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Teacher empowerment through engagement in a learning community in Ireland: working across disadvantaged schools

Deborah Tannehill* and Ann MacPhail

Physical Education and Sport Sciences, University of Limerick, Ireland

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This ongoing longitudinal study examined the professional development of physical education teachers in an Irish physical education learning community where all teachers worked in inner-city disadvantaged schools. This research is framed within teacher empowerment. Four years of data collection included in-service seminar/workshop evaluations, small group discussions and focus group and individual interviews. Data were analysed to allow us to answer three research questions that focused on support in setting and achieving group goals, shared experiences of planning and teaching students and the informed development of learning communities towards a community of practice model. Results highlight the support these teachers provide one another, the empowerment these teachers developed to address issues posed by their challenging work situations (e.g. limited facilities, low economic conditions, students with challenging behaviour) and the motivation that being a member of a community afforded them to persevere in teaching in difficult settings. This research is ongoing as we explore and examine how the same group of teachers are able to maintain the work of their community, reinvent themselves and move from concluding one phase to begin new projects and impact student learning.

Keywords: learning community; teacher empowerment; community of practice; professional development; disadvantaged schools; physical education

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> They questioned themselves as teachers. They questioned themselves in terms of what they were achieving and it wasn't until they began to talk to each other and how they taught their students that they began to recognise that they were achieving something. It was different to what other teachers were achieving but they were achieving […] Now, it is different; they want to share and feel proud of what they have accomplished […] being part of this community makes daily life as a teacher easier, better, more meaningful. (University facilitator)

Introduction

Professional development (PD) refers to a variety of structured and facilitated learning opportunities designed to assist in improving teacher professional knowledge, competence, skill and effectiveness (Speck and Knipe 2005, Whitcomb *et al*. 2010, Patton *et al*. 2015). However, PD research has noted a lack of evidence to support the effectiveness of PD initiatives to improve the quality of teachers, teaching or

*Corresponding author. Email: Deborah.Tannehill@ul.ie

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student learning (Newmann *et al*. 2000, Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, Kennedy 2014). While no one method or strategy for PD has emerged, we do know that quality PD must take teaching contexts into consideration while being collaborative, social and focused on teachers' needs and delivered in challenging ways (Guskey 2000, Desimone *et al*. 2002) and where teachers working together is crucial (Garet *et al*. 2001, Butler *et al*. 2004, Helterbran and Fennimore 2004). It has been suggested that PD should involve teachers in communities where learning is both social and personal (Whitcomb *et al*. 2010, Patton *et al*. 2015). A case in point is shared when discussing how teachers working in urban schools in the United States strived toward achieving shared goals by applying strategies learned from colleagues to improve their teaching practice (Byrd-Blake and Hundley 2012).

There is growing consensus that teachers should be involved in the design and implementation of their own PD (Richardson 1994, Bransford *et al*. 1999, Lieberman and Miller 2001, 2007, Little and Curry 2008). Sugrue (2011) describes practitioner-driven PD, the norm in the Irish education system and taught by principals and teachers seconded from their schools. He suggests that this model of PD 'privileges craft or practitioner knowledge, and assumes also that all of the necessary expertise to transform curricula, pedagogy and school leadership already resides within schools' (2011, p. 797). There is, however, a dearth of research on practitioner-driven PD to support such practice or inform future PD models. Sugrue *et al*. (2001) did note that while this form of PD was generally considered successful, it often reflected the 'information giving' format of more traditional PD.

In an attempt to determine the most effective types of PD, Kennedy (2014) examined a range of PD models and proposed a framework through which they might be analysed. As a result of this work, Kennedy suggests that models should be grouped along a spectrum which displays their capacity to transform teaching practice and professional autonomy. She argues that a community of practice (CoP) lies somewhere along the spectrum in the range of transition because it can either perpetuate the dominant discourse (transmission end of the spectrum) or, through dynamic collective engagement, transform practice (transformation end of the spectrum).

In studying five urban schools identified as disadvantaged, King (2014) set out to evaluate the impact of PD on teachers' growth and professional learning, identifying factors that have begun to receive research interest: systemic factors, diffusion and staff outcomes including personal, professional and cultural impact. Through examination of these factors, King concluded that teacher change and development is contextual and influenced by multiple factors. She cautions PD organisers to consider teachers' professional identity, their disposition, attitudes and beliefs, their professional roles as well as the settings in which they work. Perhaps most important for the current study, King (2014) highlighted the importance of collaborative practice as key to change.

