Focus group analysis of "Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in Northern Ireland (NI)" Proposals

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Introduction

<u>Purpose of the Research</u>

The background to the project was set out by the Department of Education in its project specification:

1. The Department of Education's (DE) Teacher Education Team (TET), in association with educational partners in Northern Ireland, is responsible for the implementation of DE's Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) Strategy, "<u>Learning Leaders</u>".

2. The Strategy sets out the Department's vision for teacher professional learning as "*Every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people".* Published in 2016, the aim of the Strategy is to empower the teaching profession to strengthen its professionalism and expertise to meet the challenging educational needs of young people in the 21st century.

3. In essence, the Strategy envisages that teachers determine their own continued professional learning throughout their career as the agent of their own improvement. TPL is not something to be 'done to', but is best when based on an individual's understanding of their personal needs, in the context of their learners, the school and the community in which they work.

4. A proposals paper entitled "***Teacher Professional Learning in Northern Ireland***" summarised the development work carried out by three working groups[1] during 2019-20, and was approved by the Learning Leaders Oversight Group[2] for use in discussions with targeted Focus Groups in the education sector. An associated aide memoire / poster has also been produced (see **Appendix 1**).

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[1] Leadership Competences Advisory Group, Induction and Early Professional Development Sub-group, and Development of Standards for TPL Sub-group.
[2] The Oversight Group is made up of key representatives from DE, the Education Authority (EA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers NI (UCETNI), as well as a number of practitioners.

Methodology

The Department of Education wished to undertake Focus Group work to ascertain initial feedback on the **Teacher Professional Learning in Northern Ireland** proposals paper and the associated Aide Memoire before full consultation takes place. Focus group participants were provided with these documents in advance and also given a link to a short video setting the context for the development of the proposals.

The research team were required:
- to devise, in conjunction with UCETNI, the HEIs and the Department, a set of questions to be used at these meetings;
- to record the feedback provided by attendees;
- to analyse the comments provided at the meetings; and
- produce a summary report on the Focus Group findings.

The research team, working on behalf of UCETNI, was drawn from Ulster University and Stranmillis University College. They met with DE representatives on a number of occasions to clarify requirements.

At the outset a list of questions relevant to each target group was proposed and agreed with DE before the focus groups commenced. These are attached as Appendix 2.

Institutional ethical approval was secured before the research commenced and appropriate consent given by each participant. The Department of Education had already organised some focus groups and provided contact details for other focus group facilitators.

In total, seven focus groups involving 53 participants were completed with student teachers; early career teachers; employing authorities; teacher educators; governors; and teaching unions. A focus group was arranged for School Principals but unfortunately none attended. A separate cohort of principals were identified and contacted twice regarding a rescheduled focus group, but the research team did not receive a response to either email. Therefore, it was not possible to include the opinions and perspectives of Principals in this report.

Table 1: Overview of Focus Group Participants

14/03/2022	Teacher Educators	8
31/03/2022	Student Teachers	5
04/04/2022	Employing Authorities	11
07/04/2022	Student Teachers	2
12/04/2022	Teaching Tutors	9

13/04/2022	Early Career Teachers	9
14/04/2022	Teaching Unions	4
28/04/2022	Governors	5
03/05/2022	Principals	0

Due to the time-bound nature of this study and therefore reasons of efficiency, the research team decided from the onset to liaise directly with contacts provided by the Department of Education (DE). However, not having direct communication with participants and being reliant on a third party contact, did present some difficulties and delays.

Results

Thematic Review

Thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts identified the following themes and each will be discussed in turn under the headings of content, concerns, suggested additions, questions raised by participants, design and implementation. Recommendations will then be made based on these findings.

Content

Time and again within the focus groups the documents under review were described as positive, ambitious, "a welcome document" and aspirational.

> *"I love the vision of it. I love the aspirational nature and I love the fact that this could start your initial training as an undergraduate, and continue with you right throughout your career, and track your whole learning journey. I just think that's a great idea".*

> *"I like the ambition of the document, in a sense that there is an attempt to see a bigger picture in relation to the development of the competence of teachers, not just an initial teacher education phase, but right through to senior, senior learning leaders…."*

> "*I like the positivity of it and the ambition of it*".

It was voiced that currently there was a "hole" in relation to TPL and therefore the ambition of this document was welcomed:

> *"…for people who are maybe aspirationally looking towards school leadership or for people who are school leaders in developing themselves. There's such a huge hole there. And I like the ambition of this".*

The centrality and promotion of ethos in the document was commended by those in the Employing Authorities Focus Group.

