A narrative exploration of how curricula for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties shape and are shaped by the practices of their teachers

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This article presents the findings of a study that asked teachers to narrate their interactions with learners from the perspective of the curriculum that the school adopted. Thirteen female teachers, employed at eight special secondary schools for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties in England, participated in the research. They narrated their experiences, which were consequently subject to phenomenological hermeneutic analysis. All the teachers displayed a high degree of individuality and conceptualised their work not straightforwardly as teaching the espoused curriculum, but rather as they themselves being the ‘curriculum-in-action’, with their practice lying alongside and only obliquely cognisant of their school’s explicit provision. The narratives disclosed ongoing conflict with school leaders being interpreted as a threat to their specific pedagogic practices as well as their professionalism. The research raises questions about the ability of the ‘special curriculum’ to be truly responsive to pupils’ needs within this complex pedagogical environment.

Key words: curriculum, pedagogic practice, teachers, PMLD
Introduction
The intersection of inclusivity with responsive pedagogies and learner-adaptable curricula has made mainstream special education praxis arguably more diverse, more personalised and more culturally relevant to a wider range of learners than at any point in the historical provision of special education (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). However, at the same time, it has also exposed domains of special education where there are difficulties in adopting appropriate curriculum models because of disagreement between the purposes and outcomes that are being sought (Imray & Hinchcliffe, 2014; Lacey & Scull, 2015). Such a context is the basis of this article: the education of children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), who are working below statutory National Curriculum Levels in England. In these contexts, teachers face complex decisions about their practices on a daily basis and routinely deal with fundamental questions of educational inequality and how the curriculum to which that they teach meets its stated purposes (Bellamy et al., 2010; Byers & Lawson, 2015).

Despite the proliferation of research exploring the impact of inclusive pedagogy on the practices of teachers faced with a diverse range of children’s individual differences, there is little research that is concerned with the pedagogic decision making of teachers of children with PMLD (Cameron, 2014; Simmons & Watson, 2015). Specifically, there is scant literature that explores the intersection of PMLD teachers’ practice with the espoused curriculum in the creation of a balanced and appropriate education for this group of pupils within specialised settings (Butler, 2018). This is partly related to the comparative marginalisation of this area in policy terms in England, where the current study was carried out (Long, 2016), but it is also related to the fact that PMLD pedagogical praxis is both compellingly complex and highly contextual. Although inclusive education principles have led to shifts in teacher education and development (Florian, 2015) and these in turn have given rise to studies that question the capacity of teachers to adapt inclusively to this specific environment (Male, 2015), the field of the education of pupils with PMLD is characterised both by the absence of a research-based curriculum, and by the dearth of studies that examine teacher behaviour and values within specialised settings. The studies of Jones (2004, 2010; Jones & Riley, 2017) are among the few in the field that explicitly examine teacher decision making and teacher beliefs and values for teachers of pupils with severe intellectual difficulties, for example. Indeed, Colley (2018) asserts that the field of PMLD research has been ‘very largely excluded from the policy and practice of inclusive education and overlooked in debates around inclusion’.
The Rochford Review (Rochford, 2016) and the subsequent DfE response (DfE, 2017) have signalled a shift in curriculum and assessment practices in the area of the PMLD curriculum, by stating that the P-Scales (‘Performance’ scales – levels of assessment for learners operating below the standards of the National Curriculum in England) are no longer fit for purpose. Both the review and the Government response argue that existing curricula are predicated upon progressive and linear models and therefore do not fit the untypical and extremely diverse PMLD population (MacKay, 2009). However, their removal will not mean that statutory assessment of such pupils will no longer exist – on the contrary, schools should be equipped to:

‘demonstrate every kind of progress made by a pupil, be it linear, lateral or consolidation. We know that the teachers and other school staff that work with these pupils have the best expertise and understanding of their complex and individual needs …’

(DfE, 2017, p. 14)

