

Talking about teaching in non-crisis situations: learning from a teacher support project

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Abstract

Facilitating schools to develop more collaborative cultures is seen as one of the major challenges in promoting teachers' continuing professional development. This paper recounts how a 15 month project designed to promote greater collegial learning and professional development emerged and developed within one school. Evidence is presented that suggests that a model that is voluntary, involves teachers observing each others' classrooms and sharing insights is both effective and sustainable. Trust, supportive school leadership and external facilitation are also identified as important components in the realisation of this model of teacher development.

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Introduction

Policies and practices regarding the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers depend very much on how teachers' learning is conceptualized. Sugrue et al (2001), building on the work of Liebermann and McLaughlin (1999) identify a spectrum of perspectives where, at one extreme, "teachers are cast in the role of implementers of knowledge generated by experts and formulated by policy elites that they 'bring back' to schools and 'put into practice' in their daily routines". In contrast, teaching is seen as a craft (Huberman, 1992, p 136) that is responsive to the unpredictability of school life and the individual school is seen as a key site for individual teachers' CPD. (Hargreaves, 1992, Sugrue et al, 2001). A third view suggests that teachers' knowledge is both local and public simultaneously; context specific but also shaped by economic and socio-political agendas. (Sugrue et al p.29)

Advocates of greater teacher collaboration emphasise its potential to liberate teachers from a traditional isolationism that both restricts accountability and promotes individualism, uncertainty and conservatism (Lortie, 1975). Critically, such collegial conceptualizations of CPD tend to see teachers as constructors of knowledge, knowledge as very context specific and practice as in need of continual re-invention.

From a policy-making and implementing point of view, seeing teachers as implementers encourages a 'top down' perspective that holds many attractions, not least the possibility of devising in-service 'packages' that can be rolled out to large numbers of teachers. The effectiveness of such approaches is questionable and unproven. The 'messiness' of teacher development becomes evident when the focus shifts to individual teachers in their specific working contexts and when attempts are made to promote 'bottom-up' developments. Ideally, a comprehensive approach to CPD would enable all teachers to benefit from being exposed to new policy developments while at the same time offering

them regular opportunities to choose to work with colleagues where practitioner wisdom is the driving force.

This paper begins with a brief review of some recent trends in CPD policies in Ireland. It points to the importance of school-based CPD and then recounts how a group of teachers in one school engaged in a small-scale CPD project over a 15 month period. Through the lens of this particular project, the paper contends that similar, school-based initiatives in CPD have extensive potential to promote professional collaboration, boost morale and encourage a view of teacher learning that is ongoing and sustainable. Some of the policy shifts needed to make this effective are identified and discussed.

Context

When external examiners reviewed Irish national education policies over a decade and a half ago, one of their central contentions was that the education for a teaching career ‘should be continuing and not seen simply as a preparation for and introduction to it’. (OECD, 1999, p.91). Subsequently, the theme of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) has been a prominent one in policy documents. (e.g. Government of Ireland 1992, Coolahan 1994, Government of Ireland, 1995). Furthermore, new programmes of in-career development were developed and a significantly higher amount of money was allocated to such purposes (Egan, 2004, p.11). Managed by the In-Career Development Unit (ICDU) of the Department of Education and Science (DES), many of these initiatives in the 1990s were in support of curricular reforms and, while necessary and welcome, can be described as primarily ‘top-down’ developments, in support of national policies. Such programmes normally involved groups of teachers from clusters of schools spending time away from their workplaces, often in newly constructed, dedicated Education Centres, actively exploring new curricula and the implications for classroom practice.

The individual school as a site of teacher learning has not featured particularly strongly in recent developments. There are few accounts of specific, school-based and school originated initiatives in CPD. Cultures of individual teacher autonomy, lack of tradition,

the structure of the Irish school day and views of CPD as an optional add-on are among the factors frequently put forward as inhibiting such developments. (Callan, 1997, Sugrue et al, 2001)

International scholarship on CPD points to the importance of context, emphasising the values of teacher co-operation and collaboration in giving teachers access to new ideas, sustaining morale and assisting teachers to be more effective with their students. (e.g Hargreaves and Fullan, 1992, Fullan and Hargreaves, 1996). Such a perspective leads Liebermann and Millar (1999, p.62) to assert that

Professional learning is most powerful, long lasting, and sustainable when it occurs as a result of one's being a member of a group of colleagues who struggle together to plan for a given group of students, replacing the traditional isolation of teachers from one another.

There is some evidence of an emerging appreciation of the importance of the individual school as a locus for CPD, of seeing schools more as learning communities. For example, the 1998 Education Act states that, *inter alia*, the school principal is to

be responsible for the creation, together with the board, parents of students and the teachers, of a school environment which is supportive of learning among the students and which promotes the professional development of the teachers.