This article draws on four years of data collected from a group of teachers participating in a learning community in an urban setting. The article examines these teachers as they negotiate their own PD, and evolve into a CoP focused on achieving their own goals and professional needs. We specifically seek to determine: how does the development of a learning community with teachers in an urban school group provide support in setting and achieving group goals; how does this urban school group facilitate these physical education teachers' experiences of planning and teaching students in the context of challenging learning environments; and what

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can we learn from this urban school group to inform development of learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?

Teacher empowerment

This ongoing longitudinal study of an urban community is framed in the constructs of teacher empowerment. We firstly define teacher empowerment before exploring literature in the area. We then share six dimensions of teacher empowerment before considering how best to examine teacher empowerment in action.

Teacher empowerment is premised on the belief that teachers have both the skills and knowledge to improve the conditions in which they work (Bogler and Somech 2004). Several definitions of teacher empowerment have been proposed (Bolin 1989, Prawat 1991, Sweetland and Hoy 2000) and we favour the definition of teacher empowerment as a process where teachers develop the competency to assume responsibility for their own growth and development while solving ongoing problems as they emerge (Short *et al*. 1994). Drawing on what has been learned about PD in an Irish context, Sugrue (2011) emphasises the importance of teacher empowerment gained through collaborative learning as essential to any PD initiative.

Teacher empowerment literature, reviewed by Dierking and Fox (2012), suggests that perceptions of power, support, autonomy and efficacy each interlink and shape each other. They propose that for teachers to feel empowered, they must believe they can influence all aspects of their students' lives through active engagement in decision-making that impacts their classrooms, teaching and student learning. It was noted that teachers' increased perceptions of power and self-worth changed when engaged in a PD context where knowledge was co-constructed (Dierking and Fox 2012), which is in line with the belief that empowerment depends on teachers' commitment to professional learning and growth (Robertson and Tang 1995).

Drawing on related research over the past 10 years, Lee and Nie (2014) suggest that teacher empowerment is linked to improved classroom practices and school effectiveness as a result of its impact on various work-related outcomes of teachers (e.g. job satisfaction, organisational commitment, professional commitment). Greenman and Dieckmann (2004) highlight that teachers are critical to cultural change in their school communities, believing that teacher empowerment is crucial for impacting this change and providing the highest quality education to students.

Short and Rinehart (1992) describe six dimensions of teacher empowerment: decision-making, professional growth, status, self-efficacy, autonomy and impact. Short (1994) suggests that teacher decision-making must impact practice if it is to be effective and revolves around teachers actively engaged in important decisions that relate to all aspects of their work in schools. Professional growth is linked to continuing PD and teachers' perceptions that schools provide them with access and opportunity to become engaged in their own learning. Status is present when teachers believe they have respect and professional support from their administration and colleagues as a result of their knowledge, expertise and practice. Self-efficacy refers to the teachers' perceptions of self and whether they have developed the ability to facilitate student learning through their teaching practices and curricula they have developed to meet student needs. Autonomy is a result of teachers' beliefs that they are in charge of critical features of the teaching and learning process in their setting. Impact is the teachers' perception that they impact what happens in schools.

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Many scholars examine teacher empowerment through either a social structural perspective (considers the impact of the teachers' work environment on their decisions and practices) or a psychological perspective (a teacher's individual work motivation) (Lee and Nie 2013). Others use Short *et al.*'s (1994) single construct of teacher empowerment as a process of self-development and PD. While there is some evidence that workplace social structural influences can impact a teacher's psychological motivation (for example, Blase and Blase 1996, Bandura 2001, Dee *et al.* 2003), and thus the importance of studying the relationship between the two, in the current study we chose to examine the single construct as proposed by Short and Rinehart (1992). This decision was made due to the nature of the learning community that extended across several schools which reflected different administrative structures, one of the main social structural influences (Lee and Nie 2013).

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Learning communities/communities of practice

Desimone (2011, pp. 68–69) describes PD as 'interactive and social, based in discourse and community practice'. When this PD is relevant to teachers, based on their needs and developed both for and with them, it is most meaningful (Helterbran and Fennimore 2004). Lieberman and Miller (2008) argue that professional learning communities provide a context where, through collaboration and communal interaction, new ideas and strategies are cultivated and teacher competence is nurtured and developed. It has been suggested that as community develops, and teachers interact and problem-solve issues related to shared interests, they come to appreciate one another as thinkers and as learners (Collinson 2012). Byrd-Blake and Hundley (2012) support the notion of learning communities as an avenue for PD to push the education establishment to seriously consider the role of teachers in their own development and encourage the design of PD in exciting, challenging and teacher-led ways (Darling-Hammond 1996, Fleet and Patterson 2001, Lieberman and Miller 2007, Little and Curry 2008).