Significantly, therefore, although the Rochford Review recognises the current shortcomings of assessment regimes for PMLD curricula, at the same time it fails to address the more fundamental structural failing of PMLD provision, that of appropriateness of curriculum for the diversity of learners within PMLD schools in the first place (Bellamy et al., 2010; Simmons & Bayliss, 2007). Consequently, Rochford leaves open to highly diverse and individual interpretation the decisions of schools and their teachers as to how and when pupils will be judged as achieving and performing sufficiently well and with recourse to particular targets. On the surface, this is no different to the expectations of teachers within mainstream and National Curriculum subjects, but in reality, research in PMLD school contexts, such as it exists, exposes a bewildering array of curricula ranging from the ImPACTs (Individualised Profile Assessment Curriculum Target Setting) model, with its focus on learning through routine, through Quest for Learning, with its emphasis on developmental milestones, to the Curriculum for Excellence, in which intensive relationship-building between teaching staff and pupils is placed centre-stage. Unsurprisingly, each curriculum that is followed develops around it a repertoire of unique teaching and learning practices (Rayner & Male, 2013). Such practices do not exist in a pedagogic vacuum, however; they are often developed under the direct leadership of particular schools, and evolve as a function of the training and beliefs of its teachers, in parallel with the involvement of other professionals and parents of the children (Butler, 2018).
But such differences mean that schools’ approaches are predicated upon quite different developmental grounds for their pupils; indeed they exist upon a continuum of therapeutic to disciplinary curricula (Foreman et al., 2004) on the one hand, and relaxed nurturing to quasi-behavioural modification on the other (Fergusson et al., 2015).

The little research that exists suggests that, perhaps more in this area of provision than any other, there is what Simmons et al. (2008) have termed the ‘culture of faith’ in relation to the ability and inclination of schools to educate pupils with profound difficulties and disabilities. This study has been carried out therefore at a highly apposite time in the context of the education of children with PMLD: not only does it overlap with the Rochford Review and the UK Government response, but it also examines in detail the intersections of curriculum and teaching within specialist PMLD provision, a field that is significantly under-researched and that is in flux as a result of these statutory reforms. The importance and originality of the work lie in the hidden and largely invisible nature of PMLD teacher practice, and its intersection with policy and discourse surrounding the deeper meaning of what it means to educate pupils who have traditionally been excluded, by accident and by design, from mainstream education.

This study

Our research takes as its subject the praxis of 13 female teachers who are employed at special secondary schools for children with PMLD in England. This particular article is part of a wide-ranging project examining the training, curriculum-led and pedagogic practices of professionals working within secondary-age PMLD schools in England. In this specific study, we explore how these teachers construct their work through the lens and direction of their school’s espoused curricula, and how the intersection of curriculum and beliefs about the abilities of these children shapes their day-to-day pedagogic practices. This study did not seek to develop critiques of individual curricula, nor did it intend to link specific developmental or therapeutic practices with particular assessment scales; rather our purpose was to examine the processes of how staff interacted with learners as functions of whichever curriculum they and their school followed.

The current research is based on in-depth interviews conducted over the period 2016–2018, for which ethical approval was granted from the hosts’ institution. Thirteen teachers, all female, participated in the study. Their characteristics are given in Table 1. We recruited the participants through two
Table 1: Participants’ characteristics

| Participant’s pseudonym | Gender | Years in teaching | Highest qualification | PMLD school where employed |
|-------------------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Trish                   | Female | 25                | Bachelor of Education (Primary) | School 1                   |
| Mia                     | Female | 32                | Bachelor of Science in Psychology | School 2                   |
| Scarlett                | Female | 6                 | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 3                   |
| Hazel                   | Female | 9                 | Bachelor of Arts in Education | School 4                   |
| Brianne                 | Female | 2                 | Bachelor of Arts in English, PGCE in Primary Education | School 4                   |
| Allison                 | Female | 2                 | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 5                   |
| Kylie                   | Female | 19                | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 6                   |
| Estelle                 | Female | 11                | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 1                   |
| Maddie                  | Female | 13                | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 5                   |
| Faith                   | Female | 15                | Bachelor of Education (Primary) | School 7                   |
| Morgan                  | Female | 20                | Bachelor of Science in Psychology | School 2                   |
| Sheena                  | Female | 5                 | Bachelor of Science in Primary Education | School 8                   |
| Charlie                 | Female | 6                 | Bachelor of Arts in Primary Education | School 8                   |
means: our personal knowledge of and familiarity with many of the schools, and subsequent snowballing (Sadler et al., 2010) when we announced our interest in conducting such a study, whereupon prospective participants contacted us directly. All the teachers at every school were informed about the study individually and were asked to participate by narrating their experiences of how the curriculum shaped and was shaped by their pedagogic practices. All the teachers were working full time and were interviewed in their schools. For reasons of confidentiality during the progress of the research, the teachers never met as school or cross-school groups, and were not accompanied by colleagues at any interview unless they specifically requested this.

