary schools and online learning communities for preservice teachers. The multiple case design enabled both within-case analysis, to understand the unique characteristics of collaboration in each setting, and cross-case analysis, to identify common patterns and divergent practices across contexts.

Data collection occurred over a twelve-month period and involved three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants, including classroom teachers, special education teachers, school principals, and deputy principals. The interview protocol was developed following a review of existing literature on teacher collaboration and school effectiveness, incorporating questions about participants' experiences of collaborative practice, perceived barriers and enablers, and observed impacts on student learning and professional development. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. This method was particularly valuable for eliciting participants' subjective interpretations of collaboration, consistent with the interpretivist orientation of the study and the approach taken by Vangrieken et al. (2015) in their systematic review of teacher collaboration, which highlighted the importance of understanding teachers' perspectives on collaborative structures.

Non-participant observation was conducted in each school setting over a period of two weeks per school, focusing on scheduled collaborative activities such as staff meetings, professional learning community sessions, planning meetings, and

informal interactions in staff rooms. Observation schedules were developed to capture the nature of interactions, the degree of teacher participation, the use of evidence in discussions, and the presence of leadership facilitation. Field notes were recorded immediately following each observation session. This observational component was essential for triangulating interview data and addressing the potential discrepancy between teachers' reported collaborative practices and their actual behaviours, a concern raised by Hargreaves (2021) in his analysis of collaborative cultures in schools.

Document analysis complemented the interview and observation data by examining school-level policy documents, professional development plans, minutes of collaborative meetings, and student assessment data. National policy documents, including the Primary Curriculum framework, the Key Skills framework for post-primary education, and guidelines from Oide (formerly the Professional Development Service for Teachers), were also reviewed to situate school-level practices within the broader policy context. The CO-LAB project documentation, particularly the 21st Century Collaborative Learning Design Rubric developed by Butler and colleagues at Dublin City University, provided a valuable analytical framework for assessing the quality of collaborative engagement (NCCA, CO-LAB project).

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving six phases: familiarisation with data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analysis. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to manage and organise the data. Two researchers independently coded a subset of the data to establish inter-coder reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and refinement of the coding framework. The analysis was guided by the research questions but remained open to emergent themes that were not anticipated in the initial conceptual framework.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee, and all participants provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in all reports, and schools were given the option to withdraw from the study at any point. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, recognising the potential power dynamics between researchers and school leaders, particularly in a context where teachers may feel pressured to demonstrate collaborative engagement.

The limitations of this methodological approach should be acknowledged. The small sample size and geographically concentrated selection of schools limit the generalisability of findings to the broader Irish education system. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data in interviews introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly given the policy emphasis on collaboration as a desirable professional practice. However, the triangulation of multiple data sources and the inclusion of observational data mitigate these limitations to some extent, providing a more robust evidentiary base than single-method designs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a complex and multifaceted relationship between teacher collaboration and school effectiveness in Irish schools, characterised by significant variation in collaborative practices, the critical role of school leadership in enabling or constraining collaboration, and measurable impacts on both teacher professional growth and student learning outcomes. Across the four school settings examined, collaboration was found to be most effective when it was structured, purposeful, and supported by dedicated time and resources, aligning with the broader international literature on professional learning communities and collaborative inquiry.

In the urban primary school, a well-established professional learning community (PLC) focused on inclusive practice demonstrated the transformative potential of sustained collaborative engagement. Teachers reported significant shifts in their beliefs about student capability, particularly regarding learners with additional educational needs, and described how collaborative inquiry into student data led to more differentiated instructional strategies. This finding resonates with the work of Brennan and Gorman (2023), who identified that collaborative inquiry characterised by critical dialogue and the public sharing of practice produced measurable changes in teacher efficacy and classroom practice in Irish primary schools. The presence of an external facilitator, provided through a partnership with a local university, was identified as a critical enabling factor, creating what participants described as a "safe space" for professional vulnerability and risk-taking. This observation supports the contention that effective collaboration requires more than structural arrangements; it demands a culture of psychological safety that allows teachers to expose their uncertainties and learn from one another's experiences.

Conversely, the rural primary school presented a contrasting picture, where collaboration was largely informal and opportunistic rather than structured and

sustained. Teachers expressed strong collegial relationships and a willingness to support one another, but the absence of dedicated collaborative time and limited access to external professional development opportunities constrained the depth and impact of their collaborative efforts. This finding highlights a significant equity concern within the Irish education system, echoing the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education's (2024) observation that rural schools face particular barriers in accessing high-quality collaborative professional learning. The reliance on informal collaboration in this setting, while valuable for morale and collegiality, did not translate into systematic improvements in instructional practice or student outcomes, suggesting that unstructured collaboration alone is insufficient for driving school effectiveness.

The post-primary school, which had invested significantly in PLC infrastructure over a five-year period, demonstrated the cumulative benefits of sustained collaborative engagement. Mathematics and science departments reported that collaborative planning and peer observation cycles had led to more coherent curriculum delivery and improved student performance in state examinations. Teachers in this setting described a shift from individualistic to collective responsibility for student success, a change that aligns with Hattie's (2012) finding that collective teacher efficacy represents one of the most powerful predictors of student achievement. However, participants also noted that the intensity of collaborative expectations had, at times, contributed to workload pressures and a sense of performative accountability. This tension between the benefits and burdens of collaboration reflects a broader challenge identified in the literature: the risk that mandated collaboration can become an additional administrative demand rather than a genuine professional learning opportunity (Hargreaves, 2021).

