

Equality and Curriculum in Education

A Collection Of Invited Essays



Rose Dolan (Ed.)
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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
Rose Dolan	
Higher education policy in an economic recession and its impact on universities in the Republic of Ireland.	7
Marie Clarke	
Constructing Identities with Young People: Rethinking Educational Practice	21
Grace O’Grady	
Accessing the maths curriculum; applying psychological theory to help students with specific learning difficulties and with benefits for all.....	37
Maeve Daly	
Cultivating Transformations through Learning Experiences: Priorities in Continuing Professional Development	45
Pádraig Hogan & Anthony Malone	
Tapestry	54
Gary Granville	
Junctions and Disjunction in the Aims of Irish Education Policy	71
Tom Collins	

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Chapter 4

Cultivating Transformations through Learning Experiences: Priorities in Continuing Professional Development

Pádraig Hogan & Anthony Malone

In this contribution we would like review developments in the TL21 professional development programme for teachers in the last few years. Learning Anew, the final report on the TL21 project, was published in January 2008. The last chapter contained not a set of recommendations but a collection of “ideas worth considering” by all of the main parties in Irish post-primary education: teachers, school leaders, students, managerial bodies, schools inspectors, policymakers. These ideas, seven in total, were based on priorities for teachers’ CPD that came to define the project’s work during its active phase. Some of these were envisaged from the start in the project’s main aims. Others emerged during the course of the project’s intensive research phase (2003-07). All of them however became central concerns in the project’s developmental initiatives, and in the ongoing TL21 Professional Development Programme that was inaugurated following the completion of the intensive research phase. The seven priorities are:

1. Teachers as the authors of their own work
2. Students as active learners
3. Teachers as a strategic national resource
4. School leadership and the demands of administration
5. Providing for different categories of need in continuing professional development
6. CPD as integral as distinct from an ‘add-on’
7. Accreditation for CPD

The TL21 Programme is currently working in partnership with five Education Centres – Co. Wexford, Kilkenny, Laois, Monaghan, Sligo – and with Dublin & Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board. This involves a total of 35 post-primary schools. In each of these regions teachers from participating schools in the region attend CPD workshops on five or so occasions per year over a two-year period. Accreditation is provided for all the teachers by the Education Centre or ETB. In addition there is an optional university accreditation path provided by NUI Maynooth leading to an M.Ed. in Innovative Learning. All of the participating teachers carry out some action research exercises on their own practice but those

following the university accreditation path undertake more intensive action research for their assignments and theses.

Here we will select each of the seven priorities in turn, comment on how it is faring in the programme's work and identify some issues that we continue to grapple with in our efforts to make headway.

TEACHERS AS THE AUTHORS OF THEIR OWN WORK

After an initially unpromising start, in the wake of an acrimonious industrial dispute, the early experience of the project in 2003 disclosed a more encouraging vista. This early insight was that once initially successful inroads are made on the insulation and isolation of teachers in Irish post-primary schools, some exciting if also challenging possibilities open up. Inherited attitudes that cast teachers in a conformist role are often sustained by teachers themselves, and are reproduced by practices that are deeply lodged in school cultures. We felt that tackling such attitudes head-on would in all likelihood lead to defensiveness and conflict. Workshops that take teachers out of their schools however proved from the beginning to be particularly helpful here. They provided the teachers with a hospitable climate to discuss issues in their pedagogical practice with previously unknown colleagues on a recurrent basis.

Such workshops are now a mainstay of the TL21 programme and they are organised and monitored as a developmental series in each centre by a co-ordinator who works closely with the Centre Director. As these workshops proceed bigger issues can enter the discussions and most participants reveal substantial advances in their capability to deal with them. Such enhanced capability can be exercised back in the teachers' own schools in at least two crucial ways. Firstly, within their own classrooms, perhaps initially with certain selected classes, teachers begin to introduce innovations that promote more active involvement by the students in learning. The effects of these innovations are monitored so that the teacher can give a telling account (to himself/herself and to colleagues) of what has worked, what hasn't, and why. Secondly, teachers can also exercise their enhanced capability by endeavouring to strengthen subject teams or departments, and by contributing to such meetings in ways that they wouldn't have ventured to do previously. It is particularly important that the school leadership overtly promotes action on both these fronts. In addition to the encouragement such support gives to teachers, it also sends messages to the school as a whole that words alone couldn't do.