**Interviews**
The first author conducted digitally recorded interviews, in which the participants were asked to narrate their interactions with learners from the perspective of the curriculum that the school had adopted, reflecting on examples where their pedagogic practice had been explicitly shaped by the curriculum, or where they had to decide how to enact the curriculum differently in response to their detailed personal knowledge about specific learners. If the interviewer wished the participant to expand on the story, or had trouble understanding what the teacher was trying to say, only then would they use the same form of words that they used throughout, namely, ‘What did you do/think/feel then?’ (Mishler, 1991). Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes, and all were later transcribed.

**Interpretation**
This research adopts hermeneutics as its mode of analysis (Ricoeur, 1976, 1991). In essence, the method uses dialectic as a movement through the narratives, constantly balancing understanding and explanation and allowing for the representation of people’s reconstructions of experiences especially as they related to the school communities in which they worked (Howarth, 2001). This comprised an initial ‘naive’ reading, followed by two structural analyses in which the text was broken down into themes to refute or support the initial reading. Finally, both authors carried out a comprehensive analytical interpretation incorporating the first interpretation and both structural ones; this was undetaken in relation to theory and findings from studies of teachers’ inclusive practices in special education contexts.

**First ‘naive’ reading**
Initially, readings of the narratives provided a superficial interpretation. In this part of the process, both authors read through all the transcriptions of
interviews given by all the participants, making notes about the intersections of curriculum and teaching practices. During this stage, the texts were read as open-mindedly as possible, in order to obtain an ‘obvious’ understanding of being a teacher of PMLD pupils, trying to balance complex pupil needs and curriculum aims and outcomes. The levels of personal responsibility were narrated as critical issues for almost all the teachers. Narrated examples of feeling alone in relation to decision-making about activities and assessments for pupils featured strongly in many different ways. Bound with these narrations were episodes of conflict and accord. In almost all cases, the teachers related conflict as a function of school leadership, while accord was mainly reserved for the relationships between the teachers and other professionals. All of the teachers investigated displayed a very high degree of individuality and conceptualised their work not straightforwardly as teaching the curriculum, but rather as being the curriculum-in-action, with their practice lying alongside and only obliquely cognisant of their school’s espoused provision. The narratives revealed creative practices and unique understandings and interactions with their learners, interpreted as highly responsive and caring pedagogies (O’Connor, 2008; Sims, 2014). The narratives disclosed ongoing conflict with school leaders interpreted as a threat to their pedagogic practices as well as their professionalism. However, dependent upon experience, the teachers either believed that pupil-ability outcomes or pupil-relational approaches should be the focus of their practice. Significant impressions from this first reading was that being a teacher of pupils with PMLD was both a constant balance and an inner struggle, with personal professional principles shaping the eventual pedagogic outcome.

First structural analysis
Both authors contributed to the structural interpretation and this was conducted using both narrative categories (Burman, 2003; Elliot, 2005) and metaphors (Jensen, 2006). The narratives provided rich data, the teachers being both protagonists and unwitting casualties in the nexus of curriculum-pedagogical politics that were taking place within their schools. The sense of individuality was acute in the narrations: in some cases, individuality was narrated as a positive element of the teachers’ work, with those who had long-term experience, or novice teachers who had undergone training, feeling that this was a unique element of working in a PMLD school. In other cases, such levels of lone working and responsibility were regarded as a matter of loss, of the lack of possibility to develop professional collegiality in such complex circumstances, and they exposed themselves alongside feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability in their own practice. The sense of obligation towards pupils, as well as the ensuring
of pupils’ rights, made them objects of responsibility, and expectations for the future for these children were expressed as stories of both hope and resignation at the lack of curriculum opportunities for them within their schools. Frequent use of exhortations to ‘proper’ practice, as well as the repeated use of ‘should’, to relate their ‘valid’ pedagogies to those espoused by school leaders, characterised much of the narration of individual teachers.

Metaphors occurred most often in the texts of the teachers in two main contexts: when they turned to working with the curriculum for pupils at the start of each unit of work, and in relation to the teachers’ relationships with their work and parents’ and colleagues’ views and attitudes. In the former case, the teachers frequently used movement to illustrate their narratives; for example, ‘it’s tiny steps all the way’, ‘you have to take baby steps … not even … steps that you’d need a microscope to see’ and ‘teaching x is like a dance, we’ve come to know each other’s movements and steps’. In the latter case, metaphors were used in relation to the teachers’ demeanours and beliefs as they negotiated interpretation of their work in multiple ways, and drawing on their strength as having animalistic qualities; for example, ‘you have to have the heart of a lion to deal with the day to day problems that we have and yet keep going’, ‘when you speak to the parents you have to develop the hide of a rhino’, ‘inside you have to be a pussycat to feel for these kids’ and ‘You need the cunning of a fox to outsmart the head teacher in this school’.