(Government of Ireland, 1998, 23, 2 (c))

The School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) 'which aims to stimulate and strengthen a culture of collaborative development planning in schools' (SDPI, 2003, p.7) can also be seen as a recognition of the importance of individual schools as sites of development. However, as the first national progress report (SDPI, 2002) noted regarding schools' initial encounters with SDPI, legal and operational issues tend to take precedence over teaching and learning ones. Thus, while obviously supportive of school-based teacher professional development, the SDPI initiative in itself seems unlikely to trigger new forms of CPD.

A recent DES perspective on teachers' CPD observes that a 'focus on supporting the individual school in addressing its developmental needs have potential for further

development' (Egan, 2004, p.18). This emphasis on 'communities of practice' (Sergiovanni, 1994) can be seen as supporting the concept of the teacher as 'reflective practitioner' (Schöen, 1983) and the idea that reflection 'in', 'on' and 'for' practice offer fruitful avenues for exploring teachers' tacit and explicit theories about classroom practices.

Against this background of an emerging appreciation of the individual school as a key site for CPD, this paper reports on one particular initiative.

The Project

The principal of a post-primary school in Dublin initiated this project. He invited a University Education Department to collaborate in developing a school-based project that would lead to improved learning for teachers and their students. Following discussions with a university staff member he agreed to invite teachers to participate in a project with two aims: firstly, to further develop a culture of teacher professional collaboration and support within the school; secondly, to attempt to implement a model of teacher support that was voluntary, focused on sharing insights into classroom practice, teacher driven, self-sustaining and transferable to other situations. The role of university staff member was to act as facilitator to the project.

The heart of the project involved groups of teachers volunteering to visit each other's classrooms and then to discuss what had been observed in a spirit of openness and mutual trust. The volunteers worked in pairs. Looking at, reflecting on, and self-evaluating one's own teaching with a view to improving one's practice was the central focus of the project.

A basic premise of this initiative was that new insights and understandings about teaching in a school can emerge when teachers in that school talk to each other about teaching and learning (Jeffers, 2006). Such professional conversations should contribute significantly to a greater spirit of co-operation and collaboration among staff. While greatly dependent

on teachers' own engagement with the process, this project involved two distinct but complementary features:

- Teachers volunteer and then commit to the process of working with a partner teacher. This involves visiting the partner's classroom, being visited in one's own classroom and then the partners subsequently discussing what has been observed.
- Participants also commit to working with the wider group¹ in a workshop format, sharing insights and being open to other developments that the group might suggest e.g. diary-keeping. These group meetings would be facilitated both off-site- on the university campus - and on-site - in the school.

Both features, the pairs of teachers observing each others' classes and the workshops, involved some adjustments on the part of the school leadership to participants' teaching timetables, so that the project was firmly embedded within the school structure rather than being a mere 'add-on' activity.

Methodology

From the outset the facilitator (and author of this paper) placed an emphasis on his role as an outside voice who was there to listen, to pose questions of clarification and, if necessary, to maintain the broad focus on reflection on classroom practice. He also drew attention to values of listening, confidentiality, respect, equality, safety and participation within the group process (Prendiville, 2004). He suggested that the primary learning within the group was likely to come from the participants making sense of their own personal experiences of classrooms rather than from any external source.

The facilitator indicated to participants from the beginning that he was interested in reporting on the project to a wider audience. The project was an action research one, that is 'a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such an intervention' (Cohen and Mannion and Morrison, p. 226).

¹ In this particular project 'the wider group' or the 'forum' was made up of the ten participating teachers, the school principal and the external facilitator.

Critically, the project had a collaborative dimension and can be seen as including many of the strands of action research set out in the following all-encompassing definition:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their own understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.... The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realize that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1998 quoted in Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2000, p.227)

The group decided that discussions would not be recorded and that individual comments used in the report would not be attributed. Data for this paper is drawn from the facilitator's observations of the process, from participants' written comments and from interviews. At two stages during the 15 month process participants were invited to respond in writing to brief questionnaires. These were followed by individual interviews where additional observations were recorded. At each stage, recorded comments were checked and approved for use by the participants.

Participants' comments were grouped thematically and an analysis of these led to the various sub-hearings that are used in this paper.

An account of the project was drafted and circulated to each participant and revised in the light of his or her comments². This account was subsequently adjusted in the light of peer review suggestions. The author acknowledges the

² The initial account had kept the name of the school anonymous. Participants subsequently requested that the school's actual name be used. This suggestion seems consistent with a perspective that emphasizes the importance of school context. It also reflects a view that, given the relative smallness of the Irish educational community, the school might be recognized anyway!