> *"I think it's coming back centre stage, I think it's very appropriate and important that it is centre stage, that is one of the three domains that we're referring to there".*
> *"So the lens, if you like, I think really helps us to promote the importance of ethos within the whole process".*

Ethos was described within this group as follows:

> *"ethos is where it is, ethos is your raison d'etre, it's the heartbeat of the school. So key, so I do think that's absolutely crucial".*

The sense of self-determination for teachers enabling them to make choices about their professional learning and development was welcomed. Participants liked the "*large degree of flexibility*" offered: "*because of the flexibility and the ability to tailor it to that particular individual... it's not just a tick boxing exercise.*" They felt that the

different ways of interpreting the document were a strength and allowed different schools to "*put the meat on the bones for their particular setting.*"

Participants liked the values-led approach and repeatedly commended the concise nature of the document. The reduction of the competences to twelve was welcomed by some, who felt this made it more achievable as a focus; "*[a] pretty cumbersome 27 down to… 12. That's a lot more manageable.*"

Representatives of one Employing Authority commented that the competences outlined fitted with what they had adopted for the appointment of principals and vice principals- "a new competency-based recruitment scheme".

> *"…the domains of the competences both are well reflected within the new competency-based recruitment scheme that (we) have adopted for the appointment of principals and vice principals. So very much speaking as an employing authority… those competences chime with what we have in place within that new recruitment scheme".*

Student Teachers liked the competences being broken down into four broad ones as they felt this was easier to understand because *"you get bogged down by so many different ones where (here) it's just … four strict main ones and it's broken down - it's easier once you understand. I thought that was very, very easily digestible".* The breakdown of competences into four areas was also welcomed by student teachers as being less overwhelming:

> *"But if you looked at (previous competences)… you didn't know what to focus on. Whereas… it's (now) separated into four areas, and you can … focus on one in each just to get you started and then you can start developing your competences, as a whole. But I think it's laid out in a way that you know what your expectations are, and those subsections as well kind of lay out the expectations in a better way that you're not trying to fulfil 27 competences, but rather four key areas, which also helps, I think, with the stress that will come with starting your teaching career,…you're setting your expectations, and then the expectations of the education authority as well".*

The strong emphasis on continuum was recognised as following on from the '2016 'Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning'. On the whole we experienced that some participants felt more familiar with the *Learning Leaders* strategy than others; most participants agreed that "*not many [people] will necessarily be aware of [the strategy].*"

The core principles of Choice, Continuity and Collaborations were positively received and their easy to remember nature commented upon.

> *"…thought that was good, it's just it's easy to remember for one thing, and easy to have those core principles".*

Student Teachers and other participants welcomed collaboration and mentoring continuing outside of teacher education.

> *"I thought that's quite nice to (have) everyone …collaborating together. And I like the idea of …more mature teachers or teachers that have been in the*

profession longer helping along, teachers that are either training or they're newly qualified. So I like that because I'm on placement at the minute and I know it's quite nice having someone there to give you a bit of help, to give you a bit of guidance. And I think that's beneficial even as you start into teaching. And you get a bit more of an idea of the everyday running of things when you're there every single day".

Participants liked the efficiency of e-portfolio's and having an online journal: "*with keeping a lever arch file and bits and bobs and photos and documents... you just end up with piles of paper everywhere... [an online journal] is so handy for people just in terms of organisation.*"

It was also commented that the online journal could be an encouragement to teachers;

> *"…in the busyness of being a teacher and working in school, you've maybe done some piece of work on something to do with autism, and you implement some of those things, and then you move on, and you forget that you ever did it. And … the learning that you had has just become part of your practice, because you forget that you ever have the training process. So I like the idea of an ongoing sort of profile of yourself that you can amend and add to. And I think that, you know, if I was to sit now, and look back through my career and see all of that stuff… it will be really encouraging. And …it might actually rekindle things for me that I might want to go back and revisit again. I think that's a great idea".*

Teacher Tutors were keen to know how they would be affected by the proposal and felt that further information was needed regarding their role in light of the TPL proposal. They expressed uncertainty about their role in the context of the TPL proposal: "*I would like to see the role of the teacher tutor specifically addressed within the TPL [because] the role is not mentioned.*"

It was suggested that developing this TPL plan could help Northern Ireland with teacher retention:

> *"…we have young teachers who are being trained, and who are going off elsewhere, because the money they're getting, the experience they're getting, and the training that they're getting. And if we're not providing all of that here, we're not going to retain them. And that's not what we want, because we've always had really good teachers in Northern Ireland, and we want to retain that".*

<u>Concerns</u>

On the subject of continuum, teacher educators felt teachers should be supported to look at competences in depth, without going into a management position. It was raised by a teacher educator that they thought this document was about *"a set of stepping stones a set of, you know, stairs to climb to get to a particular, pinnacle, and actually that pinnacle can be in your classroom".*

> *"We need to be able to encourage people to be the best practitioners that they can be, and then have a mechanism around them of support so that they can look at certain competences, but they can go deeper and deeper and deeper throughout their career without necessarily going up a ladder".*

Regarding the language of leadership, it was felt that by focusing on being leaders the document missed the opportunity to acknowledge different phases such as that of a student teacher and in not doing so it risks undervaluing their experience.