Lave and Wenger (1991) developed a situated learning model which proposes that learning is social, evolving from participating in daily life and engaging in a CoP. Wenger (1998) describes some communities as formal and prescribed while others are natural and informal, yet they are a setting where members come together with common goals and beliefs and learn through their mutual engagement and interaction. These CoPs are considered a powerful mechanism for teacher growth and development (Vescio *et al.* 2008, Parker *et al.* 2012, Patton and Parker 2014). CoPs are more than just a group of people who share an area of interest. They are a group who share a common view of the area in which they practice and have a sense of belonging and mutual commitment to this (Wenger *et al.* 2002). Members of a CoP develop among themselves their own understandings of what their practices and profession are about and, while learning is a primary goal for them, they also find value in the process of learning.

Urban schools

In their work examining teachers in urban contexts, Naraian and Oyler (2014) report a lack of research evidence about teachers' experiences in the classroom or knowledge of the challenges, obstacles and barriers they encounter and over which they perceive they have little control. These authors suggest that coming to understand

teachers' lived experiences in their teaching context might allow PD to be designed in ways that ensure it is relevant and responsive to their needs (Booth, Nes, and Strømstad 2003, Naraian and Oyler 2014). There is further support that teacher learning is strongest when teachers are engaged in learning experiences directly linked to their own context, focused on their needs and interests, involving teaching colleagues, taking place over an extended period of time and facilitating their learning of the theory behind their practice (McLaughlin and Talbert 2006).

While all students rely on schools for support in their lives in the classroom and with learning, Milner (2012a) proposes that teachers serve a pivotal role in the social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive development of pupils from lower economic levels and living in challenging contexts. He also suggests that the preparation and PD of teachers is the most important criteria for improving education in urban schools (Milner 2012b). This supports the idea posed by numerous scholars that teachers and their practice are key to the success of all students regardless of the context in which teaching and learning takes place (Gay 2010, Howard 2009, Milner 2010).

In attempting to forge an initiative for teacher PD that could be sustained over time, Younger and George (2013) examined the challenges and opportunities that arose through development of CoPs for experienced teachers working in socially disadvantaged schools in the Caribbean. These teachers applauded the community as a source of personal and professional empowerment, highlighted the benefits they gained towards their teaching practice and cited being motivated by collaboration among the group. Noteworthy was the recognition by these teachers that they possessed the teaching knowledge and skills to be effective teachers and the belief that this expertise should be shared with one another.

Aim of research

The design of what has become known as the Urban Schools Group (USG) was cognisant of research findings regarding the centrality of capacity-building and teacher networking to effective PD (O'Sullivan and Deglau 2006, Armour and Yelling 2007). The USG intended to provide a group of physical education teachers in urban schools with PD to empower them to address issues posed by their challenging work situations (e.g. poor facilities, low economic conditions, students with challenging behaviour). This research examined a group of urban physical education teachers as they moved from a learning community focused on a new curriculum in physical education to a CoP committed to intense, sustained and focused engagement on issues related to their teaching practice and personal growth as physical educators. In their research on teacher groups working in a variety of PD initiatives, Parker *et al*. (2012) identified a continuum that ranged from a collection of teachers, to well-established groups, to an authentic CoP. This continuum was not intended to suggest that one end was better than the other, but rather 'it reflects a progression of the potential for teacher growth and development' (2012, p. 323). In this article we specifically sought to determine the following: how does the development of a learning community with teachers in the USG provide support in setting and achieving group goals; how does the urban school group facilitate these physical education teachers' experiences of planning and teaching students in the context of challenging learning environments; and what can we learn from this USG to inform development of learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?

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Support for the teaching of physical education in Ireland

The Junior Cycle Physical Education Support Service (JCPESS), funded by the Department of Education and Skills, was established to support all teachers in all Irish post-primary schools in implementing the new junior cycle physical education syllabus through a sustained programme of continuing PD of teachers, designed to supplement current in-service days. The intent of the JCPESS was to build the professional confidence of teachers, empower them to be proactive in advocating for quality physical education and to meet the professional needs of individual teachers, groups of teachers and specific school contexts.