There is also a more advanced sense in which teachers can become the authors of their own work. This is when the focus is placed more on whole-school issues than on the work of an individual teacher or subject team. Our experience with the schools shows that it takes longer to cultivate this more advanced capability. It also reveals that this cultivation calls for nothing so much as an intensifying and broadening of the kinds of co-operative practices that are

important to get underway from the start. Increasingly however, the location for cultivating this more advanced capability becomes not just the workshop, but also the school. Significant here are informal and more structured exchanges between teachers, whether through critical-friendly deliberations in schools or in local professional development networks. This work of cultivation professional learning communities in an unforced way, whether in-house or at-a-distance, enhances the kinds of capacities that are needed among teachers if policy initiatives like School Self-Evaluation are to become embedded in professional practice and prove really fruitful (DuFour 2004; Hord 2009).

STUDENTS AS ACTIVE LEARNERS

The range of pedagogical approaches introduced in the workshops in the TL21 programme – many from the assessment for learning family – have shown themselves to be productive in tackling boredom and low motivation among students. Yearly evaluations by the participating teachers show that encouraging advances are made not only in students’ achievements in learning but also in students’ attitudes towards learning and in their actual practices of learning. In making these evaluations more searching we have adapted Thomas Guskey’s five-level evaluation strategy (Guskey 2002) to try to capture the quality of learning, not just the effectiveness of teaching. In their evaluations teachers characteristically acknowledge that they have been agreeably surprised by students’ willingness to share more of the burden of work in the classroom, and to follow through with more sustained efforts in their homework. This kind of surprise marks a welcome shift of perspective on the part of teachers themselves ; a change of mindset – even a change of heart – that enables them to perceive things that they previously disregarded or overlooked. In short, it enables them to learn in new ways with their students.

A more active involvement by students in their own learning over a sustained period invariably leads to higher achievements in tests and examinations, and particularly so among students described as less academic. The point we wish to stress here is that such higher achievement is the natural product of something intrinsic, namely a higher quality of educational experience on the part of the students. Recent examples from the participating schools include: (a) how the judicious use of iPads transformed the learning environments in 1st year maths classes in a DEIS school, with regular discovery by the students themselves of apps with ingenious pedagogical potential; (b) how the use of a Problem-Based-Learning approach in science proved initially counter-productive but then yielded great advances in motivation and achievement among (c) how the sustained use of a comment-only marking system in English enhanced students’ engagement with texts and deepened their interest in a sustained way. As these examples show, this higher quality of learning experience should not be confused with the increases in marks and grades that are driven chiefly by extrinsic factors, such as pressures to compete for higher positions on league tables, including unofficial or unacknowledged league tables.

In some instances changes in the quality of students' learning have occurred in Leaving Certificate classes, as have increases in their examination achievements. This suggests that despite the pressures for conformity to older ways that spring from a centralised examination system, there are still opportunities for teachers to practice creative forms of learning, at least in some subjects, with their Leaving Certificate students. Notwithstanding this, many teachers remain reluctant to introduce innovations with examination classes. This is because of a strong belief that the examinations, and the points system for entry to higher education based on the Leaving Certificate, chiefly reward qualities like accurate recall and comprehension. While the points system is likely to remain with us for some time, efforts to reform the Certificate Examinations will continue, notwithstanding the recent rejection of the new Junior Cycle Framework by the post-primary teachers' unions. Feedback we continue to receive through the teachers' evaluations and comments, as well as the evidence from action research projects, gives us good reason to believe that if the Certificate Examinations were clearly seen to reward a wider range of accomplishments on the part of students, including those that flow from active learning approaches, the effects of the points system on schools would be far less constricting. In such circumstances, teachers generally would be much more likely to pursue active learning approaches with Leaving Certificate students.

TEACHERS AS A STRATEGIC NATIONAL RESOURCE

We continue to observe that the possibilities for enriching each student's personal development and for advancing a healthy community of learners are greatly enhanced where classrooms become environments of imaginative teaching and active participation by students. We also see that such gains move to a higher level and become more widely influential where collaboration between colleagues is successfully cultivated by school leaders. Such productive possibilities and gains are essentially concerned with the intrinsic benefits of education. Where they are fruitfully and widely pursued however, there are very considerable social, cultural and economic consequences; what we might call extrinsic benefits. To put it concisely, imaginative learning environments in schools and colleges are the nurseries for imaginative cultures of innovation in all walks of life and work.