The school is Collinstown Park Community College, a second-level school in West Dublin catering typically for 12-19 year olds. The school is designated 'disadvantaged' and located in a suburban area of severe social deprivation. The school was established over twenty years ago and has been proactive in offering varied, relevant and alternative programmes and initiatives to the community it serves. Currently 636 day students are enrolled in the school. There are also 61 adults attending full-time day courses and a further 90 attending night classes on a part-time basis. In the school year 2003-04 the full-time and part-time teaching staff totalled 75 teachers.

engagement of the teachers and school leadership in the process and their contribution to this paper.

Beginning the process

Ten teachers, in five self-selected pairs, the Principal and the facilitator attended the initial meeting in March 2003. Those who volunteered were all experienced teachers, some with more than twenty years' classroom experience. From the outset the emphasis was on finding 'a partner with whom you would be comfortable observing you in your classroom', rather than on any subject affinities. Of the five pairs, one involved two teachers who described their main subject as Irish. Another pairing linked a teacher of Home Economics with one who teaches English and Irish. The third linkage involved the school chaplain (with a strong teaching background) with a teacher whose main subject is Geography. A teacher with particular responsibility for Special Needs linked with a colleague whose main teaching subject is English. The final pairing involved a teacher of Geography and English with a partner whose subjects include History, Civic, Social and Political Education and English.

The initial discussion focused on how the idea of mutual observation of each other's classrooms might translate into practice. Given the strong inherited traditions of teacher autonomy/isolation and the predominantly 'closed door', privatized practice that has characterised teaching in Irish schools, there was, understandably, some reticence about what was involved. Ground rules were agreed. The understanding among participants was that the teachers in the group would always be in control of their own engagement with the process, deciding how much or how little they wanted to contribute, and were free to opt out at any stage. At this session, each participant agreed to visit a colleague's class and then engage in a post-observation discussion with their partner. Six weeks later a workshop involving brief oral reports from each of the ten participants followed. Discussion among the ten teachers, principal and external facilitator led to a clarification of the project's possibilities and a re-iteration of the parameters within which the group would work. This session generated a momentum that led to all ten participants volunteering to continue the process during the school year 2003-04.

The facilitator interviewed participants individually in September 2003, primarily to confirm what had been agreed and to clarify further the direction of the project. A subsequent letter³ from the facilitator to participants indicates how, even at this early stage, individual teachers had different priorities regarding the project, and by implication, their own professional development. He wrote

For some of you the main benefits derive from the process of observing each other's classes and getting feedback on your approach to teaching. For others, the structured forum to discuss issues of teaching with a group of colleagues, as one of you said 'in a non-crisis situation', is the key. Both activities seem to complement each other. Some, though not all, said they are keen to keep a diary or do some 'journalling'. The overwhelming message seems to be to continue with both mutual classroom observation and the larger forum for reporting, reflecting and discussion.

The project continued throughout that school year 2003-04. The co-operating pairs observed each other teaching on at least three occasions and, importantly, engaged in discussion about these classes soon afterwards. Five workshops involving the ten participants, school principal⁴ and facilitator were held at intervals of approximately six weeks.

Emerging themes and issues

Apprehension

Collinstown Park Community College had, according to participants in this project, already established a school culture characterized by co-operation. The school had also embraced with enthusiasm many of the curricular innovations of the past decade such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)⁵ programme, the Transition Year (TY)⁶ and the

³ Letter from Gerry Jeffers to project participants, 29th September 2003.

⁴ On one occasion the Deputy Principal attended instead of the Principal.

⁵ Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a distinct, self-contained two-year innovative programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. The programme puts an emphasis on forms of learning, achievement, excellence and assessment which the established Leaving Certificate has not recognised in the past. See <http://lca.slss.ie/>

⁶ Transition Year Programme (TYP) is a one-year, stand-alone, optional programme offered to 15-16 year olds where the emphasis is strongly on personal and social development. See <http://lca.slss.ie/>

Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP)⁷, all of which require teacher co-operation. However, notwithstanding such positive environmental features, many of these volunteers expressed apprehension about getting involved in a project that involved close-up investigation of their classroom practices. Because of the teaching culture that has evolved in Irish schools, in particular, the lack, until recently, of inspection at second-level, some participants had not experienced an adult observer in their classroom since their pre-service education. In some cases this was more than twenty years earlier. Apprehension was reflected in comments such as

I was anxious about the project at the outset. I felt that my teaching was under scrutiny and even that my relationship with my students was under scrutiny.

I was a little bit nervous at the start of this project, nervous that different people would come in to my classroom and offer criticism, even constructive criticism. Criticism is always hard to take.

At the outset I was interested but hesitant. 'Looking at yourself' is always sensitive stuff.

This point merits attention because if apprehension is an issue in a school with a relatively open attitude to teacher co-operation, teachers in schools with stronger patterns of teacher autonomy/isolation might be even more apprehensive. By volunteering to take part, the participants in this project already demonstrated an openness to working more collegially. For example, one remarked:

I see the pairing like a mirror. It's great that you don't feel as much on your own.