> *"I think sometimes we use the language of leadership, because it's almost kind of the norm in today's society, that everybody has to be leading something. And certainly, I think we see that with our students, there's this kind of an activist mentality and mindset, but I do think there's something around putting a huge amount of value on starting out on beginning on learning as you go. …But I think we're missing an opportunity if we don't acknowledge the different phases, and that we don't undervalue the experience of the student teacher, or the NQT or the beginning teacher, because actually, I think they bring something really (of) incredible value to the whole school ecosystem."*

It was suggested by teacher educators that the expectation that new teachers are expected "*to be leading from almost day one*" wasn't "*doing them a lot of favours*".

> *"But I'm not sure that we're doing them a lot of favours, if we set them up from the start…there's an expectation that they have to be leading almost from day one. And that can be confusing and maybe a little bit… demoralizing for some…How do we build recognition through the different roles that individuals will play, particularly student teachers and newly qualified or beginning teachers (and) add value to that… as well as placing so much value on leadership?"*

Teacher educators thought the domains of leadership displayed on the Aide Memoire showed "*a reductive view of what teachers do*" - that "*everything's reduced to leadership*".

> *"…in the picture that (is) supplied, the poster, under the domains of leadership is the phrase this refers to what teachers do. And actually if domains of leadership is what teachers do, then it seems to me that leading learning, leading ethos and leading improvement is quite a reductive view of what teachers do. I mean, yes, of course, they do all those things, but they do a hell of a lot more, …the leadership language…suggests a bit of a poverty of imagination, to be honest at that point. So I would like to see… if this is going work with student teachers that….it needs to be opened up and extended and*

expanded a bit, with a little bit more ambition and imagination around that language".

The Aide Memoire was seen as helpful however it was emphasised that in order for it to work the corresponding document would need to be properly understood:

"The Aide Memoire is fine for us (teacher educators) but I think there will need to be a real deep understanding of the document for the Aide Memoire to be of use in schools".

The feeling was highlighted that the power of coaching has been lost in this document compared to what came before in the Learning Leaders document.

"…when they go to section seven, they talk about the entitlement to mentorship for all teachers. And I feel that the teachers should have access to mentoring support at all stages of their career. I think that they have missed a trick…they haven't acknowledged the power of coaching and that developmental continuum. And it was highlighted in the first-person direct variation of learning leaders, and I feel it's lost here".

On the subject of values, concern was raised at the absence of the terms *"quality and excellence"*, it was felt that *"there's a lot about support, but there's not a lot about challenging people to be their best. And I would really like to see a greater emphasis on challenging teachers and us challenging each other as teachers".*

It was raised that some of the document's language emphasised *"…a bit of a "provide and consume" approach to teacher professional learning…we do not want to provide and consume. We want teachers and educators all involved in their own exploration, alongside experts, with experts with each other with the children with the learners".*

The general comment made in relation to the language of the document was that it was *"just a little bit maybe dry for me"* and *"maybe lacking in terms of creativity, curiosity".*

Some participants felt that the proposal did not adequately reflect the diverse nature of early-career teaching and argued that it would be preferable to have a tailored practice for each individual setting: "*not all support is going to be relevant.*" The early career teachers felt this was especially true for people in their position: "*we haven't got permanent jobs yet [and] one school's interpretation of it might be different to another school's.*" This focus group concluded that clarity was needed, particularly regarding how it would affect them as early career teachers: "*it's like yes, I want career development, but you can't get career development when you've got no job.*"

In terms of the content of the TPL proposal, some participants felt that the standards were "*unrealistic*": "*it's very difficult to push for development when I don't have the ability to stay in that school for four years and see it through or have the authority to try and see it through.*" This sentiment was echoed by the other participants on temporary contracts: "*how can I go up to my line manager and say I want to spend time on professional development... it's impossible even to go and ask for that time because that would then put a strain on them... they may not even have the staff available.*" They felt this was particularly true in the post-pandemic context, since

teachers were already learning new skills, such as the online learning platforms: "*there's just so much going on... this big strategic 'eye' isn't going to fly with us right now.*"

In terms of the concepts and ideas outlined, participants felt that the TPL proposals provided the opportunity for "*beginning teachers*" to develop a reflective practice, but felt that there needed to be "*something similar*" for teachers with more experience: "*We need to have these purposes for induction teachers and a different purpose for EP1 and a different purpose for EP2 and so on.*" They felt clarity was needed for where the process fitted in terms of the teacher's career path: "*How does that affect our processing of induction, EPD1, EPD2.*" Participants also suggested that the resources should be made available for substitute teachers and for teachers in temporary positions.