An incisive grasp of this point is of first importance for post-industrial societies (i.e. societies where 'brawn-power' work, and even automated manufacture, is irreversibly declining in proportion to 'brain-power' work). Hence the appropriateness of viewing teachers as a resource of comparable significance for a 'knowledge society' to what reserves of mineral wealth were for an industrial society. We are touching here on an aspect of our work with teachers that we did not have in mind at the beginning of the TL21 project. In arguing now that teachers need to be seen as a strategic national resource however, we are keen to stress that we are not talking about entrepreneurship in education. Entrepreneurship is a concept whose proper home is the field of economics and business. Public education in a pluralist democracy is a practice in its own right. It has much to contribute to the fruitful and ethical

conduct of practices of business and economics, just as it has to cultural and social renewal and to personal development. But it is likely to lose its own soul whenever it succumbs to the demands of the currently stronger party; if it trades its former ecclesiastical masters for a more secular and mercenary set of masters.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND THE DEMANDS OF ADMINISTRATION

Unlike some earlier research and development projects with teachers in which the Maynooth Education Department was involved, a school leadership dimension has been central to the TL21 initiative from the beginning. In the early days of the project some school leaders who became involved were so busy with administrative work that they delegated to a post-holder the conduct of the school's participation in the project. This gave rise to anomalies, mainly because the project itself was in a key sense about leadership. Principals and Deputy Principals quickly saw that the centrality of leadership in this kind of project meant making important adjustments in their own working patterns; the kinds of adjustments that would allow their own and their schools' participation in the project to be whole-hearted. In all cases this was difficult to do, and in some cases very difficult, due not only to the quantity of demands, but also to the competing demands of school administration and educational leadership. It meant that some schools had to leave the project. More recently it has meant that some schools have been a bit reticent about joining the TL21 programme.

Legislation of recent years in Ireland has placed an unprecedented range of responsibilities on the school Principal, many of which are only secondarily connected with the quality of teaching and learning in the school. The international research literature on educational leadership, by contrast, emphasises repeatedly that building and sustaining high quality learning environments is the proper work of school leaders and that time spent on other actions should be continually reviewed in terms of the loss of time to their primary task (Lieberman & Miller 2004; Hargreaves & Fink 2006; Duignan 2007; Townsend & MacBeath 2011).

Leaders of schools participating in the TL21 programme continue to work with commendable perseverance against the administration tide. Despite losing many posts of responsibility they have used much ingenuity in finding time and opportunities to promote meaningful professional development activities in the school. This has frequently meant availing of Croke Park hours to enable themselves and their teachers to continue their participation in undertakings like the TL21 programme. The efforts involved in this are sometimes all-consuming however, and notwithstanding their fruits they can scarcely be recommended as good practice in any occupation.

In short, the job of school leaders, and specifically of Principals, has become difficult to the point of crisis in Irish post-primary schools; the essential crisis being the daily press of

administration that prevents or frustrates the exercise of specifically educational leadership. If educational leadership is to succeed as it should – and we have seen how well it can – then the bulk of this administration needs be undertaken by someone else, with the specific and necessary expertise. School leaders need the necessary time, support and opportunity to lead high-quality learning environments. We will return to this issue in our concluding remarks below.

DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF NEED IN CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Where CPD is concerned there is now a much greater awareness than a decade ago in educational circles of the need to distinguish between the needs of the system, the needs of the school and the needs of individual teachers. The drawing of such distinctions helps to clarify thinking in the designing coherent CPD policies. Reference to three different categories doesn't mean however that these are three insular domains, with no overlaps between them. Our experience with both the TL21 project and the TL21 programme suggests that it is more appropriate to speak here of a contrast of emphasis as distinct from separate domains. At first sight the CPD priorities of individual teachers might look very different from those envisaged for the educational system as a whole by the DES. Viewing each school as a professional learning community however provides a perspective where different sets of priorities can be viewed in their interaction with each other, while also acknowledging the features that are peculiar to each set.

Since the publication of *Learning Anew* there have been many developments in the field of teachers' CPD in Ireland, two of which are of particular significance. The first is the publication by the Teaching Council of its Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education in 2011. The second is the reconstitution of the Professional Development for Teachers (PDST) in 2012-13, to incorporate a number of former support agencies (incl. PPDS, SLSS, LDS), under a single umbrella organisation. A third development – in fact a two-fold one – is the reconceptualisation and expansion of initial teacher education programmes and the expansion of the national programme for the induction of teachers through the Teaching Council's Droichead initiative. Though neither of these is directly focused on CPD, each has major implications for how experienced teachers and beginning teachers engage with each other. Taken together, all of these developments are placing CPD for teachers in a new context, one which is as challenging as it is promising.