The evidence suggests that even when teachers assent to the notion that while opening up their classrooms to other adults might lead to one's professionalism being acknowledged, praised and, possibly, improved, the fear of criticism, of somehow being found wanting, has to be confronted. As will be seen, in this project the growth of an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, firstly among the co-operating pairs and then within the wider group

⁷ The Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP) is a support framework with the Junior Certificate programme aimed at young people who may leave school early. See <http://jcsp.slss.ie/>

appear to be almost essential conditions for effective collaboration. This points to the need for the processes employed in such forms of CPD to be made explicit in order that teachers know that they are in control of the process.

The power of conversation

Right from the initial briefing, the confidentiality of the paired relationship was underlined. Each pair was free to report as much or as little about what they had observed and discussed. This was a necessary protection for all. It also had the impact of giving a strong affirmative tone to the early meetings and contributed to developing trust. As the group journeyed towards clarifying what they understood by 'good teaching' in the specific context of Collinstown Park Community College, there was a palpable positive energy. These group conversations, lasting about seventy minutes, provided a much appreciated forum for the participants. For example, three different teachers commented:

I liked the forum that was created. Often we talk to each other about teaching after a dreadful class. Here we were talking about teaching in a non-crisis situation

For me the benefits have been the opening of lines of communication, not just with my partner but with the full group of 10. I like the opportunity the forum gives; as a result, the opportunities for 'bouncing ideas off people' are enhanced. Now I don't feel it's just me that is having difficulties with students.

It makes you think more critically. You become more aware of effective teaching. For me the forum was more important than the pair work. Listening to yourself and listening to others was important and valuable.

The support for such semi-structured teacher conversations as an effective form of CPD is consistent among those who took part.

Student reaction

When visiting each other's classrooms, teachers tended to offer general explanations to students such as 'I'm here to see how you are getting on' or 'I'm going to be here for this class'. In general, participants reported that students in this school did not express difficulties about the presence of another teacher in the room. The majority of participants in the project later remarked that while they did some observation from a seated or standing position at the back of the class, they felt more comfortable when they

were moving around the class, observing and appearing to offer 'the real teacher' some assistance at the same time. They reported that the opportunity to engage students about their work during the observed class was also illuminating.

The implications of this insight, and worthy of further exploration, is that a type of team teaching may offer more promise and less threat than a more passive, seated observer. Indeed, while 'observation' is the primary intention of the classroom visitor, such observation, to re-configure the language of Schön (1983), may be best achieved by observation-in-action as well as observation-of-action.

Observing each other

Participants reported that their conversations after the initial observed class tended to focus either on particular details or on broader general comments about the observed classroom. When first reporting to the wider group, a hesitancy and sensitivity was evident. Sometimes a particular incident or moment was identified to illustrate a wider point, for example,

...the clear, uncluttered and colourful way she used the blackboard.

...the way she handled the student who didn't have a pen.

Attention to these subtle, apparently incidental aspects of teaching grew throughout the process as participants became more conscious of the significance of such momentary interactions. Broader comments tended to focus on general classroom atmosphere, rapport and relationships between teacher and students.

...the powerful way she uses positive feedback to the students.

...the obvious respect they have for her.

...the way everybody in the room is included.

...the way she gives students space to talk.

...she's so proactive in regard to class discipline.

The pace and structure of a class and the variety of activities undertaken by students were also frequently noticed by the 'visitor'. Teachers' attitude to and passion for their subjects as well as concern for trust, respect and safety also featured in the oral reports to the forum.

Asked to sum up their perspectives on the early observations, participants were positive about the process and, in many cases, energised by it. For example:

I benefited from getting positive feedback from my partner, especially in little things - aspects of my style of teaching. We all need affirmation.

Another put it like this:

I just liked seeing how a colleague works in the classroom. Over the years when you are working with someone, you form an impression as to how they might be in the classroom. Looking at someone teaching the same kids as I teach is very powerful. You get so many ideas just by observing.

What was perhaps significant in much of those early conversations was the tentative exploration of aspects of teaching, the slow development of questioning of practice and underlying assumptions and the almost total absence of criticism. Hargreaves (2002) when mapping the emotional aspects of teachers' interactions and relationships with their colleagues, observed that while teachers welcomed praise from colleagues they tend to shy away from disagreement and controversy. While such dispositions were evident in the early stages of the project in Collinstown Park Community College, the process did seem to assist participants in moving beyond affirmation. A greater frankness and robustness in the exchanges was evident as participants' confidence with the process grew. This was especially evident when individuals spoke about their own teaching and when the group explored the links between teaching and learning.