Participants were apprehensive about the reflective practice becoming "*something that is just gonna get added on to a list of exercises that we feel that we just need to tick a box... It's a nice idea but... it feels more like we've got a gimmick.*" The participants also expressed concerns that the requirements of the proposals would cause anxiety for early career teachers involved: "*there will be a lot of teachers that could be caused further anxiety and feel pressure [that they] just have to complete it and fear of not progressing at the pay scale or being dismissed because they haven't completed it.*"

Participants from the Irish Medium School Sector expressed concern about being able to deliver TPL properly, they explained that:

> "*…for us to deliver this properly, we are very concerned, so most of our TPL is delivered right after school. And we are not able to release teachers to participate in any further aspects of TPL because there simply is no substitute to cover there …. we basically can't even get a teacher out even for one day, one day TPL training and we're looking to get the coordinators into schools but it just can't happen. We would have the funding there but we just can't get these teachers out*".

The Irish Medium School Sector also requested that the aide-memoire be available in Irish so that it can be displayed in classrooms in line with their "whole immersion ethos".

> "*I suppose from our point of view, in the Irish medium sector, just to make that available in Irish would be great, because I envisage this as something that would be visible within classrooms, within staff rooms, something that teachers will be displaying. And just for that whole immersion ethos, you know, we try to have as much as possible displayed in Irish for our staff and our pupils, so and also with their working through the medium of Irish and gathering their evidence and doing all of that, it's difficult then to have to kind of translate between the two so*".

Participants disagreed about the content of the proposals. Some participants felt that "*a bit more meat on the bones*" was needed, particularly regarding the competences. Teacher educators felt that this was an overview document and required further details especially around competences and how they can use them to guide the student teachers work in schools.

"…when it comes to the use of competences, I very much appreciate that there's been a reduction to 12 and 27. But looking at it I kept thinking to myself, how can you implement them evidence based? …But looking at the detail, it's not there yet and it's very hard to see how some of those follow through into action, you know, again, I'm thinking about we're using competences to work out what we're getting students to do in schools. …. there was not enough clarity around the competences…just need to see further details".

There was also a fear that the lack of detail regarding competences could lead to student complaints and appeals.

"…in relation to the competences as well, I could see lots of difficulties, I could see huge numbers of student complaints, appeals and everything coming in, if we were to use that in any way to assess work at university level. So I've seen lots of problems around that".

It was felt that the competence statements didn't relate to the continuity necessary in other aspects of the document.

"I think on the whole with the competence statements, they don't seem to speak to the continuity that's required in other parts of the document. So there's this idea of moving from a learning leader to middle to senior, but that's not reflected in this document, again, in the original GTCNI document, those phases were there, but they're not here. And I think we need to acknowledge there's a difference between novice and expert that needs to be reflected here in different styles of competence statements for different audiences. And I also think, for that reason, there's also how what… how highly likely are they used to be used by middle management if they don't speak specifically to middle management?"

As anticipated in the Project Specification, during the focus groups, comments and concerns were voiced concerning resourcing, implementation and support. In these instances, the focus group facilitator advised that these issues were to be addressed in the full consultation stage.

Suggested Additions

Participants acknowledged that this was a draft document however they believed that supplementary to what has already been mentioned above, the document required the following additions:

1. A foreword *"to clearly summarize the purpose of the document…how schools can use it"*.
2. A *"clear"* definition of what effective TPL is – *"it was touched upon at various points in the document, but I think up front and centre at the beginning, would be a good idea"*.
3. A definition of professional learning communities.
4. An explanation about the "outworking" of the word 'coherence'- *"how do we demonstrate coherence?"*
5. *"Professional Mission"* was described in several focus group as being given prominence but not defined/explained.
   "…the other issue I had was around the professional mission and that isn't defined... that needs to be given careful attention and developed and explained for me".
6. Acknowledgement/recognition of the importance of informal mentoring and informal learning experiences.
   "…put a note or addition, somewhere, I do think we should be acknowledging that there are lots of opportunities for those informal learning experiences or input mentoring coaching, I'm just wondering how formal we want to be in terms of some of the language particularly around mentoring and coaching…. I would hate people to feel that the things that they're already doing, … in terms of mentoring and supporting and equipping our student teachers or our early career teachers somehow need to fit into some stylized, formalized program for them to have value…maybe recognize the importance of informal mentoring and coaching opportunities with colleagues".
7. The inclusion of and emphasis on health and wellbeing in the document:
   "…in terms of wellbeing. That to me just didn't come across really, as something that I think increasingly is a priority, right across our schools in our sector… I do think it's a big, big piece of what we're doing both in terms of the workforce themselves and their health and wellbeing, and practicing from a place of resilience and strength, but also, then that being something that we're trying to embed into our practice".
   "so I'd like to see more, maybe emphasize emotional health and wellbeing in there, I don't see anything about that".
8. Reference made to the pupil voice:
   "I'd like to see something that mentions pupil voice, I don't see anything about that either".
9. A teacher educator commented that the word "know" was missing and they would like to see it included, they also felt that the document contained key words that they would like made more of.
   "I mean, there's some very obvious words that are missing that I really would struggle to let go of…I'd love to see KNOW in there, …surely a key aspect. Or … where is assess … where is classroom management? There are some key words in terms of what we do and have to focus on, particularly in ITE, that we