**Second structural analysis**

Next, the text was divided up by ‘units of meaning’ in which the content was denoted by phrases or sentences. In basic terms, the content covered the suitability of the school curriculum for individual pupils; planning learning activities for pupils; interactions with learners; interactions with colleagues; relationships with school leaders; striving to maintain balance in the teaching role; endurance and professional responsibility, personal conflict and professional knowledge. Reflections on the texts confirmed the earlier impressions from the initial reading that how individual teachers interacted with their pupils is intrinsically linked to, as well as impacted by, the curriculum that they followed. Important themes that were supported by examples from the units of meaning included the fact that irrespective of the particular curriculum that each teacher followed, the extent of the impact on the teacher’s interpretation was a function of their personal view as to how to balance the developmental and therapeutic elements. This was very much an individual decision which, although shaped by their beliefs and identities, meant that the curriculum was a dynamic object, with no two teachers following it in the same way. In addition, and as a result, the curriculum and associated
pedagogy became a battle ground for many of the teachers; conflict with their school leaders emerged as a theme in almost every teacher’s narrative. With relevance to the whole text, the meaning units were identified and links were made between them and across narrative text. Through a process of condensation and consolidation, five themes emerged, each of which will be discussed in turn, with quotations that exemplify each theme:

1. having ownership of and responsibility for the curriculum;
2. balancing development, therapy and care;
3. being pedagogically resourceful and independent;
4. coping with structural conflict;
5. reconciling parallel personal and professional feelings.

**Having ownership of and responsibility for the curriculum**

The curriculum that the teachers’ schools followed was narrated with questioning and frequent confusion, as the teachers tried to understand, and justify for themselves, the reasons why particular curricula had been adopted, especially given the diversity of the pupils at their schools:

‘An appropriate curriculum does not entrench pressure or expectation, it should not be about achieving unrealistic targets for the children, best fit for each individual, I make those decisions irrespective of the one we have, and I stand by what I do in my classrooms’.

(Hazel)

‘The curriculum – any curriculum – doesn’t fit in PMLD settings – it’s a faint starting point but we as teachers have no choice about whether it’s the right starting point – but we use our own judgment as to how to interpret what it means in practice’.

(Morgan)

‘I have a watered down national curriculum so all the basic premises are there but on a lower level in a scheme which was designed by the head because he has the knowledge, but it means that I do the proper work, fitting it to the children themselves’.

(Charlie)
The narratives revealed that most of the teachers considered the curriculum at their school as a matter of imposing manageable order on an educational context that had not fully responded to the principles of personalisation for children with such disparate needs. As such, the teachers expressed feelings that, despite the introduction of curricula within their schools that were supposedly tailored to the aims and ethos of these schools, actual opportunities for adapting these to particular students led to confusion as to what was the most important element:

‘This new curriculum that we’re doing seems to have a much clearer rationale than the last one – it has a greater balance of communication and interaction that I personally think fits our children better than the last one did, but I think that was a matter of the head’s personal choice – they have a clear intent and obviously they have the experience, so we follow it in principle but in practice, we’re left on our own’.

(Faith)

Several of the teachers had become aware of the lack of a research basis for their school curriculum choices. Their difficulties in understanding and resistance to the methods and motivations of the school curriculum leaders and advisors could be clearly interpreted from such narrative texts as:

‘It’s just astonishing to me that the head seems to pick up her ideas about what counts as progressional [sic] activities from conversations that she’s had in coffee shops, or documentaries that she’s seen on the TV. Nothing, absolutely nothing that we do, is based on rigour and proper research’.

(Faith)

‘I did a post grad at a university where it was an eye opener for me that all the sort of grandstanding at our school was a smoke screen for some very questionable ideas about statutory curricula, assessment. For the first time, I saw that there was a lack of real questioning about what we do’.

(Estelle)
Such narratives reveal two aspects of the teachers’ practices: they appear to acknowledge the scant research basis for the curricula adopted in the teachers’ schools, and they also brought to light the lack of opportunity for discussion and openness about the practices that each curriculum might support. Ironically, this lack of ownership unwittingly promoted individual teachers’ more idiosyncratic practices that were unknown to other staff, headteachers or senior leaders within the teachers’ schools, and were only shared with parents. However, the following quotation presents clearly the concerns of one of the teachers in relation to the origin of the curriculum in this respect:

‘The curriculum that we use at the school I think is actually tailored quite well both for the pupils and our personal strengths as teachers and teaching assistants, but that’s the whole problem – it’s tailored – too much a personal mission of a few people round the head, who have designs on what these kids should and shouldn’t be learning – I do worry what’s going to happen when these new changes start to bed in’.