The JCPESS staff consulted with teachers prior to design of the junior cycle PD and through feedback and discussion following each PD session. The information they received as a result of previous teacher in-service days and this current JCPESS PD was that teachers working in urban schools experienced tremendous difficulty in implementing the revised physical education syllabus. They indicated that the syllabus content and sample lesson plans were not easily adaptable to their settings with limited facilities and overcrowded classrooms. They also described how years of working in these circumstances had resulted in a feeling of disempowerment that included: alienation from the mainstream education system; disenchantment with in-service that did not pertain to their specific context, resulting in a reluctance to engage fully with the practical sessions or discussion on planning for implementation; disengagement with the education system, although not with their students; and a need to engage with colleagues working in similar situations regarding possible class content and ideas.

The JCPESS concluded that the support offered through the in-service programme did not help teachers in urban settings in facing the frustrations and challenges posed by their working environment. It recognised that while these teachers felt alienated from the system, they were committed to providing the best education they could for their students. This was evident from the teachers' desire to share ideas with their colleagues and the continual attitude of caring they displayed for their students. The JCPESS, at the suggestion of one of their physical education associates, wished to create a vehicle whereby this sharing, collegial interaction and dialogue could happen and considered that the teachers themselves held many of the solutions to the issues they faced. In September 2008, the JCPESS initiated a project to support a particular group of physical education teachers who were working in schools with little or no facilities and with students who displayed challenging behaviour. The group became known as the Urban Schools Group (USG).

Methodology

Participants

Eighteen post-primary qualified physical education teachers (who had shared their dissatisfaction with previous workshops and in-service initiatives) from 16 schools located in urban settings in the Dublin area of Ireland were the participants in this study. These teachers were invited to participate as a result of their dissatisfaction with previous workshops and in-service initiatives. While these teachers did not know one another personally, they indicated having met, or at least being aware of each other, when attending previous JCPESS and/or physical education workshops. In all but two instances, these teachers were the sole physical education teacher in

their respective school, leaving them with no teaching partner with whom they might consult. These teachers and their schools met the criteria laid down for inclusion in the USG; the school was part of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme; the school had inadequate or no facilities for teaching physical education; the principal was committed to releasing teachers for three days of PD in the first academic year of the project; teacher(s) agreed to form a learning community to convene on at least three occasions outside school time during the school year; and teachers agreed to trial any ideas and/or strategies decided by the group.

Two facilitators assisted the USG teachers in developing as a learning community. One facilitator (JCPE-F) was seconded from her school to work with the JCPESS and is the person who recognised the problems and initiated the USG. Being from a school with similar characteristics to those in the USG, she was intimately familiar with the challenges and obstacles which participants in this study experienced. Once she received approval from the JCPESS to move forward with the USG initiative, JCPE-F recruited a university facilitator member, the first author of this article, who was teaching in a physical education teacher education programme in Ireland and had experience teaching post-primary physical education as well as previous involvement facilitating PD initiatives, learning communities and a CoP. Both facilitators were committed to providing teachers with support in their desire to gain confidence in their own professional competence, empowering them to take charge of, and solve, their own problems in the school environment in which they worked.

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USG project framework

The USG initiative comprised what we describe as six distinct stages: (1) creating a learning community (2008/09); (2) trialling ideas, strategies and documenting teaching experiences (2009); (3) sharing experiences, capacity-building and planning future CoP work (2009/10); (4) developing and sustaining the CoP and implications of the USG (2010–2012); and (5) developing, extending and moving the CoP forward (2012–ongoing). Within each stage were full-day in-service seminars sponsored by the JCPESS and evening workshops organised and hosted by the learning community teachers. In 2011, with the dissolution of the JCPESS, the USG continued their work in the absence of funding. This article reports data from this ongoing research collected until 2011, noted as stages 1–4. Table 1 presents the focus of each stage of the learning community/CoP with specifics of both the seminar and workshops conducted.

Data collection

The four methods of enquiry and the particular research question(s) they sought to address are summarised in Table 2.

USG in-service seminar and workshop evaluations

At the conclusion of each USG in-service seminar/workshop, teachers were invited to complete an evaluation form sharing their perceptions on its success in terms of

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Table 1. Six stages of the USG initiative to date.