need to be able to draw the attention of students to those as highlights. And I know a lot of those are … embedded in the language in the last column, but I'd love to see them have a little bit more".

10. A request was made for teachers who do not want to go into a management position but stay in the classroom to "have the capacity to be rewarded" included in this document.
"…let's say teachers that want to remain in the classroom, they want to go through their career in the classroom, they don't want to necessarily go into leadership management, that they have the capacity to be rewarded. And we keep that expertise in the classroom, I would like to see that reflected in this document as well. You know, there is this inherent notion in education that you know you're succeeding if you go through the ranks and become a principal or become a vice-principal, or whatever. And actually, that couldn't be further from the truth".

Questions raised by participants

A number of questions were raised by participants in relation to the Teacher Professional Learning Document and the Aide Memoire (poster) as follows:

o What TPL is and what TPL is not.

"And I kept wanting to see a definition of TPL and maybe this is me, just being very black and white, X made reference to, you know, what TPL is? It's an obligation, yes, it's essential. Yes. But actually, what is it? And what is it not?"

o Why were those specific values included and not others? The use of "umbrella values" was suggested.

"…we seem to have gone to a very small number of values and I would like, if there are a very small number, underneath them a subset of values so that …something like social justice (which) speaks to fairness and equality or something like inclusion (which) speaks to, other values, below it, it in a more rich and expansive way."

o "How do we know these [competence statements] are going to work?" Before adoption, a time of piloting was thought to be of worth.
"…is there an opportunity to pilot them to road test them in some shape or form before we then set them in stone for the profession in Northern Ireland? So I think that process of testing would be helpful or piloting".

o "Where is the training going to come from?" Participants wanted to see "concrete plans" about the delivery.

o A query was raised over the references in the document to "programmes" and what this actually meant.
"And there were several references to programmes and maybe my definition of a programme might be different to what is envisaged here. …the word programme throws up …the idea of input, something that a provider … will put into a school in order to build knowledge…, but there doesn't seem to be any reference to how the forms and mechanisms of TPL need to be there in order to make it impactful".

o *A question was raised in relation to section 3.13 (page 13)* following the statement 'school principals and vice-principals must of necessity be regarded as Senior Learning leaders' (PAGE 17). The participant wondered: *"Does that make it exclusive to principals or vice-principals? Because I believe it's inclusive of, so when I read it first, and then I read it again, and I said this is open to debate, it's open to challenge".*

o If e-portfolios are to be used in the recruitment, promotion, accreditation processes, it was commented that it would need to be quality assured and the question was asked about who would do this.

o One focus group wanted to know if there would be an economic value associated with implementing the proposal: "i*t wasn't clear in reading the document how it would impact on the pay scale progression*."

Design

The early career teachers described the 'eye visual' as "*a bit big brother*," and criticised the design: "*it doesn't make sense*." They suggested using a telescope lens as an alternative: "*you have the increasingly smaller circles in which teachers are, you know, developing... as opposed to your principal is watching you, make sure you fulfil all these boxes*."

In contrast, the teacher tutors liked the learning leadership lens. They felt that the diagram was both clear and relevant: "*I think it's very clearly laid out, I think it's perfect*." One participant said it was "*much better*" than what they currently used. All of the teacher tutors said that they could see themselves using the lens as a tool to help to reflect and monitor on their own professional learning and development.

Some of the governors liked the lens diagram and felt that it was clear and straightforward to follow. However, one governor felt that the connotations of a link between the TPL and 'crying' could be seen as negative: "*I look at it and 'cries' stands out to me and I'm not sure that I like the connotation that teacher professional learning has reduced it to something with an eye that makes you cry*." Another governor mentioned that the diagram was "*very, very busy*," but they felt it made sense "w*hen you really delve down into it and listen to the videos or read the report*."

Representatives from the Employing Authorities were positive about the learning lens.

> "*I think the whole diagram and the idea behind it is very straightforward to try and ensure teachers and leaders will just latch on to and work with quite well".*

The Triangle Diagram on Page 7 was raised in the focus groups with Employing Authorities and Teacher Educators as being difficult to understand, even though they were in support of the 3 C's- Choice, Continuity and Collaboration.