(Mia)

Balancing development, therapy and care
The emphasis of the curriculum adopted within individual schools was varied and reflected the models of education within PMLD contexts, including foci on language, physical developmental, social relational and specific knowledge-based approaches. However, it was very clear from the narratives that there was significant divergence between and within schools as to how curricula were shaped and enacted on a day-to-day basis. The process of curriculum interpretation seemed to rest on what teachers felt that they were told in their schools about the purpose of the curriculum adopted, as well as its milestones and aims. The final shape of the curriculum as it was brought to life by individual teachers was strongly a function of what they felt was appropriate for particular pupils, as well as their own ideas about the curriculum, and this was a theme narrated by almost all the teachers:

‘Planning is a strange thing in PMLD, a paradox, it’s the most definite part of what we do, tiny milestones, steps, minute changes, yet it’s also the vaguest thing, because we have to keep everything – learning.'
development, inclusion, how we treat our pupils, in a balance, and that depends only on us, which makes it quite lonely and difficult’.

(Scarlett)

Several teachers expressed the view that there was quite a narrow range of activities that learners with PMLD might experience in practice, and many participants felt that particular curriculum programmes often emphasised only one route of learning, development, therapy or care:

‘We should care with a capital C, we should really want to educate and enable, not disable through the very curriculum that is supposed to enhance potential’.

(Maddie)

The conflation of learning and assessment that the teachers described had been driven by long-term adherence to P-scales that have validated particular approaches. This meant that for several teachers, development goals were subsumed into assessment outcomes:

‘There is so much pressure on the head to hit targets, that planning for therapeutic goals, for example, has to be squeezed in and made to fit but that will be so wrong for my students, we’ll undo all the really careful work that I’ve done with them’.

(Kylie)

Working with other professionals, including teaching assistants, physiotherapists and music therapists, was often cited as a catalyst for the development of specific pedagogic practices:

‘I often read the professional journal of music therapy and I get some interesting cross-over ideas about using caring approaches to improve small developmental tactile goals. This sort of wider awareness is critical for the kids because they’re not able to respond in only one way’.

(Trish)
The roles and behaviours of parents were exposed as key factors in the teachers’ narratives of balancing curriculum themes. On the one hand, their needs often assumed more importance than their children, especially when discussing the need for teachers to care rather than meeting a particular descriptor, for example. But at the same time, the teachers were unified in their frequent indignation over parents who had suddenly become angry with them when their child was removed from a particular therapeutic project, or had failed to achieve a particular skill:

‘Oh yes, the parents! They want everything – they want me to ensure levels of attainment, to make this progress, get that skill, do this, achieve that, all with constant vigilance as to their little darling being happy and well-adjusted’.

(Brianne)

Being pedagogically resourceful and independent

The fact that there had been such a narrow range of approaches within each curriculum had left individual teachers either exposed or empowered in the development of their pedagogical stances. Either way, teachers in the study had become exceptionally pedagogically resourceful and independent. As a result, the teachers were often extremely creative and were willing to try out pedagogical variations on strictly school-imposed curriculum levels, in order to facilitate learning among their pupils:

‘I adapt the curriculum through my own teaching because none of it is able to really fit with what I know about these kids – I do not hold back if I need to use red balloons for counting or CDs for movement work or spaghetti to do tactile stuff… I think people think they cannot do things, yes, they can, just give them a chance and use a different pair of binoculars’.

(Kylie)

‘Attainment levels are low and so appropriate teaching and learning practices mean completely different things in PMLD. The syllabus is the starting point of course, but we, the teachers, are the curriculum in action, our knowledge and experience creates a physical, social and
emotional syllabus, one that’s in tune with their needs, that can bend and weave around them, the pupils themselves’.

(Mia)

‘The pupils themselves’ was a phrase that many teachers used when they related their pedagogic practices, with the newer teachers’ stories placing the pupil outcomes centre-stage, with accounts of how they facilitated highly prescriptive teaching to ensure compliance with particular projects and curriculum schemes. They were frequently unsure about how far they should go to make decisions about particular pupils in relation to their progress, however:

‘Lots of research and experimentation and some sceptical colleagues have educated me, I have had to work my way through balancing plans and schemes when they often don’t seem to agree at all. But that’s been the thing that has made me more questioning and to think the issues through, although it’s exhausting and I often feel like I’m alone on my own little path’.