In an era where major importance is being given moreover to research-informed teacher education (European Commission 2012), developments like these are to be welcomed as ones that enable the energies of educational practitioners in a range of agencies to become more confluent and more productive. Regular contact with the national educational agencies –

support, managerial, regulatory and policy-making agencies, as well as teacher unions – has been a feature of the TL21 initiative since its planning stages over a decade ago. Such contacts continue to inform our work on the TL21 programme at present and in the emergent context we look forward to pursuing them in a new key in the period ahead.

CPD AS INTEGRAL AS DISTINCT FROM AN ‘ADD-ON’

During the early days of the TL21 project it was a common experience for us to hear teachers, and indeed some school principals, describe CPD as an “add-on” to an already very busy schedule of work. Work schedules have become even busier in the intervening decade, but few among Ireland’s educational practitioners are now likely to disagree with the description of CPD as “a right and a responsibility” in the Teaching Council’s Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education (p.19). Participants in the TL21 programme are prepared to come to workshops, for two to three hours outside of school time for a two-year period, for concentrated forms of CPD. Few if any of these teachers regard these workshops as an “add-on”, despite the fact that they are not included within their normal scheduled time in school. It is clear however that there isn’t enough time available in school schedules to accommodate the kinds of CPD necessary to sustain schools as professional learning communities. School leaders have been struggling to find ways in which forced measures such as the “Croke Park hours” can be turned to some productive CPD purposes and in some cases their ingenuity has paid rich dividends. In many schools however such ingenious efforts have become stillborn.

Where there is wide agreement in principle that CPD is an integral feature of a teacher’s practice and professional identity, this has important practical consequences, though it is likely to take some outside-the-box thinking for these to be worked out. Chief among these consequences is the necessity for a negotiated settlement that would enable provision for formal CPD to be accommodated at regular intervals in each school’s annual calendar. This has become standard practice in many countries, some of the more interesting ones being countries comparable to Ireland in population and resources. Many maintain that such a provision would mean a lengthening of the school year by some five or so days. Others argue that such days might be designated within the existing totals for the school year. Others still suggest some combination of both. For our own part we will confine ourselves to two comments on this issue. Firstly, it is important that a solution is found by negotiated agreement, as was the case in Scotland in the McCrone settlement of 2001. Where practitioners are coerced into accepting an “agreement” such as the Croke Park hours in much of the good that the extra time could bring risks being frustrated, sometimes even undermined for years. Secondly, the new context for CPD in Ireland referred to in paragraph 5 above provides fresh opportunities for learning from how other countries have resolved . For instance the paths leading to the McCrone settlement in Scotland would repay careful study. Even more interesting are the possibilities that lie in Finland’s “less in more” philosophy (Sahlberg 2011, p.41ff). It is well known that Finland’s school system enjoys an enviable

reputation internationally. Less well known is the fact that class contact time in its schools is amongst the lowest in OECD countries (ibid., p.64).

ACCREDITATION FOR CPD

We have referred in our introductory remarks to two forms of accreditation in the TL21 programme: a university route leading to an M.Ed. degree and a non-university route where itemised accreditation is provided by the Education Centres or ETB. While the university accreditation remains of central importance the fact also remains that it involves participants in scholarly disciplines that include serious and sustained reading, and the production of significant quantities of writing. This means that it is taken up by a minority rather than a majority of the participants – up to 20%, but rarely more than that. Our experience with the accreditation aspect of the programme continues to highlight the desirability of non-university as well as university forms of accreditation for CPD activities.

The Teaching Council's Policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education makes reference to teachers inaugurating a professional development portfolio during their initial teacher education and building upon this as they progress through their careers (p.11). Such a policy can work as a welcome support for a teacher's enduring commitment to CPD as a form of professional growth. In this connection non-university accreditation provided in electronic form by Education Centres, ETBs and other agencies could be a key way of developing one's CPD portfolio incrementally, allowing for more advanced as well as more rudimentary kinds of development. From another perspective however, the maintenance of such a portfolio could be seen as a bureaucratic requirement, enforced by a powerful body, for the renewal of one's licence to practice as a teacher. Were the portfolio idea to be implemented in today's circumstances it is likely that the latter perspective would be more prominent among teachers than the former. This indicates that there is much work for initiative like the TL21 programme to accomplish. We are happy to expand our involvement in this kind of work. It is clear that the work itself, and its expansion, are a necessity if Ireland's teachers are in an unambiguous sense if the TL 21 aims are to be achieved nationally: that the majority of Ireland's teachers become the authors of their own work and that the majority of students in our schools and college become truly active and responsible participants in their own education.

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