> "*…about the diagram on page seven. Like others I like the three C's. I thought that was good. But the diagram to me doesn't really show how the three areas interrelate. And I just I'm not sure how I would use this*".
> "*…going back to the triangles, I appreciate the choice, continuity and collaboration but I don't understand how some of those link, I can understand some of the titles that are in there, but I'm unsure of how they will link*".
> "*…I'm looking at the teacher professional learning framework on page seven and I'm going to be appear very dense, I don't actually understand it but I'm not actually sure what they're trying to communicate you know*".
> "*…page seven is not clear at all and I felt that there were hints of things there that I was expecting to see taken up in the document, that weren't. Nice as it looks, isn't very helpful*".

It was commented that, in regard to the Aide Memoire section on continuum, the arrow symbols should be replaced by lines to reference that not all teachers want to end up in a management position.

"We (should) just have lines because (with arrows) it makes it look like this is where you go, and then you go there. And … ultimately, you want to end up in senior management when, you know, many people don't".

The running order of the document was identified as an area that should be reviewed:

"*I wasn't actually too sure about the whole running order of the different sections. Section three, and four worked very well together. But to me, I was into section two, and then I had three and four, and they worked well together. And then section five seemed to pick up on where section two had left. So just maybe some further thought given… to the running order maybe for the contents of Section Five into section three, and then you've got two and three together. And then it would be four and five together".*

It was suggested that moving the terminology annexe to the front of the document would improve the proposal's accessibility: "*it uses all of these terms throughout the whole booklet... and I didn't really know what they meant until I got to the very end*."

The design of the document was described as *"really colourful… and pleasant to read….some critter has spent a long-time formatting all of that and to make it look lovely".*

Implementation

How and when the document is launched was highlighted as important. Participants expressed hesitancy regarding the practicality of implementation: "*Unless there's time set aside... getting somebody to actually go and do it in their own time will be very difficult for principals.*" Participants recommended having landmarks throughout the teachers' professional career so that progression was evident and there was an incentive to participate: "*[currently] it seems there is no incentive to do it.*" Other participants agreed with this suggestion: "*There was a lot in [the proposal] that was excellent, I would just be working out a time frame budget to ensure that people had some cover days or time allocated to make this work.*" It was felt by some that if this was not done properly the Aide Memoire, for example could cause panic. However, if it were to be done well these proposals could bring back a sense of professionalism.

When asked whether they saw any issues in terms of implementation, Educating Authorities identified the need for an implementation strategy to be written and as such it was difficult to comment on;

> "*...this is a policy document. And there is aspirational language and concepts used, ... we need to get to the point where, how do we enable this to happen?*"
> "*I think there needs to be a whole implementation strategy written*".

The need was identified to ensure a common understanding of what the document is aiming for as well as identifying where it 'sits' with other policies, strategies etc.
> "*...there has to be a lot of work done around ensuring that we have a common understanding of what the document is aiming towards*".

> "*...looking at where the document sits with other things going on, other strategies and policies, where it sits with the inspectorate, where it sits with our school improvement strategy, where it sits with a fair start, oh, you know, all of those things, I think will be important going forward*".

Although participants agreed that time allocation was essential for implementing the proposal, they disagreed about how the implementation should look. One participant felt that there should be a stand-alone, independent assessment to ensure that the practices were being undertaken, whereas another felt that the nature of the proposal meant that it needed to be ongoing: "*it's not just 'come in, do an assessment and leave,' this is a continual all year-round process.*" Participants stressed the necessity of integrating reflective practice into the culture of the school: "*You can't just say to people... 'this is what we're doing,' it's going to take them a while to accept what's going on.*" The idea of requiring "*buy-in*" and creating an ethos of participation was repeatedly raised as an essential part of the implementation process, as well as the need for this to be a whole school approach. The need for a whole implementation strategy was emphasised encompassing 'buy in' from staff and departments, the promotion of shared understanding of the document, incentives for motivation with adequate time being allocated for the process.

The suggestion was made that teachers should be granted time in their schedules for TPL and that doing so would act as an encouragement for completion.

"I feel like teachers probably should be granted more space and time to be able to fulfil those things. And if there were times set aside in our schedules to be able to do it, then it would be great you know? Because it would be so beneficial as well. It's not just doing these things for the sake of doing them. You know, it'll benefit you but of course, your if there was a specific time set for you to do it, I think I'd be a lot more encouraged to be putting in a lot more effort to do it".

In order to aid implementation, and "*so teachers don't feel overwhelmed by it*", specific training was suggested to ensure "*clear understanding and interpretation of the framework. So all teachers are singing with the same hymn sheet, all leaders are singing from the same hymn sheet, and everybody knows what's expected*".

The concern was raised about mindset amongst teachers following Covid and the timeline of introducing these documents. It was felt that previous communications to the sector had not been *"well-choreographed"* and this has been detrimental.