(Sheena)

Several teachers revealed the conflicting views that they had concerning whether their teaching approaches were able to make a difference to individual children’s outcomes, preferring an organic explanation for lack of progress, rather than a socio-cultural one:

‘I don’t think, despite whether I like the curriculum we follow, that my teaching makes a difference to these children, they have long term problems, so I do my best just to teach with care and maybe make little changes over time’.

(Allison)

‘The children have too many needs to really make a difference, and you never know what’s happened in their early years to make them like this, so it’s hard to know just how to teach and with what purpose, but I try anyway’.

(Sheena)
When it came to being pedagogically creative and flexible, the nature of experimentation confirmed the separation of novice and more experienced teachers’ views. Newer staff in particular referenced the possibility of adapting and experimenting, but seemed to focus on the impact on themselves rather than the possibility of assisting pupils’ learning:

‘My teaching allows me to experiment on students and try new things, look, explore and see how to do things — I can make mistakes but I have to be careful about what parents think, especially if I go too creative’.

(Allison)

‘The older staff seem to experiment on students and try new things, look and personally explore and see how to do things. They don’t seem to be afraid if it goes wrong though but I have to think about my career and getting a good reference’.

(Brianne)

Coping with structural conflict

A sense of shifting sands and uncertainty about where the curricula originated, and why they had been adopted and how, was pervasive in the teachers’ accounts, and stood behind the issue of how and why teaching staff did or did not collaborate, or at the very least come to a consensus concerning the learning needs of their pupils with PMLD. For several teachers, agency and autonomy were important in articulating their principles in the face of such complexity:

‘If staff want to learn more, then it’s up to them personally to join a course off their own back and make sense of it how they want. You have to be continually thinking through your approach here because no-one has any answers and the curricula are all so different that there’s just no way we can all agree’.

(Mia)

Many of the teachers mentioned the strength of collaboration and communication as the only way to make sense of the diverse learning environments
in which they found themselves. Some expressed the need to work together constantly and to express shared educational values:

‘The emotional curriculum is entrenched in what we do here, we care for one another and it goes beyond the student and me to the whole class team but that means we all have to take responsibility for our roles, share our information and knowledge and work together so that they mesh even if we don’t always agree’.

(Scarlett)

However, conflict and concord were never far apart and served to shape the teachers’ actions as well as their motivations for particular pedagogic strategies:

‘I had done some research with the university, and when I came back to school, I tried to talk to other staff, but it was interesting that everyone had their own ideas and it was like I was being a dangerous adversary and they were even scared to talk to me about it’.

(Estelle)

The influence of school leadership, and conflict with it, on teachers’ practice was a persistent thread in many of the narratives told, and was both a source of anger and a source of shame that the leaders might find out what teachers were doing in order to facilitate the curriculum that the school had adopted:

‘The Head asks for things and I shut the door and think no chance, it’s like that scene from Matilda where Miss Honey knows Miss Trunchbull is coming and asks Matilda to hide the colours’.

(Estelle)

‘If I hadn’t been here for so long I’d be a nervous wreck with fear that I’d get found out. Think of the headlines in the Daily Mail – they’d make a field day out of what I do!’

(Morgan)
Reconciling parallel personal and professional feelings

The continual need to reflect on and preserve their professional identity and ideals was important for these teachers, in the face of competing principles, values that were assailed from all angles, and complex learning environments that could be interpreted at any point in the day as being either oppressive or inclusive:

‘Unlike my mainstream colleagues I care, you have to, you should want to, so even if what’s being asked of you is beyond you, you have to do it. I think that they key thing for me is that there is no evidence for what we do to work, so I have to think things through more careful, be more aware of the consequences of your teaching and what you do’.

(Charlie)

Despite the possibilities offered by the strength of collaborative working when it occurred, the teachers expressed several times the internal conflicts of their role and the loneliness of having unique relationships with each child that were so much a function of knowing them more deeply than anyone else:

‘I sometimes feel very fearful about working in PMLD, the problems, the challenges, the ways in which all of us do things so differently, it scares me because we could all be making huge mistakes, but then we all know our own children in deep and unique ways, so that is a curriculum of its own’.

(Maddie)

‘Years of making mistakes, seeing terrible things and picking myself up, reading up on everything has helped a great deal, but you have to live it every day, you have to have a desire to change student lives and that’s almost impossible in this job’.