Stage	Seminar focus	Workshop focus
Stage 1 (2008): creating a community	Seminar 1 • Building working relationships • Auditing teachers' status • Building capacity • Assessing practice plan • Results sharing Seminar 2 • Working with service providers • How to manage challenging behaviour • Teaching Frisbee games • Future CoP planning	Designed and delivered by four community teachers • Sharing warm-up ideas for restricted spaces • Teaching strategies for rope skipping
Stage 2 (2008/09): trialling ideas, strategies and documenting experiences	JCPESS facilitated community members attending a nationally delivered dance seminar and/or a regional orienteering seminar	One community teacher assisted the group developing orienteering resources, teaching guidance and a scheme of work. Culminating activity delivered by Orienteering of Ireland
Stage 3 (2009/10): sharing experiences, capacity-building and planning future community work	Seminar • Behaviour management • National Behaviour Support Service invited to deliver seminar	Workshop 1 • Teacher development of curricular schemes for challenging contexts Workshop 2 • Extend schemes by sharing activities requiring little/no resources/space • Discussion of USG future and moving forward
Stage 4 (2010–2012): building and sustaining the CoP and identifying implications from the USG to inform PD	Seminar 1 • Experiencing the Sport Education Curriculum Model • Discussion on the impact of the USG on members and advising others teaching under similar conditions	Several evening workshops • Good teaching practices • Evolution of dance • Practical pedometer use • Hurdles, javelin and shot • Euro Fitness activity pack • Handball lead-up games

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Table 1. (*Continued*).

Stage	Seminar focus	Workshop focus
	Seminar 2 • Follow-up on managing challenging behaviours • USG teachers attend PEAI conference • Attended half-day seminar/workshop presented by Don Hellison (Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility) • Follow-up hands-on behaviour management workshop with Melissa Parker, University of Northern Colorado	• Badminton in small spaces • Writing up and sharing resources • Discussion of sustaining the USG after loss of funding • Sharing experiences with the wider teacher community

Table 2. Link between method of enquiry and study research question(s).

Method of enquiry	Research question(s) focus	Types of questions posed
Seminar and workshop evaluations	What can we learn from this USG to inform development of a learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?	What was useful about the workshop? How did it meet your needs? How might you apply what you learned to your teaching practice? What might be more useful to the community in the future? Were comments from other group members helpful in your understanding?
Small group discussions	How does the urban school group facilitate these physical education teachers' experiences of planning and teaching students in the context of challenging learning environments?What can we learn from this USG to inform development of a learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?	Issues related to their perceptions on benefits of the USG; if and how the community became their own initiative; how they felt the community could move forward
Focus group interviews	How does the development of a learning community with the teachers in the USG provide support in setting and achieving group goals? How does the urban school group facilitate these physical education teachers' experiences of planning and teaching students in the context of challenging learning environments?What can we learn from this USG to inform development of a learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?	Teachers' insights into community development; their interactions with one another; personal and group development; implications for maintenance of the community
Individual facilitator interviews	How does the urban school group facilitate these physical education teachers' experiences of planning and teaching students in the context of challenging learning environments?What can we learn from this USG to inform development of a learning community and CoP models of good practice for teachers working in challenging environments?	Insight gained from teachers' comments, observation of group interactions and discussions on usefulness of community ideas applied to teachingLinking observations of and knowledge gained from the USG to previous and current literature on learning communities and CoP models

their professional needs and interests. A total of 93 evaluations were completed and returned, reflecting feedback from six seminars and five workshops. Evaluation forms were intended to inform future seminars/workshops and assessing the value of the current session; examples of questions posed in the evaluation forms included: 'What was useful about the workshop?'; 'How did it meet your needs?'; How might you apply what you learned to your teaching practice?'; 'What might be more useful to the community in the future?'; and 'Were comments from other group members helpful to you?'.

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Small group discussions

At the end of stage 2, following one of the workshops, the USG teachers were asked to split themselves into three groups of six for discussion on the impact and relevance of the learning community. Discussions took place in the sports hall in the school where the workshop was held, with one member of each group volunteering to be in charge of the audio-taping and another to pose prompts to the group. Discussions conducted within each group were recorded and transcribed for analysis, with group discussions lasting for an average of 50 minutes.

Focus group interviews

Following stages 3 and 4 two focus group interviews (group 1 with four USG teachers and group 2 with six) were conducted, by the second author, to gain the teachers' perspectives on the impact of the community. These interviews took place in a local hotel as this was most convenient and provided a quiet environment. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Individual facilitator interviews

Following the second year (2011) of stage 4, the two USG facilitators were individually interviewed by the second author to gain their perspectives on development of the community and their observation of the USG teacher reactions and responses. Interview sites were chosen for convenience and for providing the quietest environment, one taking place in a local hotel and the other in the facilitator's home. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Facilitators referred to their own journal notes collected across all four stages to inform their comments in the interviews that were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Trustworthiness of data

Efforts to establish trustworthiness included triangulating qualitative data sources (Creswell 2012) involving identification of responses to answer the three research questions from workshop evaluations, small group discussions, focus group interviews and facilitator interviews. Debriefing between the researchers throughout data collection and analysis prompted discussion on developing interpretations and how to best construct future questions to be posed to the teachers. Debriefing allowed the researchers to explore and address any instances where the first author, as a member of the community, may have exercised research bias in her interactions with the teachers as well as their interpretations of associated data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Member checks were conducted formally by seeking clarification from teachers on the accuracy of their small group discussion and focus group interview transcriptions, giving them an opportunity to clarify and elaborate on any issues arising in the transcriptions.