"But I just have a concern that at the moment, …post COVID as well, when everybody (is) exhausted and … particularly principals and school leaders are just at the stage where if you sent anything more out to me, I am going to flip you know. I completely understand that because they're still dealing with teacher shortages and COVID absences and everything while everybody seems to think it's all changed. It's all still happening in schools. So…it really is a matter of how, and timing and everything else as well, because I do believe that it has huge potential and I don't want to see it sink?"

"And that's one of the mistakes, various parts of our system make frequently around communication of what could be good ideas. And then they just hit the fan you know, because their … release and all those things that are around it haven't been well choreographed basically".

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall the aspiration of the document was well received by all groups and they generally welcomed the focus on teacher professionalism and the reduction of the competences. However on the basis of the focus groups the following recommendations should be considered.

- Include within the proposals the idea of teachers being able to look at competences in depth without wanting to progress into a management position.

- The language around leadership should be revisited and a wider range of language used that is reflective of the full breadth of teaching responsibilities.

- Consideration should be given to the suggested additions and questions raised by focus group participants.

- Greater emphasis should be given within the proposals to challenge teachers and encourage teachers to challenge each other "to be their best".

- The language of the document should be reviewed and revised if necessary as a means to move away from a "provide and consume" model of TPL and encourage individual exploration.

- Clarity is needed on how these proposals can address the diverse nature of early career teaching, particularly in regard to when a teacher does not have a (permanent) job but wants to work on career development.

- Investigate the need for different reflective practices for more experienced teachers, substitutes and those on temporary contracts.

- Further consultation is advised with the Irish Medium School Sector regarding the specific language requirements required of the proposals and Aide Memoire.

- Further details are required around the competences and how they can be used to guide student teachers' work in schools and to assess their work at university level.

- Participants consistently commented that they did not understand or find the Triangle Diagram (page 7) helpful, therefore we would suggest a new diagram/illustration be formulated to explain the relationship between Choice, Continuity and Collaboration.

- The arrows contained in the Aide Memoire relating to Continuum should be replaced with lines as a way of reiterating that not all teachers wish to progress to management positions.

- The running order of the document should be reviewed and if necessary revised to ensure the sequence flows, for example, it was suggested that Section 5 could be included in Section 3.

- The Terminology Annex should be relocated to the beginning of the document to help aid the reader.

- An implantation strategy for the document needs to be formulated and it must clearly identify where the strategy "sits" with other policies and strategies. Special consideration has to be given to how and when the proposals are launched, especially following on from the impact on teachers of the pandemic. This should include training for teachers on the new strategy to minimise stress and to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what has been proposed.

- Clear descriptions should be provided for the responsibilities required of employees. It was felt that clarity regarding their roles in relation to the TPL proposals would be useful to ease anxiety regarding its implementation.

We would like to thank all participants in the study for their time in sharing their views.

Appendix 1
Teacher Professional Learning in Northern Ireland – Aide Memoire

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) in Northern Ireland

"Every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people"

Department of **Education**
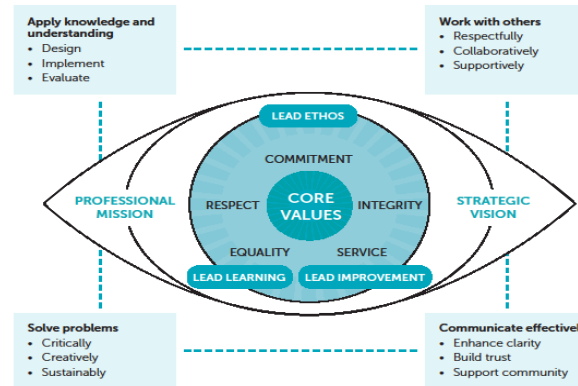www.education-ni.gov.uk

What is TPL?

Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is both a professional obligation and a personal commitment to continuous improvement.

Key Principles of TPL

CHOICE

1	Some PL linked to SDP	PL Research linked to reflective practice	Experiential learning	Online Space to record PL
Creating a balance between autonomy and accountability		Disseminate effective practice	Database of accredited opportunities	

LEADERSHIP & MENTORING

CONTINUITY

Credit for contributions	Facilitated by ITE tutor with seconded teacher	Research-based activities	All Early Career Teachers
	Thematic/ Subject Community of Practice	Online discussions, Conferences, Short courses	2 Improve continuity from ITE to career-long practice

LEADERSHIP & MENTORING

COLLABORATION

	Access to research	Seeking answers to classroom practice/ whole school questions	Bursaries for secondments to other schools/ HEIs and Sabbaticals	Research support by Teacher-Researchers in each ALC
3 Collaboration for research in-school and between schools		North-South and East-West collaboration projects between teachers/academics	Group and individual research collaborations	

LEADERSHIP & MENTORING

How is TPL developed?