(Trish)

Analytical overview and concluding thoughts

The field of research in PMLD teachers’ teaching and curriculum-making is very small, and studies of the nexus between teaching practice and curriculum-making in practice are scarce (Rees, 2017; Colley, 2018). The present study
therefore provides new knowledge as well as shedding light on existing research at an important point in curriculum and assessment in special educational needs and disability provision. Being a teacher in a PMLD school is no different from other educational roles: it demands constant adherence to, yet also constant questioning of, the nature of inclusion, of moral decision making, and of resource allocation, both in emotional and practical terms. However, it also raises complex pedagogical questions (Imray & Hinchcliffe, 2014). The stories revealed in this research paint a picture that is partially at odds with the few studies in this field: they do somewhat confirm that staff felt a sense of dislocation from their professional role (Simmons & Watson, 2015; Butler, 2018) and that this was underlined by the frequent lack of dialogue in their schools about what each was trying to achieve with this group of pupils. But they also expressed strong feelings about leadership and the idiosyncratic way in which decisions about all manner of curriculum and pedagogic concerns were handled (Byers & Lawson, 2015). Rather than revealing deficits in knowledge and skill (McDermott & Atkinson, 2016), these narratives show that the teachers operate in a creative and sometimes intuitive way, but also that they are very independent and their responses and practices often have to be secret, since there is too much to lose by revealing the complex and creative pedagogies that flourish in individual classrooms (Rayner & Male, 2013). This weight of secrecy operates at all levels of experience, for different reasons, and serves to reinforce the very principles that their school leadership appears keen to change.

Frequently, the teachers spoke past each other: the novice teachers were preoccupied with how things looked and how they were going to ensure that their practices were congruent with the latest curriculum innovation, while the more experienced teachers were occupied with being inclusive at a relational and responsive level, so undermining their amassed skill and knowledge in the eyes of the school leadership, who focused on outcomes and assessments. Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014) have argued that teachers’ practices in the context of PMLD require distinct pedagogies on the basis that mainstream inclusive pedagogy is posited on a relatively narrow range of teachers’ responses to diversity. This study has highlighted the need for a nuanced interpretation of pedagogy, but one outside mainstream education, otherwise, as Colley (2018) asserts, the needs of the PMLD curriculum will inevitably be viewed through the lens of the capacity of teachers to adapt their practices within the norms of mainstream pedagogy and so fail to understand the relationship between the abilities of these pupils and their environment outside mainstream education.
Interactions and social relationship building, between staff and pupils and all the variants of support staff, are key elements of curriculum design and associated pedagogic practice in PMLD schools (Rayner et al., 2016). The teachers in the study stressed that collaboration and co-working were important ways in which they could make sense of the curriculum demands of teaching such a complex group, a finding that is in line with the research of Munde and Vlaskamp (2015). However, paradoxically, all of the teachers emphasised the high degree of individuality that they had toward both the application of the curriculum as well as the teaching required to enact it fully. This curriculum-in-action approach characterised the teachers as being a unique group that they felt set them aside from teachers in other sectors, whose discipline was separate to the curriculum. In these PMLD schools, their ability to be a living, responsive and inclusive curriculum was the very professional identity that all of them so clearly sought but often struggled to achieve. Simmons and Bayliss (2007) presented research in which the practitioners sought a deep understanding of their learners and frequently felt compromised between immediate targets and longer-term training needs. This study contributes to such debates, finding important differences between these teachers, dependent on their development as professionals: the newer teachers, with less than approximately 10 years in teaching, enacted what could be characterised as an outcomes-led approach to the curriculum-teaching nexus. On the whole, such teachers were afraid of making mistakes, were dependent on collaboration as a form of professional protection, and were deferent to the decisions of school leaders even though they were not sure of the curriculum decisions made or the impact of these on particular pupils (Brigg et al., 2016).

This is an important finding, since it also sheds light on the nature of individual teachers’ relationships with pupils and their propensity to explain behaviour in strictly pathologised terms, rather than regarding it as a result of the learning environment (Rees, 2017), which subsequently shapes the nature of future relationships. Poppes et al. (2016) discuss this issue in relation to how challenging behaviour might impede developing relationships, a critical point in PMLD contexts, where teachers already experience difficulty in their everyday practices and relationships without the added need to recognise that their practices are strongly a function of psycho-social beliefs. In contrast, the most experienced teachers had seen different schemes come and go, different reports emphasising various aspects of the PMLD education abandoned or adopted with equal ambivalence and confusion, and changes to initial and professional training, and were, in general, accepting of their own mistakes and the consequences of their decisions, and more open to discussing their
difficulties with parents of the children in their classes (Zaal-Schuller et al., 2016). For these teachers, collaboration was as important as it was for the novice teachers, but for reasons of continual learning and sharing, and their individuality was expressed in two ways: first, in the sense of seeing every pupil as a self-contained learning project in which the haphazardness of developmental pathways could be used as the starting point for a personalised teaching programme; and second, individuality was expressed as a form of secrecy, both to hide their work from the headteacher and also to be able to collude with parents in experimentation through practices that from the outside might look just too idiosyncratic and too far removed from ‘standard’ curriculum activities.