Self-reflection

Throughout the process the emphasis was on self-reflection. Having a colleague in one's classroom triggers very basic questions. As one participant remarked:

I benefited from having someone in my class as it made me think more about what I was doing and why I was doing it. I was nervous but ultimately pleased with how things went during the observed class.

One of the strongest endorsements of the effectiveness of this process emerged when one participant remarked:

I know I was meant to be observing, but I found myself mainly engaged in asking myself questions like: 'how would I teach this?', 'what would I do in that situation?'. Even though I was in her classroom, it was more like observing myself.

Furthermore, the post-observation dialogue often brought to the surface approaches and procedures that teachers had integrated into their practice to the point that they regarded them as 'natural'. This point was illustrated by comments such as:

It made me think a lot more about what I thought I was doing automatically.

I was never aware of doing this but I now realise...

I'd never looked at it from that point of view before...

I suppose I've just got into a routine of dealing with him in that way....

These explicit descriptions of particular features of an individual's teaching style can be especially powerful, particularly when it comes from a trusted colleague. The validation of good practice by colleagues appears to be greatly valued. For example, one participant recounted how delighted she was when it was brought to her attention that the 'observer' thought she was particularly good at affirming her students, commenting

I can tell you I went home on a high after that.

This focus also reminds us that a culture of teacher isolation inhibits feedback and fails to affirm those who engage in good teaching; it also greatly reduces the possibility of meaningful support to those who may need it most. For those who might argue that ‘individualism’ is one of the most distinguishing features of teaching as a profession and that the presence of colleagues in classrooms would inhibit this, the evidence here does not support such a viewpoint. Indeed, listening to participants reflecting on their own individual styles, one could see that articulating their own beliefs and values was in itself developmental of confidence and coherence. And while nobody stated that ‘I must stop doing that’, there were quite a few explicit indications of intentions to concentrate more on doing what they and a colleague felt they were doing well.

Shared insights

In inviting participants to volunteer, the emphasis was on 'someone you can trust' and 'a colleague with whom you feel comfortable' rather than on same-subject combinations. The pair who were teaching the same subject tended to highlight differences but this led to a broadening of perspectives. For example:

She has a very different approach but when I see things work for her I am more prepared to try them in my class Every teacher has preferences within the syllabus; I can learn a lot from the way she teaches topics.

Among the different subject pairs, what was especially striking was how much they focused on common features of 'good teaching'.

At first I didn't expect that a Religious Education class would be in any way similar to a class in Geography. I was just amazed at how similar our approach to the students is.

Obviously, there are limitations when co-operating teachers come from different subject backgrounds, not least a limited familiarity with the subject's content knowledge and syllabus goals. However, cross-subject observations and conversations tend to lead to a focus on fundamental pedagogical practices and principles. Such configurations can also challenge preconceived notions of ‘other

subjects', open up cross-curricular debate that can lead into broader discussions of curriculum and undermine the 'balkanised cultures' described by Hargreaves (1992).

While the project's primary concern was with teacher behaviour, every so often the discussion shifted on to particular students and their behaviour. These observations served to underline the fact that teachers who teach the same students frequently have particular insights, and yet, may know almost nothing of their colleagues' experiences of the same students. The forum reinforced the value –already well appreciated by many of these participants - of sharing such insights about students and of the interconnectedness of teaching and learning. However, given the limited time available, participants agreed with the conversations keeping the focus to teacher behaviour.

The emergence of a growing appreciation of the value of reflection was discernable. The participants developed the point about 'talking about teaching in a non-crisis situation', remarking that even very supportive discourse between teachers often focused on issues of students' discipline. In a school designated 'disadvantaged', this sharing of concerns was both frequent and necessary. There was an appreciation that the forum represented a welcome, different kind of discourse complementing the more urgent and immediate everyday concerns of a normal school day. For example,

There was no preoccupation with discipline or difficult behavioural problems in the group. It was more about the nuts and bolts of teaching.

Further avenues of exploration

As the pairs got more comfortable with observing each others' classes, they reported that their post-observation discussions moved towards clarifying the rationale for particular ways of conducting classes. Within the forum, the growing confidence in talking about one's own practice, sometimes self-critically, led some to suggest other ways of exploring their teaching. For example, in response to a discussion about keeping a reflective journal, one teacher volunteered to develop a template for assisting reflection.

This heading on the template page was *Reflective Journal: Looking back on a particular class*. There was space to include Date and Class/Subject. The rest of the page provided six spaces to respond to the following:

- **Mood** (my mood at start of class, their mood at start, overall mood during the class)
- **Relationship/ Rapport** (teacher/student and student/student)
- **High Point** of the class. Why?
- **Low Point** of the class. Why?
- **Teaching**. (Preparation, Resources, Relationship with class, Methods)
- What did they **learn**?
- **One thought** to carry forward.