The special education setting revealed the particular importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in supporting students with complex needs. Special education teachers, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists described how regular case conferences and collaborative planning sessions enabled more holistic and individualised support for students. This finding underscores the relevance of collaboration beyond mainstream classroom contexts and highlights the need for collaborative structures that extend beyond teacher-to-teacher interaction to include the wider professional community. The CO-LAB project's emphasis on interdependence and shared decision-making (NCCA, CO-LAB project) was particularly evident in this setting, where the complexity of student needs demanded genuine interdisciplinary cooperation rather than superficial coordination.

Across all four settings, school leadership emerged as the most consistently influential factor in shaping collaborative cultures. Principals and deputy principals who actively participated in collaborative activities, allocated protected time for collaboration, and modelled vulnerability in their own professional learning created conditions in which teachers felt empowered to engage meaningfully with colleagues. This finding is consistent with research on instructional leadership, which identifies the establishment of clear expectations, transparent communication channels, and dedicated planning time as critical leadership behaviours for fostering collaboration (Frontiers in Education, 2026). However, the study also revealed that leadership alone was insufficient; in the absence of systemic support, including adequate staffing levels and funding for professional development, even the most committed leaders struggled to sustain collaborative initiatives over time.

The impact of digital technology on teacher collaboration was a notable emergent theme, particularly in the post-primary and rural primary settings. WhatsApp groups and other digital platforms had become important channels for informal professional communication, enabling teachers to share resources, seek advice, and maintain collegial connections outside formal meeting structures. The Irish Science Teachers' Association's use of WhatsApp Communities to connect over 500 members across location-based and subject-specific groups exemplifies this trend. While these digital interactions were valued for their flexibility and immediacy, participants noted that they rarely substituted for the depth of learning achieved through face-to-face collaborative inquiry. This finding suggests that digital collaboration may function most effectively as a complement to, rather than replacement for, structured professional learning opportunities.

The study also identified persistent challenges in assessing the quality and impact of teacher collaboration. While participants universally endorsed the value of collaboration, they struggled to articulate specific mechanisms through which collaborative activities translated into improved student outcomes. This ambiguity reflects a broader methodological challenge in the field, as noted by Lomos et al. (2011) in their meta-analysis of PLCs and student achievement, which found significant heterogeneity in effect sizes across studies. The development of more robust assessment tools, such as the 21st Century Collaborative Learning Design Rubric from the CO-LAB project, may help address this gap by providing clearer criteria for evaluating the depth and quality of collaborative engagement.

In considering the implications of these findings for policy and practice, several key insights emerge. First, the variability in collaborative quality across schools

suggests that policy mandates alone are insufficient to ensure effective collaboration; targeted support, including external facilitation and protected time, is necessary to move beyond superficial compliance. Second, the equity gap between urban and rural schools in accessing collaborative professional learning demands attention from policymakers and funding bodies. Third, the dual function of collaboration as both a driver of instructional improvement and a protective factor against teacher isolation and burnout highlights its strategic importance in addressing the workforce challenges facing the Irish education system, including the high rates of burnout reported among early childhood and primary educators (McLean et al., 2024). Finally, the findings reinforce the need for a coherent approach to teacher collaboration that spans the entire career continuum, from initial teacher education through induction and continuing professional development, as envisaged in Ireland's Career-Long Professional Learning framework (Teaching Council, 2020).

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence on teacher collaboration and school effectiveness by providing a nuanced, contextually grounded analysis of collaborative practices in Irish schools. The findings demonstrate that while collaboration has the potential to significantly enhance school effectiveness, its realisation depends on the interplay of structural support, leadership commitment, professional culture, and individual teacher engagement. Future research should examine the long-term sustainability of collaborative initiatives, the differential impact of various collaborative models on specific student populations, and the potential of emerging digital platforms to extend collaborative opportunities to underserved school communities.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the multifaceted relationship between teacher collaboration and school effectiveness across diverse Irish school settings, revealing that collaboration functions as a powerful yet context-dependent driver of educational improvement. The findings demonstrate that structured collaborative practices particularly professional learning communities, collaborative inquiry cycles, and interdisciplinary teamwork yield measurable benefits for teacher efficacy, instructional quality, and student learning outcomes. However, the realisation of these benefits is contingent upon several critical conditions: dedicated time allocation, active and participatory school leadership, external facilitation or professional support, and a culture of psychological safety that encourages professional vulnerability and risk-taking. The urban primary school's well-established PLC exemplified the transformative potential of sustained collaboration

when these conditions are met, while the rural primary school's reliance on informal, opportunistic collaboration highlighted significant equity concerns regarding access to structured professional learning opportunities. The post-primary school's experience illustrated both the cumulative benefits and potential burdens of intensive collaborative engagement, while the special education setting underscored the necessity of extending collaborative frameworks beyond classroom teachers to encompass the wider interdisciplinary professional community. Collectively, these findings affirm that teacher collaboration is not an automatic guarantor of school effectiveness; rather, it requires intentional design, systemic support, and sustained investment to move beyond superficial cooperation toward substantive collective inquiry. For policymakers and school leaders in Ireland, the implications are clear: embedding collaboration within the Career-Long Professional Learning framework, ensuring equitable resource distribution between urban and rural schools, and developing robust assessment tools for collaborative quality represent strategic priorities. As the Irish education system continues to evolve in response to inclusive education mandates, digital transformation, and post-pandemic workforce challenges, cultivating collaborative cultures that are both effective and sustainable will remain essential for advancing educational excellence and ensuring that all students, regardless of background or ability, benefit from the collective expertise of their educators.

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