Data analysis

Data were analysed to allow us to answer three research questions that focused on support in setting and achieving group goals, shared experiences of planning and teaching students and the informed development of learning communities towards

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a CoP model. To this end, data were informally analysed from the first data point (reading, making notes and discussion between facilitators) to inform stages of community engagement as well as future data collection. At the close of stage 4, all of the data collected were included in the preliminary analysis. Analysis began with the block and file approach to reduce the data while leaving large pieces of data intact (Grbich 2007). In order to respond to the research questions, systematic and rigorous consideration of all data sources in conjunction with text from each data source were manually divided into sections, assigning keywords to sections, and then locating other segments of text with the same keyword noted (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). As each source of data was collected they were again manually divided into sections that were assigned key words. The backwards and forwards method of code analysis (Silverman 2001) resulted in codes being constantly refined, identifying content related to each research question through retrieval of similarly coded segments. As the interpretation developed, data sources were referred back to on numerous occasions to ensure nothing of significance was omitted. Results identified and coded in each data source aligned to the three research questions were compared and contrasted (Mason 1996).

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Results

Wenger (1998) suggests that negotiating and developing a CoP can result in both positive and negative outcomes. However, teachers in this study overwhelmingly highlighted the positive, viewing the challenges they encountered as evidence of professional growth, a developing sense of community, and personal and shared empowerment. In reporting the findings we do so under each research question: provision of support in setting and achieving goals; experiences of planning and teaching physical education; and informing development of learning community and CoP models. Where relevant, perceptions shared by teachers or facilitators in the various data sources are threaded throughout discussion, with all names reported as pseudonyms.

Provision of support in setting and achieving goals

When examining how the community developed initially, the two facilitators noted reluctance by the teachers or perhaps a questioning about whether 'this initiative' would be any different from others with which they had become disenchanted. As the university facilitator (university facilitator) noted: 'I think at first the teachers questioned if this was really going to be something worth their time with their asking, "why are we here and what is going to be different?"'. Both facilitators discussed how, in retrospect, the initial meetings during the first two years were really designed to build trust and capacity and that this was key to the group's progress.

As time elapsed, teachers repeatedly spoke of their own needs as teachers being addressed through the community set-up: 'the facilitators had our needs in mind. I think we were always asked what did we want and the lists of what we put down were carried out. Like, we got to do everything that we asked to do' (Fergal, discussion group). With respect to the particular needs of their school contexts, teachers also felt this was adequately addressed: 'This group has been very useful; it focused on our needs, in our situations, and with our students' (Ciara, focus group). The teachers talked about how holding USG workshops in their own schools with

limited facilities allowed them to feel it was truly intended for them: 'you know we weren't in schools with lovely big playing fields and sports halls; we were in places similar to what we have so it made it more real and we could relate' (Aoife, discussion group).

There was also a strong appreciation for the opportunities to have their voices considered: 'Everybody's voice is always heard, and everybody got a say in it, you know, nobody was left out and everybody said as they felt and everybody was listened to and everybody had new ideas' (Tadhg, discussion group).

As the teachers became comfortable with each other and the facilitators, the community progressed with teachers beginning to take ownership of it and identifying goals they wanted to achieve: 'the community took on an identity of its own and a structure to support that identity; run by teachers for teachers' (JCPE-F). One teacher commented that, 'through our work together we have become enabled and emboldened' (Therese, focus group). Feelings of ownership and committing to something that belonged to them continued to be pivotal in these teachers' experiences within the community: 'Maybe the best thing was that USG was ours; it was very encouraging to have each other…but that is it, it was our ideas and what we wanted to do that led us' (Aoife, focus group) and 'the best thing has been that the schedule of what we will do at each session is built on our concerns, not imposed by others' (Fergal, focus group).