This structure appealed to the group because it arose out of their own discussions; it was their language, their categories, their order. It appeared to add to the sense of empowerment within the group, endorsing previous discussions while, at the same time, further structuring future observations and discourse. Some participants, though not all, subsequently used this template as a reflective tool in relation to some of their own classes. Some thought they might use the tool again, on an occasional basis.

Students' perspectives on teaching

The second activity that the group embraced involved some participants asking their students to describe, anonymously and in writing, what they thought made a teacher 'good' or 'bad'. Again this arose from a forum discussion on how students perceive teachers. Comments were collated and shared within the group, generating lively discussion and further insights. These comments, coming as they did from within the particular school and in the students' own words, engaged the teachers extensively as they attempted to decipher remarks such as:

- A person who doesn't give you a lot of homework.
- Kind, caring, understanding, explains everything step by step, treats a child in the way a parent would, treats every child in the class equally.

- A teacher who always ignores you, never lets you say what you want to say, plus gives out to you all the time and gives you lines all the time and notes for nothing.’

An additional question: ‘What helps you learn?’ also elicited insightful responses, including:

- A teacher that brings joy into learning because if you are afraid of the teacher I find it harder to listen and work in the class.
- When the class is interesting and the teacher is a good teacher that explains things out right and clearly.
- A strict teacher who will ask you in the next class what your learned.

This focus on student perceptions of the processes going on in classrooms was felt by the group to offer productive material for meaningful discussion. Many participants commented favourably on how perceptive young people can be about teaching and learning processes.

Developing perspectives

By the time participants had observed each other at least three times, the initial hesitancy gave way to a more confident, analytical approach to participants’ own teaching. This was evident in both the forum and in written comments. For example,

Working with a colleague that I admire and respect gives me a ‘comfort zone’. I know we can both speak honestly and openly to one another and in so doing and evaluate our practices in the classroom.

This project has given me the focus and the designated time to assess my teaching style with the help of a critical friend. The initial task of observation was a little daunting but the experience was thoroughly rewarding and reassuring. It is invaluable to have a critical friend working along side you because when an issue does arise in relation to a particular approach to teaching that is when the strengths of the shared analysis can be utilised.

The different teaching methods and modes of interacting with students I observed were very different from my own and I was able to use some of these in my own classes. As I observed classes, other things struck me about the teaching of my subject and caused me to change certain practices and adopt new ones.

As the project advanced towards the end of its agreed timescale, there was some evidence of participants wishing to extend themselves further.

I am at the stage where I would welcome some constructive criticism and advice on my classroom management, teaching practice etc. To bring the process forward I feel we need to be more objective, something which at the outset we would have been afraid of.

Written comments suggested that the project was successful in not only increasing participants' self-awareness about their own teaching, but also in facilitating changes in their teaching practice.

I am constantly assessing and analysing my approach to teaching subject topics in light of the group discussions we had at our meetings.

I feel that my own style of organising classes has improved a lot due to the work done in this group. I am more meticulous in tracking students' attendance, results and homework than I was before. My routine in the classroom has changed. It is more predictable and structured and is working much better in my subject area. Students are certainly more comfortable with the new routine. I have more energy again for my subject now that I have built in some changes into my work in the classroom.

The project's journey can be seen as one going from initial apprehension travelling through extensive mutual affirmation, on to increased self-reflection while along the way developing an openness to greater, more objective analysis. For example,

I am less defensive about criticism (or what I may see as criticism!)

Collegiality

The early apprehension seemed to strengthen the sense of travelling together on a shared journey. Respectful listening to each others' experiences and stories appeared to increase both empathy and solidarity. For example,

As a group, I think we all gained an appreciation of the work done in other departments and became more aware that every department has its own challenges.

Tentative comments at the early stages of the project gave way to more assertive ones, where participants began to articulate how they would like to see this kind of activity being more available to colleagues.

The collaboration with my colleagues is an opportunity for real discussion which hasn't presented itself very often and which I believe every teacher is entitled to experience as part of a process of ongoing self-development.

Others echoed this emerging sense of realization that this kind of professional collaboration, while initially daunting, was potentially very enriching. One is conscious that words like 'collegiality' and 'collaboration' are used loosely in teacher discourse. In his categorisation of school cultures, Hargreaves (1992) argues that collaborative cultures are rare. Stoll and Fink (1995, p.94) assert that collegiality, *per se*, is seen as insufficient. They draw on the work of Little to focus attention to 'weak' forms of collegial relations. Included here are 'scanning and storytelling, help and assistance, and sharing' They point out that 'joint work' is most likely to lead to improvement and, as examples, cite 'team teaching, mentoring, action research, peer coaching, planning and mutual observation and feedback'. They note that

These derive their strength from the creation of greater interdependence, collective commitment, shared responsibility, and review and critique'. (Stoll and Fink, 1995, p.94)

Hargreaves (1992, p.229) argues that the route to collaborative school cultures is via what he calls 'contrived collegiality', where 'a set of formal bureaucratic procedures' are used to seek to increase teacher co-operation. While recognising some of its benefits, especially when sincerely facilitative, he warns that it can be

little more than a quick, slick administrative surrogate for more genuinely collaborative teacher cultures, cultures which take much more time, care and sensitivity to build than speedily implemented changes of an administratively superficial nature. (Hargreaves, 1992, p.230).