The Learning Leadership Lens provides a framework through which TPL can be understood and developed.

Apply knowledge and understanding
- Design
- Implement
- Evaluate

Work with others
- Respectfully
- Collaboratively
- Supportively

LEAD ETHOS
COMMITMENT
PROFESSIONAL MISSION
RESPECT — CORE VALUES — INTEGRITY
STRATEGIC VISION
EQUALITY — SERVICE
LEAD LEARNING — LEAD IMPROVEMENT

Solve problems
- Critically
- Creatively
- Sustainably

Communicate effectively
- Enhance clarity
- Build trust
- Support community

The Leadership Continuum

Learning Leaders >>> Middle Learning Leaders >>> Senior Learning Leaders

Who should use the Leadership Lens and Competence Framework?

The Lens has particular relevance to teachers; to schools; to those involved with the education of teachers; and to employers of teachers.

Teachers
The Lens will enable teachers to:
- reflect upon and evaluate their professional effectiveness;
- make informed decisions about the priorities and direction of their own professional learning.

Schools
The Lens will enable schools, supported by their Governors, to:
- facilitate professional learning communities;
- develop school development and action plans;
- guide career progress through Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD).

Teacher educators
The Lens will enable teacher educators to:
- design quality, research-informed programmes;
- support teachers at all levels to develop their competence and capacity.

Employers
The Lens will enable employers to:
- design mechanisms for recruitment and promotion;
- support TPL at different points in a teacher's career.

How is TPL evaluated?

The effectiveness of any teacher professional learning provision will be evaluated against the following specific outcomes.

The TPL framework
Does it reflect the principles and practice of the TPL Framework?

The teacher
Does it develop teacher competence?

The learning
Does it promote self-determined professional learning?

The quality of provision
Does it contribute to effective self-evaluation?

LEARNING LEADERS
A Strategy For Teacher Professional Learning

@LearnLeadNI
LearningLeadersNI@education-ni.gov.uk

CORE VALUES
The emphasis on professional values (Commitment, Respect, Integrity, Equality and Service) must be the defining characteristic of teacher professionalism and authentic school leadership at all levels.

THE DOMAINS OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE
These may be conceived as 'what' teachers do – they lead Ethos, Learning and Improvement.

THE FOUR AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND THE KEY COMPETENCES
The competences explain 'How' and 'Why' teachers implement their practice.

THE PROFESSIONAL MISSION AND THE STRATEGIC VISION
Out of their personal, professional mission and the strategic vision for children and young people, teachers 'empower young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives' (Northern Ireland Curriculum).

THE LEADERSHIP CONTINUUM
The concept of the continuum allows professionals to develop at a pace relevant and appropriate to their needs while taking cognisance of both the challenges and opportunities they face in different contexts.

This aide-memoire is best understood having read the "Teacher Professional Learning in Northern Ireland" proposals document. Follow the QR Code to access this document.

Appendix 2: Questions for TPL in NI Focus Group

Essential Questions

1. (a) Is there anything that you particularly like about what is outlined in the TPL proposals and Poster?

     (b)Is there anything that you particularly dislike about what is outlined in the TPL proposals and Poster?

2. How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a teacher and to your school? (Perhaps adapt this question depending on which focus group is taking place?)

     (Alternative phrasings for each group:

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a **student teacher**?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a **Headteacher/school leader** with regard to supporting professional learning in your school?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as an **employing authority**?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a **teacher educator** with regard to supporting professional learning for your students?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as an **employing authority**?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a school **governor** with regard to supporting professional learning in your school?

     How applicable/relevant do you feel this strategy is to you as a **teaching union**?

3. Are the ideas in the Learning Leadership Lens clearly explained, particularly its relevance to teachers, schools and those who educate and employ teachers?

4. Can you see yourself using The Lens as a tool to help you reflect upon and monitor your own professional learning and development? If so, how? (only for relevant groups (teachers, principals –not unions, employing authorities or governors)

5. Do you see any issues in terms of implementation?

6. Is there anything that you think that is missing from the proposals or could have been done differently?

7. Is there anything else that you feel we should have discussed, or that you would like to say in relation to this document?

Desirable Questions

D1: What do you see as the implications of the three principles of Choice, Continuity and Collaboration to you as a headteacher / practicing teacher / student teacher etc..?

D2: How familiar are you with the 2016 document (and concepts contained in) Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning'?
(Use prompts if required)What do you understand by the term, 'teacher professional learning'? How do you think it might differ from CPD?)

D3: To what extent do you think the proposals create a cohesive approach for TPL?
Could this be developed further?

D4: Overall, do you feel that the concepts and ideas outlined are suitably developed to enable/allow for a full consultation across the education sector?