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Experiences of planning and teaching physical education

As teacher morale improved as a result of community interactions, the discourse in each discussion group revolved around physical education areas in which the teachers felt invigorated about teaching. As a sense of community developed, teachers found themselves working together towards the common goal of gaining confidence in designing and delivering a positive and effective physical education programme for young people in challenging settings with limited resources. Support among the group was critical to these: 'Coming together as a group, sharing ideas that work … it was reassuring, exciting, it gave us a sense of, you know, enthusiasm, it rejuvenates you as well, to do things differently' (Susan, focus group) and 'sharing our best practices, and had them accepted without being judged…they fit what we all faced every day' (Siobhan, discussion group). Ruth noted that 'this group has given me new life' (discussion group), while Siobhan commented 'I think we used to marginalise ourselves by not talking to each other at PD meetings; now we cannot wait to get together and share, question, and challenge each other' (discussion group).

JCPE-F noted that the community tends to be 'more solution focused than problem focused; their needs are similar in that they want to offer a curriculum that suits their context, and then ask, "what is your solution?"'. One teacher commented: 'the group has given me confidence in the decisions I make every day in the classroom, I am comfortable now comfortable sharing these decisions, like I own them' (Therese, focus group).

As year four progressed, teachers all agreed that they were not ready to have the USG disband because there was more they could gain from interacting and working together. One teacher noted that 'we would hate to see the group, this group disintegrate and we would be willing to give workshops in the future as they seem to inspire us to help our students reach their goals' (Darragh, focus group). Others in this group suggested how many workshops each person would be responsible for in

a year and how that might fall across the school terms, with Sarah suggesting 'when you are successful with your peers it helps your confidence and what you can do with the students' (focus group).

While the teachers did not initially recognise it, both facilitators noted that the USG teachers appeared able to design important and appropriate learning experiences for their students despite the frustrations they encountered. The university facilitator noted that what most impressed her were these teachers:

> meeting the students where they are. In other words, they don't teach a syllabus, they teach the young people. It seems to me that the teachers are more in tune with their students than many teachers I have observed outside of the USG; they really know their students and their needs.

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Informing development of learning community and community of practice models

As time moved on, comments became more emphatic about the benefits gained from the USG, 'Great as usual; I would hate it if this were to fizzle out as energy from the group is a great motivator' (teacher 1, evaluations), and Eimear noted that 'a community of those in similar situations has meant so much for our own growth' (focus group interview). When the USG moved into what we initially presumed to be its fourth and final year, teachers began to share their concerns for the future and how their efforts might be sustained: 'USG must continue in some shape or form; it is too good to discontinue' (teacher 5, evaluations). All agreed with Siobhan when she commented: 'We developed a feeling of togetherness, you know, we weren't on our own … We have a network now where we can talk to each other about similar problems and maybe share resources' (discussion group).

Teacher discussion focused on developing their ideas into a presentation at the Physical Education Association of Ireland (PEAI) annual conference. Another group talked about how to go about engaging others in their practice:

> if people are willing to commit to evenings we might link a meeting in with the PEAI conference and take time for our session that would show others what we are able to do, and share the meaning of community. (Siobhan, discussion group)

An interesting area that surfaced was in relation to the preparation of pre-service teachers and how the USG community might play a role in that process. Fergal asked:

> should we volunteer as mentors to some young teachers that are going out into situations like ours? Even if we are there for a phone call or inviting them to join our group it might help them to feel like they are doing ok and can make it work. (Focus group)

As the discussion progressed, the teachers felt they had a role to play in fostering young teachers who may be struggling particularly with content that is not the traditionally taught physical education activities. The teachers discussed attempting to move their community into the PEAI structure, becoming involved with mentoring pre-service teachers through the university, examining the impact of the community on their work with students and student learning, and sharing their work with other teachers.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of the USG was to provide a group of physical education teachers with PD to empower them to address issues posed by their challenging work situations. The study chronicles the growing confidence and empowerment of the teachers involved as they strove to build strong relationships in support of their efforts in challenging urban contexts. This is consistent with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) perspective that attempting to build a collaborative culture through meetings and structure only will be unsuccessful if the members are not willing to build relationships among themselves. As we saw, gaining confidence in themselves and recognising the quality of the work they do with young people had a significant effect on these teachers' growing sense of worth and the importance of the USG in filling the gap they had previously experienced in teaching and participating in PD.

Situating PD in the teaching context of this community allowed collaboration on shared goals and social engagement among members as noted by Desimone *et al*. (2002) and Guskey (2000) as critical to quality PD. Consistent with Byrd-Blake and Hundley's (2012) findings, these teachers reported development of their teaching practice and pedagogical skills by applying the teaching strategies shared by colleagues in the community. Findings suggested that these teachers experienced many opportunities for the planning and teaching of physical education by engagement in the community. They noted being invigorated to try new and innovative practices, were reassured that what they were doing was actually worthwhile and meaningful to students, and felt strongly that the community could continue to move forward, benefiting both themselves and students. Noteworthy was the suggestion that these teachers were more focused on solving problems then being stumped by them.