As the Collinstown Park initiative was instigated by the principal it might be seen as somewhat contrived. However, the voluntary nature of participation, the patience with the process over the 15 month period and the engagement of participants – including the principal's own involvement – all appear as indicators of a collaborative culture.

The contention here is that this project succeeded in building on and further developing good collegial relations to develop genuine teacher collaboration where colleagues voluntarily worked together to interrogate their own and each others' classroom practice.

The presence of the Principal

The presence of the Principal, and at one session the Deputy Principal, was a feature of this project in Collinstown Park Community College. Both were keenly aware that the project was primarily one of teachers talking to each other. Their interventions and contributions tended to clarify or to add support and perhaps their most effective role was as listeners. Adopting the role of 'active listener' sends important messages to teachers: listening to teachers talking collectively about their professional work is an important task for those in positions of school leadership; effective leadership in schools enables teachers to work collaboratively.

The Principal believes that a project like the one described here has to be seen in the context of a specific school culture. Twenty years' experience as a school leader has made him keenly aware of the occupational hazard of allowing the demands of administrative tasks to erode time and energy that should be given to the crucial educational dimensions of the job. He actively seeks to engage with teaching and learning issues. In Collinstown Park Community College's most recent school plan, improving 'teaching and learning' was a core policy goal. In particular, this Principal draws attention to the key role a Principal has to play in influencing the culture within a school. A recent evaluation by the Department of Education and Science commended the school and noted that 'a culture of openness is evident in the school and a high level of trust exists between the senior management and the whole school staff'.

The Principal sees this project as having been an effective way of facilitating teachers meeting together and discussing educational issues that arise from the particular realities of this particular school in a way that was structured, facilitated,

reflective, respectful and ongoing. He believes that it was a very positive experience for the participating teachers and he admired the support they received from, and gave to, each other. Within a relatively short time scale, there seemed to be evidence of significant insights and professional growth. The time investment was, he believes, well rewarded.

Some participants indicated that their initial reaction had been to wonder whether the Principal's presence might inhibit or re-direct discussion. However, they ultimately welcomed his involvement, noting that if he had not been present they would have been keen for him to know how they had engaged with the process. They acknowledged that his continual participation, predominantly in a listening role, also sent an important message to the rest of the school community about this type of activity.

While recommending that principals should encourage such projects, this Principal suggests that, depending on particular school cultures, a principal might decide, wisely, not to attend the group sessions. He remarks:

The experience for teachers must be affirming and supportive. Suspicions that the Principal might be pursuing some hidden agenda must be allayed. Of course, there was some initial hesitancy. I had thought that my presence in the feedback sessions would be a deterrent but this did not turn out to be the case. No teacher is perfect, but they don't need judgments. I believe that they need support to allow them to address professional issues.

The presence of a facilitator from outside the school was also beneficial, he added.

Facilitator's role

Participants were also positive about the use of an external facilitator. A typical comment at the end of the process was

The way the group was organised and facilitated was excellent and helped contribute to its success. The atmosphere was very relaxed and non-threatening and yet people were pushed on certain issues at times which I thought was good.

This facilitator continued his role as an outside voice reflecting participants experiences, stories and insights. The facilitator was sensitive to how much or how little people were comfortable in revealing what typically happens in their own classrooms. The facilitator took responsibility for steering the process and maintaining a balance between encouraging the cautious while not inhibiting those eager to forge ahead.

In the final session, six group members indicated, with various levels of enthusiasm, that they would be willing to facilitate a similar group, either within Collinstown Park Community College or in another school. The facilitator regarded this as indicative of the extent to which these participants had taken 'ownership' of the process.

Reservations

While each participant engaged positively with the process, there were, of course, reservations. For some, the very fact that it was a teacher-driven project - without a clear-cut, pre-determined structure and dependent on the group to agree each new stage - generated uncertainty. Some admitted they would have preferred a more defined structure and clearer directions. For example:

I am not entirely sure what I am looking for when observing classes. I cannot even attempt the diary/journal for the same reason.

The development of structured activities like those for recording reflections and the gathering of students' views about teaching and learning can be a mode of constructing more specific frameworks. However, it is important to point out that this emerged from the group-driven process, rather than being imposed by the facilitator.