We might conclude from these findings that in light of the most recent developments in the education of pupils with PMLD, in the form of the Rochford Review and its responses, the curriculum is relatively unimportant when compared with the need to ensure that progress (whatever it looks like) is differentiated and the pedagogic practice of teachers is personalised to reflect the complex patterns of learning for this group of children. But this would be to misunderstand the power of the curriculum that each of the teachers in this study actually followed and how it affected their practice. Indeed, a ‘culture of faith’ (Simmons et al., 2008) did exist within the schools in this study, but mainly in relation to the staff feeling as if they were committed to their own pedagogic interpretation of the curriculum, in the face of such great diversity, both of pupil need and of the curriculum being followed. In this research, the curriculum appeared to shape the teachers’ practices in two ways. The first is that the nature of the curriculum followed meant that interactions with school leadership were imbued with particular views of pupil progress (Colley, 2018), which in most cases centred on outcomes and supposed fit with the majority of the pupils’ needs, despite the fact that the teachers expressed a variety of concerns about both distributed decision making and its impact on their schools (Gold, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000), as well as conflict with leadership. Second, the teachers in this study narrated multiple stories about their creativity and their ability to adapt the curriculum to very specific and personalised needs (Rees, 2017). Many teachers regarded this latter aspect of their practice as a positive virtue, and developed skill and knowledge over several years that enabled them to claim expertise within their practice. However, despite this, such innovation was frequently shut down or kept behind closed doors: for early career teachers, because they were confused as to the primacy of particular outcomes rather than individualised progress;
and for more experienced teachers, because despite which curriculum was being followed, they gave emphasis to the child’s holistic development and did this through any means possible, drawing on their acquired expertise over several years’ practice.

All these matters stand at the heart of who we – the researchers – are as educators, and ring true in our experience. Prior to this, both of us were high school teachers and we have taught in mainstream and special schools, working with children with severe learning difficulties, supported by teaching assistants with varying degrees of knowledge and expertise. But both of us are also mothers of children with profound, multiple and complex learning difficulties, with experience of the various impediments to and difficulties of inclusive mainstream, special and home education. In this context, but informed by our work in the university, we have experienced what it means to have faith in an education for one’s child when their needs are so diverse and so complex. In our visits to our children’s respective institutions – and there have been many, as we swapped, moved and changed their schools repeatedly, constantly searching for the holy grail of both responsive teaching and appropriate curricula – we have both thought deeply and critically about what it means to provide an education for children who, on the surface, are often perceived to have difficulty construing meaning and purpose in their lives. In particular, we have been struck by the creativity of teachers who have been determined to find solutions to our sons’ learning difficulties and, through means both miraculous and dogged, have succeeded in ensuring that they have made progress with even the smallest task. Likewise, we have both been dismayed and disheartened when some school leaders have informed us that as parents, we ‘don’t seem to be on-board with the new programme that we’re trying out’, yet at the same time, we have been told that we need to be aware that ‘there is only so much we can do with your son’s unique needs’.

Such experiences have frequently left us bewildered and disappointed. Our own research has made us acutely aware of policy shifts that have resulted in a duality of teacher education in England: mainstream teaching becoming more informed by inclusive educational theory, but special schools becoming increasingly isolated from policy discourse and curriculum development. Our own experience tells us that this is a partial and highly distorted picture however: we have become increasingly aware of the way that PMLD school curriculum provision has become a function of individual teacher agency and responsibility, with each teacher shaping
their practice by their own experience and by continually developing narrative accounts of the abilities and capabilities of the children in their class. Troublingly, however, this has led to what we have witnessed in our personal interactions with the teachers in this research – their selection of particular disciplinary content may not support the espoused and ostensible school curriculum; teaching approaches are often idiosyncratic; and pupil progress is highly uneven and unpredictable. In isolation, such a picture of PMLD education is unproblematic when teachers are critically educated, highly skilled, knowledgeable, motivated and, above all, accountable. But despite the Rochford Review and the planned changes to the assessment and curriculum in this field, this is still not the case for this part of the education system within England, and so the significance of research like ours over the next decade is even greater.

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