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Chartered Teacher Newsletter Review
(Issue 9, November 2007)

The role of whole-school contexts in shaping the experiences and outcomes associated with professional development

by Andrew Loxley, Keith Johnston, Damian Murchan, Helen Fitzgerald and Micheline Quinn *Trinity College Dublin*, UK

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With the introduction of a revised Primary School Curriculum in the Republic of Ireland, the Department of Education and Science (1999) introduced a national support programme for teachers, ultimately lasting seven years. This programme acknowledged the efficacy of continuing professional development (CPD) and employed it as a means to embed the changes in the Curriculum. The Primary Curriculum Support Programme (PCSP) was subsequently evaluated and one of the areas studied, the interaction between externally initiated professional development and the physical environment within the school, was discussed in the paper.

The study examines the in-service programme in relation to different school contexts (size, type, disadvantaged, status); collegiate ethos and leadership and middle-management structures in the school. A description and discussion of the evaluation is followed by an overview of the PCSP and the new primary curriculum. The discussion then explores the findings with regard to professional development and the school context, whilst the conclusion encompasses critical comment on both this model of CPD chosen by the Irish Government, and the wider arena of professional development.

The data for the study emerged from a large-scale, nationwide empirical investigation based on a mixed-method research design, which involved gathering and analysing both numeric and non-numeric data from a range of sources. These methods helped to provide representative views of the different stakeholders. Narrative information was used to add meaning to numeric data and, alternatively, numeric data added precision to the narrative discourse. The evidence is strong owing to convergence and corroboration of findings by different parties and it allowed for a broader range of research questions than if a single method had been used. It also increased the credibility and trustworthiness of the evaluation, and that of any inferences or recommendations that can be derived.

Data was collected by means of questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Direct observation of a small number of workshops, seminars and the work of advisory teachers was also undertaken but the number of these indicates that, in spite of the rigour of the analyses, care must be adopted in generalising from the findings.

Additionally, official documents such as committee minutes, workshop materials, and so on, were analysed, as was the PCSP web site.

One of the findings suggested the need for teachers to have ownership of the curriculum if successful change was to be effected. This involves acknowledging the need for practitioners to interpret policy for themselves rather than directly translating it. The findings also suggest that teachers were not autonomous in regard to their own professional development at the time of data collection, although the curriculum was not fully implemented at that stage and the programme of professional development was still under way.
It was also apparent that school principals (Head Teachers) are crucial in creating a climate that can promote or restrict change, yet separate training for principals was not a feature of the programme, despite many indicating that this was desirable.

An interesting issue emerging was that in the interests of consistency and fairness a script was devised for workshop leaders to use in their delivery. However, whilst providing consistency of approach, it possibly limited workshop leaders' ability to cater for individual school contexts. The interviews indicated that almost all workshop leaders claimed that they modified their delivery to effect appropriate differentiation, which perhaps highlights the different perceptions of those involved. Although time was allocated in the workshops for the purpose of reflecting on issues relevant to their own contexts, participants claim that this was insufficient in providing opportunity for differentiation. As a result, 75% rated courses as relevant while a number of participants had reservations, a factor which requires to be addressed if change is to be embraced successfully.

A clear point arising was that time allocated for planning, implementing and assimilating change was crucial to success. Important issues surrounding time were associated with teachers' perceptions of overload. Coupled with that was a recognition of the need to phase in curriculum and professional development over a relatively long period of time. Viewing the teaching year as comprising 12 months instead of the current 9 months or restructuring the school day to free up more time for the implementation of change were discussed as part of the project, but regarded as significant challenges for the education community.

Linda Harris
University Of Strathclyde
November, 2007