To indicate real practical support for the project, classroom observation sessions and the group meetings were facilitated with some paid substitution provided to cover for those involved in the project. This support appears to have been an important dimension in the project gaining acceptance within the school community. Principal and Deputy Principal expressed a keen awareness that voluntary engagement in professional development is

often seen as some kind of 'optional extra' in which teachers engage during their 'spare time'. Despite this, the perennial problem within teaching of a perceived shortage of time was a recurring theme.

Time is a problem. We are so busy. Teaching is my passion and my fear is that I will lose my passion. I am energised and nurtured by the forum.

Biggest drawback of the process is the time taken to do it.

These comments about time are a sober reminder that a key issue identified in the report (OECD, 1991) mentioned at the outset of this article persists.

In relation to in-service education we must point up the limitations of the school day model which in general totally ignores the professional development needs of the teachers themselves. As a consequence in-service education is normally viewed as something extra that has to be provided over and above the normal teaching day, week, or year. On this basis it will always be to a degree marginal for many teachers, and those participating in in-service programmes will do so very often at the inconvenience or with the forbearance of their colleagues. It is a corollary of accepting the necessity of lifelong teacher education that the very model of schooling and its organization needs to be reconstituted. (OECD, 1991, p.102-103)

The re-negotiation of the teachers' terms and conditions of employment, making more explicit the right and duty to devote time to professional development in a way that complements rather than erodes teaching time and quality seems more urgent than ever.

In a further echo of the OECD observations of 1991, what might be called a 'process readiness' or the demands of a lifelong learning perspective was identified.

If you want to learn and develop as a teacher it will do that for you, once some time, effort and thought is put into it on the part of the individual. It is something a person must be almost dedicated to, certainly one must be determined to work at it.

Not only do such remarks appear to support the voluntary nature of participation; they also suggest that such a project is unlikely to enjoy much success if it is perceived as imposed on teachers. Some school leaders may express, in frustration, a concern that the teachers who might benefit most from such a process are among the least likely to volunteer. This may well be the reality in many schools. Without wanting to overstate the impact of a project such as this, it

can be an important step towards developing a greater culture of collaboration among teachers within an individual school. Projects like this have the capacity to legitimize formal discourse about teaching and learning among colleagues, to make visible the benefits of shared reflections and to prompt others to re-think their own approach to CPD. From a policy perspective, a shift towards more encouragement to groups of teachers within the same school to collaborate on small-scale CPD projects like the one described here would involve giving each school a distinct budget for school based CPD.

Conclusion

This project provides evidence that teachers reflecting on their own practices in dialogue with each other, in a structured atmosphere of trust, is likely to lead to affirmation of some teaching practices and the tentative questioning of others. When such teachers work together in the same school, a local sense of collective professional identity can be enhanced. As one of the participants noted about the process:

I suppose we are developing a 'language' about teaching. I think it's a good form of individual and staff development.

Initial apprehension gave way, over time, to a marked keenness and confidence by participants to further interrogate their own classroom practice. This change came about mainly through the development of an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the group. Pairs of teachers observing each others classrooms and afterwards discussing their observations linked with group discussions heightened participants' appreciation that getting 'objective' data about classroom practice is elusive. This forum enabled teachers to voice their own insights, hear colleagues' observations and interpretations and grapple collectively with the meaning of their own and their students' behaviour. The significance of apparently minor nuances of teacher-student interactions within classrooms was recognised. The process affirmed teachers as reflective practitioners, boosted teachers' morale by highlighting what they were doing well and developed their confidence to challenge and interrogate their own practices.

The particular model of voluntary pairing, shared mutual observation and group sharing, including the presence of principal and a facilitator from outside the school staff, appears to be developmental, sustainable, teacher-friendly and effective in contributing to a more professionally satisfying work environment. It can also be seen as a significant step towards 'deprivatising' teaching.

This type of small-scale, school-based CPD project also challenges the views of CPD and teacher in-service education that appear to be based on deficit models, are provider driven, prefer 'off-site' learning and, in practice, avoid genuine in-school teacher collaboration. The model outlined here seems to offer a promising avenue of professional development for teachers working in the Irish second-level system in the early years of the twenty-first century. However, those attempting to implement such a model need to be aware that a delicate balance is required: on the one hand, there has to be sensitivity about how slow the journey from trust to collaboration can be; at that same time, the process must be continually challenging, attempting to stretch people beyond their comfort zones. Genuine professional collaboration between teachers has to be more than contrived co-operation, or mere cosiness, or the exchange of 'war-stories' or exercises in mutual admiration. But these may be important milestones on the road to more open, collaborative school working environments. The evidence from the teachers in Collinstown Park Community College is that structured, school-based projects involving teachers discussing their observations of each others' classes can be a powerful form teachers' learning.

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