When examining the provision of support these teachers received in setting and achieving goals, we found a movement from teacher hesitancy to engagement and a questioning of how this new community might be different to development of a setting in which they felt their voices were sought and valued, their personal and group needs were focused upon and met, and the community was one for which they took ownership. For these teachers, Short and Rinehart's (1992) six dimensions of teacher empowerment were key to their development as teachers through engagement in the learning community. Their professional growth was supported by principals willing to allow them to engage in PD designed for the purpose of increasing their own knowledge and skills, which provided them with recognition and respect (status). This engagement also supported their perceptions of control (autonomy) of teaching and learning of physical education in their schools and the impact it has on students and the curriculum. They came to recognise their ability to design lessons to engage students and to implement these lessons in ways that were challenging and exciting, supporting the notion of increased self-efficacy. As the teachers identified the focus of various workshops across the four years of the study, they based their decisions on the needs of their students and how they might most effectively impact student learning, and considered other aspects of their teaching lives.

Teachers in this community discussed the ways in which they might impact all aspects of their teaching lives from their classrooms to teaching practice and ultimately student learning. The teachers' focus was consistently on their students and how to impact their learning by developing their own knowledge and skills in order to provide a quality education as highlighted by Greenman and Dieckmann (2004). While these teachers have begun to examine their own teaching practice, as we

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move forward with this longitudinal research the teachers themselves are anxious to examine the impact of their community engagement on student learning. This will begin to fill the gap in the literature on the effectiveness of PD to improve teaching and its influence on student learning (Newmann *et al.* 2000, Hargreaves and Fullan 2012, Kennedy 2014). It is anticipated that what we have learned from these teachers on how they go about sustaining their community will have implications for informing development of learning community and CoP models of PD.

After several years committed to one another this community continues to thrive, initiating innovative curricular workshops and sharing tips on practices that are effective in their school settings. These teachers are actively consulting one another on issues related to their teaching and student learning and beginning to consider how they might share their new knowledge with others in similar situations and beyond. Recognition of the journey they have taken, which moved from hesitancy to early motivation and from frustration to feelings of professional worth and empowerment, is portrayed in their interactions.

The success of the USG may be attributed to the teachers and the commitment they made to community and to improving the physical education they deliver to young people in challenging settings. Through sharing experiences and participating in workshops and seminars, increasingly delivered by group members themselves, the teachers have immersed themselves in discussion and dialogue. This focus has been on the continuous process of developing innovative curriculum programmes, based on the Junior Cycle Physical Education syllabus learning outcomes, and suitable for the context of their learning environments. They have drawn on their strong relationships to engage in ongoing and relevant interaction among their group to ask and answer questions that impact their work with young people, an aspect that Fleet and Patterson (2001) suggest is often overlooked.

In relation to the development of a model of good practice, the success of this initiative in engaging alienated teachers is overwhelmingly supportive of the learning community/CoP model as central to the provision of effective PD. This is recognised by the teachers and is evidenced from their determination and commitment to share their experiences, not only with teachers in similar situations but with preservice teachers and newly qualified teachers. Interactions and engagement within a community allows teachers to take responsibility for their own learning as professionals (Jess and McEvilly 2015) and to take on the role of leaders in the development of colleagues.

There is no doubt that there is a commitment among the members of this community to continue beyond the dissolution of the JCPESS and to continue the community's development in accordance with the needs and interests of its members. The community has developed from stage 1 of the initiative involving the creation of the community to stage 4 where its members are exploring how to sustain the CoP and where they and PD providers examine the implications of the USG that might inform the development of PD structures in physical education and indeed the wider educational community. These teachers have presented their work at the 2013 Physical Education, Physical Activity and Youth Sport (PAPAYS-Ireland) Research Forum (Clonan *et al*. 2013) and published one of their initiatives conducted in 2014 with Sky Sport in *Physical Education Matters* (Clonan *et al*. 2014a, 2014b). This research is ongoing as we explore and examine how the USG teachers are able to maintain the work of their community, reinvent themselves and move from concluding one phase to begin new projects, and explore the meaning the community has

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for individual teachers and/or facilitators in the first instance and pre-service teachers and newly qualified teachers in the future. Ultimately, we intend to explore the impact of the community on the learning of the students enrolled in the CoP schools under the guidance of these committed and innovative teachers.

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